

Freedom Fight Book

By

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When will it end? I've seen the silent victor that erased what used to exist. The rivalry of Cain and Abel between brothers ceased the moment we took on what the world has become beyond the wall of our home. We've faced challenges and seen the full circle of justice. The ripple of pain continues and my family faces once again, the bitterest of inner struggles. Pieces of us have broken off, yet we still stand strong. We have to. We're family. And with all that has happened to our world, I am grateful I still have that. My family. I will fight for them and if need be, I would die for them

Robbie Slagel

SCATTERED SOULS . . .

CHAPTER ONE
AUGUST 27

Chadron, Nebraska

With the spark of the just rising sun came the single, three-second blow of the bugle horn. A rumbling and vibration followed and then the charge. Over the crest and descending on to the camp of small military style structures came a long line of horses. Fifty in all. Mounted upon them, men wearing blue. Armed with rifles and swords, they rode down, firing out and stirring the sleeping enemies from their beds.

The soldiers stumbled out of their homes. Dazed, confused, yet ready to defend themselves. The first that tried were the first that failed. If they were not shot, they were beheaded in a sweep of the swift sword of justice delivered upon them. A victory sought by the men who charged was not a victory gained. Too many slumbered in the enemy camp. Too many for them to take. The camp, though startled, was not ill prepared for what was cast to them. They revamped. They fought. And a bloody battle entailed.

The men who charged rode in with a vengeance. They rode into the camp knowing that they would be out numbered. Knowing a defeat would be imminent. But they rode in knowing they would not go down without making an impact.

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Beginnings, Montana

A loud, long, yawn came from Joe Slagel as he ran his hand over his just shaved face. He stared at his reflection in his bathroom mirror, sniffled and rubbed his watering eyes. He was tired. He shouldn't have been tired. In fact, Joe wouldn't have been tired had it not been for his middle of the night visitors. Being woke at four in the morning to be told by a brilliant scientist that it was a frightening possibility that a Benedict Arnold lived amongst them, was one thing. But that wasn't what stirred Joe from his slumber. Henry Kusakari did. And not only did Henry wake him, ramble fast and ridiculous about something absurd, tote Joe's three month old grandson about, but Henry also sarcastically insulted his favorite pajamas. And that placed Joe in what he like to call, a 'piss-poor' mood. Not too mention, that fact steered Joe's mind off of where it should be. And that was on Dr. Dean Hayes' *a traitor amongst us* theory.

The day had to get better. It had too. It wasn't even six on the morning. Of course that thought quickly flew from Joe's mind the second he stepped into his livingroom.

"Oh boy." Joe blew slowly from his mouth as he walked to his diningroom. He could hear his wife, Andrea humming some song in the kitchen while clanging pans. Two of his four grandchildren, Alexandra and Joey were wake and rambunctious. Nick, his three month old grandson, screamed his loudest. And his middle of night visitors sat at his diningroom table, sipping on coffee and making themselves at home. "Christ Almighty, don't you two have

somewhere else to be?” Joe looked at Henry and Dean then walked through the diningroom and into the kitchen immediately reaching for the coffee.

“Good morning!” Andrea sang the words, kissed Joe on the cheek and resumed her cooking. “Breakfast will be ready shortly.”

Joe grumbled, grabbed his coffee and walked to his diningroom table. He plopped down in his seat, grabbed a cigarette and lit up. It was after he slowly let out that first hit and brought his head down to his coffee that he saw it. Dean staring at him. “What?”

Dean’s small framed body leaned back in the chair, his dark blonde hair messy from running his fingers through it so many times. “That is a sure sign of addiction.” Dean pointed at Joe. “Having to smoke first thing in the morning.”

After wincing at Nick’s loud wail, Joe shook his head in disgust. “Is that one of your own brilliant deductions, Dean? Or is that something you learned in college? Christ, I would think the fact that I smoke all the time ought to be indication enough of addiction.”

“Did you ever think of quitting?” Dean asked.

“No.” Joe said short, tried to resume his coffee drinking but snapped his views to Henry. “Henry! Can’t you do anything about that baby? Why is he crying so much?”

“I don’t know Joe.” Henry tried bouncing the baby. “He’s probably upset because Frank kidnapped Ellen.”

Joe and Dean both moaned and rolled their eyes at the same time.

“I’m serious.” Henry complained. “I know you don’t believe me.”

“We believe you Henry.” Joe told him. “We just think you exaggerate. And give me that baby.” Joe reached out for Nick, taking him in his arms and standing.

“Ow Joe.” Henry followed with a tilted head. “Ow, hair. He’s got my hair.”

“Christ.” Joe, with a cigarette still in his mouth, toggled the baby while removing the tiny fingers that were intertwined within Henry’s long black mane.

“Oh my God!” Henry exclaimed. “You’re gonna burn my baby.”

“Well he won’t scream any worse if I do.” Joe took the cigarette from his mouth and set it down in the ashtray. “Satisfied?” he went to turn and he saw Dean reaching to put it out. “Don’t.” Joe pointed at Dean. “Don’t.”

Dean tossed his hands up in the air.

Andrea emerged from the kitchen holding a large plate of pancakes. “Alex, Joey!” she called the kids. “Joseph sit down and have your breakfast before it gets cold.”

Holding Nick, Joe sat down with the crying baby. He reached for the plate of pancakes, broke off a small piece and shoved it in Nick’s mouth. Nick shut up.

“Joe.” Dean spoke with a scold. “You really shouldn’t be feeding that baby solid food like that.”

“Dean.”

“What?”

“Shut up.”

Humming and giggling, Andrea came back out of the kitchen. She handed Joe a bottle for Nick. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Joe extended the baby and bottle to Henry.

“No, that’s O.K.” Henry waved his hands about. “You can feed him.”

“Henry take your baby.”

“I’d really rather not Joe.”

“Henry. I’d like to smoke my cigarette, drink my coffee and eat my breakfast in my house! Now take your son!”

“Oh, all right.” Reluctantly Henry took Nick.

Joe grunted as he ran his hand down his own face. “And why are you two still here anyhow?”

Dean placed a pancake on a plate and handed the plate to Alexandra. “Andrea said she’d make us breakfast.”

“Andrea!” Joe called her. “Why are you making these men breakfast? They can feed themselves.”

“Of course they can.” Andrea spoke pacifying as she walked through the diningroom holding a mug and a plate with pancakes. She stood by the front door.

Joe watched her with oddness. “What the hell is she doing?”

No sooner did Joe say that and his front door opened.

Robbie Slagel walked in wearing a bright white tee shirt and dark green military style pants. He took the plate and mug from Andrea. “Thanks Andrea.” He lifted his views to the diningroom. “Morning Dad. Dean. Henry.” Robbie grinned turned and walked back out of the house.

Andrea shut the door with a snicker. “Isn’t he just so handsome in uniform?”

Joe tossed his hands in the air. “Why is he up and about this early?”

Henry had the answer. “Probably doing Frank’s work. Since Frank is no longer here because he kidnaped Ellen.”

Before Joe could verbally blast Henry, Dean interjected. “Henry. Frank did not take Ellen anywhere. Quit with it. You are way too paranoid.”

“Fine. Fine.” Henry gave up. “But we’ll see how paranoid you get when you find out I’m right, Dean. Not to mention pissed off. You’ll be pissed Dean.”

“Yeah, I’ll be pissed. But I’m not having to worry about it Henry. Frank did not kidnap Ellen. He wouldn’t do that.” Dean paused in his bringing his food to his mouth, “O.K., he would do that. But he didn’t. I’m sure of it. Too much is going on.”

Joe agreed. “Listen to Dean, Henry. His is absolutely . . .” Joe stopped talking when Andrea, so carefree sat down at the table. In her own world she still hummed, placed a napkin over her lap and dished herself some pancakes. “Andrea, why did you stand at the door with breakfast for my son?”

“He was hungry. And he has to eat, Joe. He’s a growing boy.”

“He’s thirty-three years old Andrea. He stopped growing fifteen years ago.”

“Still.” Andrea made herself comfortable, turned to check on Alexandra and Joey who were eating in the livingroom, then returned to her own plate.

“Still?” Joe questioned. “Andrea, did he say why he was up at six? I usually have to drag his ass out of bed at eight.”

“He’s filling in for Frank as head of Security.” Andrea said as she ate.

“See, Joe!” Henry stated loudly. “See.”

“No, Henry I don’t see.” Joe spoke perturbed. “Granted my son probably is off somewhere with Ellen for the day. But he’s off somewhere in Beginnings. This is a big place. But he did not. Did not. Kidnap her. So knock it

off.”

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Fife Lake - Saskatchewan, Canada

“Knock it off!” Frank stopped cold in his walk to the small house trailer and spun around. His dark eyes glared and he dropped the bag he carried and ran his hand down his face and across his goatee in total frustration. “Throw one more fuckin thing at me Ellen and I’m tying you back up!”

“I want to go home!” Ellen yelled at him.

“Well you’re not going home. Deal with it.” Frank grunted, picked up the bag and started walking again. Four steps into his second trip to the trailer he felt the familiar pain hit his head when Ellen beamed him with another stone. “That’s it.” Frank dropped the bag and charged to her.

Ellen backed up bumping into the side of the pick up truck. “Don’t you dare!” she screamed at him. “Don’t you dare even think about tying me up again. Ten hours Frank. Ten hours I spent tied up.”

“I wouldn’t have to tie you up if you would just stop fighting with me.” Frank stood toe to toe with her.

“What the hell do you want me to do? You kidnaped me!”

“I did not kidnap you.”

“Oh no?” Ellen folded her arms. “Then what the hell do you call, knocking someone out, tying them up and taking them from their home. Asshole!” She careened her foot down hard onto his.

Frank bit his bottom lip, grumbled a scream, stepped back and slammed his hand hard on the truck. “Get in the truck.”

“What?”

“I said. Get in the truck!” He blasted her vocally as loud as he could. “Now!”

Ellen stumbled as she hurried in the truck.

Frank slammed the door shut fiercely and stormed back to the cabin. He came out with three bags and a box. He stopped on his way to the truck, awkwardly hoisted the bag on the ground over his shoulder and carried everything to the pick up dumping it in the back. The air of anger followed him into the cab of the truck as he started it, tossed it in gear and screeched the vehicle backwards.

Ellen stayed near her door. “Where are we going?”

“Home!” Frank began to drive fanatically.

“You’ve lost your mind. I know it.”

“Yeah, I’ve lost my mind. I lost it when I lost my son, El. Our son. And all I wanted was to take some time alone with you. Time alone I don’t get at home. Get as far away from the fuckin pain as possible. Just for a little bit. Just with you.” The truck bounced over the rough road, Frank shifted gears with a grind. “I went about it the wrong way! I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking right! How can I when all I fuckin think about . . .” Frank pounded his hand against the steering wheel. He was silent for a second and then his loud tone dropped. “. . . is Brian.”

“Stop the truck.”

“No.”

“Stop the truck!”

Frank brought the truck to a violent halt. Ellen flopped around. “What.”

“How long?”

“How long, what?”

“How long . . . how long were you thinking of being out here?”

“Not long.” Frank’s hand dangled over the steering wheel. “I brought supplies for a week.”

Ellen let out a long breath and sat back. “Here’s the deal. You take me back, closer to home. Back in our own country. And I’ll be your hostage for a few days.”

“No.” Frank started to drive again.

“No?”

“No.” Frank reiterated. “You don’t want to do this. I’ll just take you home.”

“Frank, you started it out on the wrong foot. How do you expect me to react?”

“Nicer.”

“Nicer?” Ellen shook her head with a laugh. “How much nicer to you want me to be. I’m offering to stay out of Beginnings with you for a couple days. And mind you, this is after you bound and gagged me.”

Frank kept his stares forward as he drove. His jaw twitched slightly. His voice had a calm-bitterness to it. “How close to home?”

“Close enough that, if we run into trouble it wouldn’t take them long to fly to us. But far enough away that there are no reminders.”

Frank shifted his eyes to her. “Can we . . . can we at least talk during the ride there. Talk without fighting?”

“Yes.”

“About anything?” Frank asked.

“Anything.”

Frank’s eyes took on a sad look. He sniffed once then sat back in a more relaxed driving position. He shifted gears, leaned over to her and kissed Ellen on the cheek. “Thanks.”

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Chadron, Nebraska

A makeshift patch was sewn onto the left sleeve of his blue uniform. The letters, ‘UWA’ graced the patch. The twenty-some year old soldier slumped tied in the chair. He fought to keep his head up. His face showed the evidence of a beating he took. Of the fifty that charged into the camp, ten made an unscathed escape, three were captured. He was one of the three.

“Where?” Todd Masters, tall and thin, wearing a light green military uniform, walked around him. He too wore a patch, his patch held the intertwined ‘C’ and ‘S’. Caceres Society, to those who knew. “Where?”

The prisoner mumbled as he spoke, rambling the same thing over and over. “. . . and for the alliance in which I stand. I will fight for my God, for my home, and for my land. And for my brothers who have lost their lives . . .”

Todd shook his head and moved away. He picked up a radio knowing he could only call out. The place he was calling had long been since discovered. It no longer was a secret. "It's me. I need to speak to him." Todd spoke in the radio, looking back at the prisoner who still rambled.

" . . . I will defend with my honor and soul, all that I believe in. And I will fight for the freedom under which we all should live."

"He's not speaking. Or at least anything of value." Todd said. "We suffered a lot of losses. We may need to know what else is out there. Should I hold off and question him later? Right now he's saying this nonsense."

George Hadly was silent on the other end of the radio. But only for a moment. "No. You have two more . . . shoot him."

Todd disconnected the call and moved closer to the man in the chair. He pulled out a revolver and aimed it directly and close at the prisoner's head.

The prisoner did not look at him. He merely stared forward and sat up straight. A look of bravery took over him "I pledge allegiance to my country and for the alliance in which I stand. I will fight for my God, for my home and for my . . ."

One single gunshot. A raining explosion of blood. Silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Beginnings, Montana

In Robbie's choice not to use the road to its full extend, the jeep bounced high in the air as he took what he liked to call his short cut across the foliage to the security training area. One hand on the steering wheel, the other on the gear shift, he drove like Frank. Fast and mindless. Then again, Robbie was filling in for him. "What was that?" Robbie closed one eye and held the ear piece to his headset tight to his ear. "Repeat."

Mark's voice would not have broken up had Robbie not had the jeep jumping all over the place. "We . . . eve . . . gal . . . um . . . co . . . its . . . go . . ."

"Hold it. Let me get to the road." A bump and silence as he drove. "Go on."

Mark huffed and for the fourth time he repeated what he had been trying to tell Robbie. "We received a signal. It came from Quantico a few minutes ago."

"Any idea who was contacting or where?" Robbie asked as he drove.

"Negative. Thirty second radio relay to home base."

"O.K. keep me posted. Not like I think they'll radio their men back."

"Got it." Mark ended the call.

Robbie seemed un-phased. Calls to George's base in Quantico had been happening frequently since their whereabouts were discovered a few days early. Whereabouts that George knew, along with Beginnings, were too big to be touched.

"Robbie, come in." Joe called him. "Where you at?"

"Check my schedule I left it on your desk Chief."

"I'm not at my desk, I'm filling in at the bakery."

"Cool."

"No it's not cool. I'm stuck with Josephine."

"Oh yeah? Is she grabbing your butt yet." Robbie snickered as he drove.

"Robert." Joe scolded. "Just tell me when you can check in with me?"

"What's up?"

"A few things. When?"

Robbie paused to think. "I'm nearing training now. I wanna check on things there. Then I have to finish rounds and then I'm off to tracking. How bout after that?"

"How about after training?"

"Whatever you say Chief."

The sound of Joe groaning was heard and then a hiss of the dead air.

Robbie shrugged it off as he always did. He realized as he drove that he was on what he and Frank liked to call that 'stupid winding road'. And using the basic geometry notion that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, Robbie drove off that road. It was a Slagel thinking thing, no matter how rough a ride, shorter was always better.

Slowly, while sipping from his coffee mug, and triumphantly without spillage, Dean moved about the cryo-lab and back to his seat. Opening a huge thick folder, he heard the 'ready' beep of the second computer and blindly, he extended his arm, hit a key and listened for the printer to begin. He winced a little at the squeaking sound of the old printer. He thought of the requisition he filled out to have it fixed when he realized that he would be working again in the cryo-lab. A requisition that still sat on the counter. Of course it was Dean's first day back to the cryo-lab and he still hadn't unpacked the equipment he brought from the mobile. For that, he could wait for Ellen. What he needed to work, was all right there with him.

The squeak of the printer irritated him, but not as much as when he glanced down at his watch and saw the time. Why was Ellen so late? Maybe Frank did sneak her off to a secluded sector of Beginnings. Dean would definitely ream him out over that. But both Frank and Ellen should have returned to work. Again Dean looked at his watch. *'Ellen, come on. We have work!'* He scolded in his mind.

The buzzing of the cryo-door brought a smile from Dean, that was until he turned around and saw it wasn't Ellen.

Johnny Slagel stopped in his swaying stride entrance to the lab. He was a mirror image of his father Frank, with the exception that he wasn't quite as big. He raised an eyebrow glancing behind him with a odd look when he saw the stare Dean gave him. He shrugged and continued in his walk in. "Hey, Dr. Dean. I brought you those files and samples from the lab. Check this out." Johnny laid a specimen tray on the counter. "Seventeen cases of viral pneumonia. Got some sputum specimens. Jason needs you to confirm. He says remnants of the plague are reeking their effects. Whatever." He shuffled through the files. "He says it sounds like a TB clinic in the well, clinic, and he wants to know where that last batch of expectorant you whipped up is. If there isn't any . . ."

"Where the hell is Ellen?" Dean snapped.

"I don't know. Anyhow, he says if there isn't any, can you please . . . and he did use the word please, make some more. Of course that's after you've played with the seventeen samples of phlegm." Johnny let out a long breath. He said what he had to say and then he stared at a quiet Dean. "What's wrong?"

"Do you know where she is?" Dean asked.

"Who?"

"Ellen."

"No. Why? You don't?"

"I thought I did."

"If I see her I'll tell her you're looking for her. But . . . I have to go." Johnny started backing up. "Just wanted to leave those for you on my way to the . . . hey, this rec for the printer, want me to drop it off at mechanics?"

"Yeah . . . Johnny?"

Johnny stopped and turned around to face Dean.

"Henry thinks your father kidnaped Ellen from Beginnings. She's not around. Do you think that's possible? Do you think your father would do that?"

Johnny just laughed. "Henry's half baked. No. With all the shit that's happened, my father wouldn't leave Beginnings. No way. If he has Ellen anywhere I'll bet it's up in that wooded section beyond the fields. We could look for days for them there."

"You really think?"

“I know my dad, the last thing he would do is take Ellen outside our walls where he knows its nowhere near safe.”

“Thanks Johnny.”

“No problem.” Johnny proceeded to leave the cryo lab.

Dean stood from his seat and walked to the work that Johnny left for him. He slid it closer, then looked at his watch again. “You got until the afternoon Frank to bring her back.” Dean spoke to himself. “Then I’m coming up there and getting her myself.”

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Their unison counting carried to Robbie and like a familiar scent or song, it took him back to his Army days. He pulled up to the training area. A place that used to be one square mile of land used for shooting and maneuvers, now was being built as something more. A barrack style building had been erected quickly and one was in the process of being built. Courtesy if the new building crew or rather the twenty-seven defectors from the Caceres Society Army. They lived there, and now trained there with the other fifty-four Beginnings men who worked security, both full time and reserve. But right there in the morning hours of Beginnings not a single one of them built. Forty men, all the new additions lined up four rows of ten. Dan called out as he paced in front of them, slowly back and forth. Barking out orders like a drill sergeant. Leading them in calisthenics before they would move on to other maneuvers for the day. Training.

Robbie stepped from the jeep, walked in front of it, leaned against the hood and lit a cigarette. He watched them perform part of the training schedule Frank had set up. Frank had planned their day from sun up till sun down. Every security person in Beginnings would train. If they held other divisional jobs, a time of training would be allotted for them. Gazing out at them, Robbie’s mind moved back to just a few days earlier when they realized how big of a force they were up against. A simple meeting in Joe’s office. It made Robbie laugh. Because when was there ever a simple meeting in Joe’s office . . .

“Total structuring.” Joe stated to Frank and Robbie who sat across from his desk. “Frank, you have Twenty-seven new guys, twelve SUTs and seven coming from containment. Start with this crew for your new structuring.”

“I structure.” Frank said defensively. “I train my guys good.”

“Yeah, I know this. But you heard what Jess said. He was there. The society runs it like the old world army and that’s what I want from Beginnings. This may end up bigger than just defending Beginnings and you know it.”

“So Dad,” Robbie interjected. “We’re gonna need more men. Have you given any thought to my suggestion.”

“What suggestion?” Frank asked. “If this is security. I should know.”

Joe waved his hand to Frank. “Robbie made a suggestion and yes, I thought about it. I’ll speak to Henry and Danny today about making more of those Auralnator things. I think that’s the best way to go. Frank, I want you and Robbie to start training our men for Robbie’s . . .” Joe cringed. “Four ‘S’ Plan.”

Frank looked curiously at Robbie.

“Sneak, squeeze and seize the SUTs.” Robbie explained.

Frank nodded with a closed mouth approval look. “Excellent. O.K., so, structuring. You want strict military like the old days?”

“Yes.” Joe nodded. “Breed some pride, some respect, not that our men don’t have it. But there was nothing like the old days when a military man defended his home.”

“Got it.” Frank said. “Are we reestablishing ranks?”

“It’s up to you.” Joe answered.

Frank looked at Robbie. “I’m game.”

“So am I.” Robbie said. “As long as you don’t make yourself a general.”

“Now why would you say that?” Frank snapped at him. “Why would I make myself a general? I hated officers.”

“O.K. then make me a general.”

“No way. What ever I make myself. I will outrank you.”

“Why do you have to outrank me?” Robbie argued.

“Because I’m older and I run security.”

“You just want me to have to salute you.”

“You better believe it little brother.”

“Here’s my salute.” Robbie shot Frank the middle finger.

“Oh nice, very nice.” Frank held out his hand. “See Dad.”

Joe huffed as he ran his hand down his face. “Does this have to be decided on now?”

Both Frank and Robbie answered ‘Yes.’

“Tell you what.” Joe stated with irritation. “I’ll decide who is ranked what. No officer structure Deal? We don’t want Dean coming in here thinking he has an ‘in’ because he outranked the both of you in the old world. It will be enlisted man ranking with . . . Frank being the highest ranking enlisted man.”

“Oh yes!” Frank clenched his fist.

“That sucks.”

“Robert.” Joe stated strongly. “Experience dictates. You’re second. Frank, set it up from there on in.”

“Got it.” Frank agreed. “What about you Dad? Hey wait, I know. Robbie, he’s the commander in Chief.”

“Too long to say.” Robbie argued. “We could call him. C.O.C.”

Frank looked serious then he snickered.

“What?” Robbie asked.

“You want to call Dad cock?”

“No that’s not what I . . .” Robbie shifted his eyes to Joe then laughed.

“Don’t even think about it.” Joe pointed. “Just put this plan in motion, the both of you, and make it work. But make it work fast.”

. . . Robbie smiled one more time at that thought as he tossed his cigarette. He lifted himself from his lean on the jeep and walked closer to the training men. It was a plan still in motion, but it was moving fast, just like his father had requested.

Scott was the inside mechanics man. He was the one, and always had been, that stayed behind and fixed the smaller things that people dropped off. Henry, John Matoose, Robbie and now Danny Hoi were the ones who moved about the community. Not going about the community suited Scott fine. He was never a people person and still wasn't. Even though there wasn't that many people left to be a people person to. When anyone in Beginnings would drop things off. He'd rush them out, acting all busy. Few never got his hints. Those few were always women. Jenny always had a problem that no one else could fix. Trish always had the problem that needed to be fixed right there and then. Andrea could never leave without sharing a story. Ellen couldn't leave without bitching. And Josephine *wouldn't* leave unless she made some sort of sexual advance. Scott always felt he had the built in people detector radar. Robbie kidded with him often that they should hang *him* from a tree instead of Danny's tracking devices. Because Scott could sense someone approaching long before they got there. Of course that only applied to when he worked in mechanics. And his senses kicked in when Henry neared mechanics. Scott's senses didn't zoom on the other person with Henry, his ears beat his senses to the punch. A baby's cry. Loud and long, hysterical and drawing closer and closer. Scott cringed.

Henry walked in, bringing a screaming Nick strapped inside a knapsack on his back. "Hey Scott." Henry looked more frazzled then he did in the morning. He dropped his tool bag and grabbed the requisitions from the 'In' bin.

"Henry? Why isn't Nick in the nursery?"

"Hap kicked him out. He hates my kid. He says he's too fussy. And I'm not to bring him back for two hours."

"Maybe he's sick. Did you take him to see Dean?"

Henry's eye lit up. "You know what? I will. Good idea."

"Sounds like he's getting teeth." Scott commented.

"So why is crying then? He should be happy. I know I would want to have teeth instead of just those gums. He probably misses his mom."

Scott looked at Henry laughing. "Ellen? I can't recall seeing her with Nick."

"O.K., he probably misses Frank. Frank kidnaped Ellen, you know."

"Yeah. Yeah. I head it all from you this morning." Scott rolled his eyes. "And can't you shut him up?" Scott asked as he held his ear closed. "Feed him or something."

"He won't eat for me. I think he likes to cry to hear himself."

At that second the mechanics door opened and Danny Hoi walked in. He immediately started laughing. "Oh my God. Henry I bet you were exactly like that when you were a baby. Whining all the time."

"Very funny." Henry resumed looking at his requisitions.

Danny dropped a pile of papers on the counter. "Those are done." He walked behind Henry and grabbed Nick from the knapsack. Nick stopped crying. "There that's better. For as wiry as your dad is I wouldn't want to be strapped to his back either."

Henry looked up and about. "Hey Nick stopped crying." Henry seemed so surprised, especially when he looked and saw Danny was holding the baby.

“Danny, good job. Thanks.”

“He needed held. And you know what?” Danny asked.

“Huh?” Henry reviewed the orders from the work Danny did. “Excellent getting these done so quickly.”

“Thanks. Anyway. I think you should let me have this kid.” Danny joked. “He looks more like me than you anyhow.”

“O.K.” Henry said and set down the work orders. “But just until Frank gets back. Because Frank likes him.”

“Henry, I’m kidding.”

“Aw.” Henry whined. “You shouldn’t do that Danny,. Not on such serious issues.”

“Don’t you want your kid?”

“Not when he’s crying.”

Danny laughed. “Then you must never want you kid, because anytime I ever see him with you he’s crying. And what is up with your hair today?”

Henry ran his hands through it. “Oh. I’m just frazzled.”

Scott heard Henry’s response and he immediately looked to Danny giving him a warning not question Henry any further.

Danny wasn’t paying attention. “Why are you frazzled? We did all the work.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Funny. No. Incase you didn’t hear. Frank kidnaped Ellen.”

Scott’s hands slammed down to the table. “And for those of us who did hear it a million times. We now have to hear it again.”

“You’re kidding. Frank kidnaped Ellen?” Danny asked.

“Yep. Took her right from Beginnings. Left a note and everything.” Henry explained.

“How is something like that dealt with around here?” Danny questioned. “I mean when Frank gets back. Do they let him back in. What?”

“They’ll let him back in. But I’m sure Joe will yell at him really bad.” Henry nodded. “And Dean. Dean is going to be so pissed off when he finds out.”

“Dean doesn’t know?”

“He doesn’t realize. I told him. He thinks I’m crazy. But I know. Frank took her. They all think he has her somewhere on Beginnings property. But I know better. I know Frank.” Henry took a stack of orders over to the file cabinet and laid them on top.

“Well since you have to watch your own kid now. Does this mean I have to find someone else to help me build more Auralnators?”

“No.” Henry answered. “I’ll find someone to help out with him. In fact, I’ll speak to Joe during our meeting this afternoon.” Henry looked at his watch. “And speaking of which . . . I’d better hurry up and look at perimeter twelve ahead of time. I know Joe will ask about it.” Henry hurried and lifted his tool bag. “See you guys.” He darted out the door.

“Henry. You forgot . . .” Danny held his hand out, then dropped it when Henry was gone. Danny looked at Nick in his arms. “Your kid.”

Scott snickered. “He did the exact same thing to me this morning.”

“What am I supposed to do with him? I can’t just . . .” A bright smile hit Danny.

“What? What’s that look for?”

Danny nodded his head. “I’ve got a great idea.” He moved to the door with Nick. “It’s time to put Henry’s true paternal instincts to test. See ya.”

Danny left with Nick.

Scott shook his head and returned to his work. "Test Henry's paternal instinct." Scott chuckled. "He'll fail."

^ ^ ^ ^

Opheim, Montana

Ellen huffed. Her arms were folded to her as she stood outside with Frank. He faced one way over a small hill. She faced the opposite way. Yet they stood close enough that their arms almost touched. She peered at the truck twenty feet away and huffed once more.

"Enough." Frank told her.

"Frank." Ellen tapped her fingers in an antsiness. "Do you think you can take any longer?"

"I wouldn't take this long Ellen if you weren't breathing down my neck."

"I can't even reach your neck." She tilted her head back and peeked at him. "You didn't even go."

"How can I go when you keep watching me."

"Why did we even pull over?"

"I told you I had to go."

"But you haven't."

"That's because you keep telling me to hurry up."

Ellen let out a disgruntled breath. "You would think after twenty years you wouldn't have a problem peeing in front of me."

"I don't have a problem peeing in front of you. I have a problem starting when you keep fuckin watching."

"Then I'll stand by the truck."

"Don't stand by the truck. I want you by me incase there's trouble."

Ellen tossed her hands in the air. "Frank. You either have me stand here telling you to go or I stand by the truck to let you go in peace. Either way. GO!"

"All right! I'm going."

"Thank God." Ellen exhaled, and shifted her weight. "You make me stand by you." She shifted her weight to the other side. "How in the world are you supposed to protect me while you go to the bathroom."

"Ellen shut up."

"What are you gonna do Frank. Hose them down."

"El. Quiet."

"Why are you talking to me like that?" Ellen bitched. "And will you please finish. This isn't a marathon. I'd like to . . ."

"Ellen!" Frank zipped up.

"No. I'd like to get going."

"I'm done! Now will you shut your fuckin mouth!"

"Fuck you Frank. I can't not believe you are taking . . ." Ellen shut up when she saw Frank reach into his shoulder harness for his revolver and pull it out. He spun to her, stepped back and lifted it.

"What are you gonna do. Shoot me?"

"Duck." Frank laid his hand on her head, shoved her down, extended

his revolver and fired a shot. There was a grunt, followed by a thump.

Ellen screamed, spun to look, and saw what looked like a savage laying not three feet from her. His forehead now missing from the shot Frank hit him with. "Shit."

"Where's there's one, there's more." Frank helped her to her feet and spoke calm. He checked his clip. "Stay behind me. Hold onto my waist. Whatever you do. Don't let go." He began to move with her.

"Should we run to the truck?"

"No. Move with me. With savages, I take no chance. Just stay ready. And don't be surprised if . . ." A loud hooting, the traditional cry of war from the savages began. ". . .that happens. Fuck."

One came from the left, two from the right. And another jumped up on the truck. Frank fired straight ahead. It hit the savage on the truck and sailed him backwards. He turned to his right and aimed. Flying at him with a high pitch whistle, came a spear. Like a batter waiting for his pitch, Frank swung the hand that held the gun down, knocking the spear to the side. He raised up again, shot twice, hitting them both, then he shifted to his right.

The last savage leaped forth as if he were an attack dog. Frank looked more perturbed than anything else seeing the thin, smaller man lunge for him. Frank merely clenched his fist, grunted in anger and delivered a hard blow to the savage just as he neared within inches. The savage's eyes rolled, his body spun fast the other way, then dropped to the ground. Frank reached down with Ellen still holding tight. He lifted the still breathing savage by his hair, braced him, and with a quick jolt of his head, Frank broke the savage's neck.

Ellen's face was buried so deep into Frank's back her nose actually hurt. Slowly she lifted her head back. "Is it safe?"

"Did you think it wouldn't be?"

"Oh listen to how cocky you are. See! See Frank. This is why we shouldn't be out here."

Frank took Ellen by the arm and led her back to the truck. "No, this is exactly why we should be out here."

"What? So we can be killed."

"No, so we can stay busy."

Ellen laughed in ridicule as they arrived at the truck. "You are not Indiana Jones Frank. Life isn't just one big adventure. You can't swing in on a rope and save . . . O.K. maybe you can. But you can't jump in . . . well, you can do that too." Ellen got in the truck and Frank stayed at the door staring at her with one raised eyebrow. "What if a group of . . .eh, you could."

"Your point?"

"My point is . . ." Ellen paused to think. "My point is, we aren't stopping any more. No more. Let's just get going."

Frank smiled and closed the truck door. He walked over to his side, got in, shut his door, grabbed Ellen and kissed her hard and long. He pulled back with a slight moan, kissed her quickly again then started the truck. He grinned at her. "Having fun yet?"

"Oh, there is just something wrong with you."

Frank gave a chuckle, shifted gears, pulled away.

Ellen brought her hands to her lips as the truck started to move. She slowly and silently let out the frightened breath she held. The same breath she hid from Frank just so he wouldn't know she was scared. But the fact remained,

whether Ellen was with the safest person she could be with or not, she had just been scared. And though it didn't seem to phase Frank, they were beyond the walls of their home. Ellen wondered what else could be waiting for them out there.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

It used to be where Andrea lived. The house next to Henry's. Three doors up from Dean's. First row of houses in the living section. Now that house, so nice and feminine, belonged to Robbie. He wanted to make a stop there after watching training and before going to see Joe. He walked from the house with Jess Boyens. A Caceres society defector, now a full fledge Beginnings resident who sported a security uniform. Jess was the man who led the defection. The knowledge he knew of the society and their works he shared with Beginnings along his twelve years with the Canadian Army in the special forces division, pretty much shooed him into the security position Frank nailed him with.

Jess stood nearly as tall as Robbie but with a slightly thinner build. And though he was four years older than Robbie, he looked much younger, because he just didn't look as rugged and worn. Short, cropped, wavy blonde hair. Jess is what the women in Beginnings described as, 'the guy who could give Blake the soap opera God a run for his money'.

"Robbie I appreciate this." Jess spoke in his soft and slightly British accented voice.

"I needed a roommate. In Beginnings unless you're Josephine or you win the single dwelling structure lottery, you're out. You have to share. And hey, I figured since we hit it off right away and you're on security. You're the man."

"I don't think you'll find me too difficult."

"I don't either. I usually know which people I click with right away. I clicked with you. Besides, Frank put you on night and evening shifts walking the living sections. So how much will we see each other? Of course I lived with my father forever, so I can live with anyone."

Jess laughed as they walked. "O.K., so you're headed back to work?"

"Head of security now." Robbie lifted his shoulders. "But I have to be careful I don't show my brother up. He's getting old and he's starting to suck at it. Then again, man, do I have to work a lot now?"

Jess shook his head with a smile. "I'm checking out the different distribution areas, you know, see how it runs. Do we need anything at the house?"

"Like what?"

"Like food. Or are we good on our share this week?"

Robbie paused in his walking. He blew with a flutter of his lips, raised his eyebrows, while scratching his head. "I don't think I ever went to distribution for food my entire time in Beginnings. No wait, I'm lying. Milk for El. I guess my Dad took care of that. I never thought about it." He shrugged and started walking again.

"What about now since you lived alone?"

“Andrea feeds me.”

“Then I’ll just let distribution be one of my responsibilities in the house. Because I don’t think Andrea will feed me too.” Jess said.

“She might. You never know. She gets pretty loopy.” They had reached the edge of town. “This is where we depart. I have to see my dad, I should have been there an hour . . . or more . . . ago. See ya’ later.” Robbie gave a swift pat to Jess’ arm as he moved a little faster to center town.

In the small school yard, Dean walked hand in hand with Alexandra towards the school. Jenny Matoose was out front, gathering the kids into the building.

Jenny stepped closer to Dean, she folded her arms and tilted her head with a smile. “All better?” She asked.

“We’re better.” Dean released Alexandra’s hand.

“Sorry we bothered you. I was too busy with the art project.”

“Not a problem. I was getting ready to take a break anyhow. I’m just sorry this happened again.”

Jenny smiled as she looked down at Alexandra. “We’re girls Dean. We do that sort of thing. Then, again, I blame myself. I saw her doing the wiggle dance that Ellen does. I should have known an accident would ensue.” Jenny took a deep breath. “Alex, can you go in the school. Forrest is reading. I want to speak to Daddy.”

“O.K.” Alexandra waved and smiled to Dean and darted in.

“What’s up?” Dean asked.

“I heard a rumor and I wanted you to confirm or deny.”

“The ‘Ellen’s been kidnaped’ rumor?”

“Yes.”

“I’m really having hard time believing that Frank would take her.” Dean explained. “I mean, I know he’s having a hard time dealing with what happened with Brian. So am I. He just seemed content with the arrangement we had and why would he take her out of our walls. I just . . .”

“Sounds to me like your trying to convince yourself.” Jenny raised her eyebrows. “As eccentric as Henry is, I would really think about what he is saying. We know Frank. Frank pushes and pushes. And yes, he has this understanding with you. But if he needs Ellen more. Frank will just say . . .”

“Fuck you Dean?”

“I was uh . . . gonna use a better word choice.” Jenny blushed.

“To say what Frank would say?” Dean gave a questioning look and Jenny agreed. “But how can I be sure, short of searching out this community?”

Jenny motioned her head to behind Dean. “Seems someone would have to know the details. Especially if he is going to get up early and be the fill-in for head of security.”

Dean turned around to see Robbie waltzing across town. “Thanks Jenny. My mind’s been so cluttered I didn’t think to ask him.” Dean hurried up and raced after Robbie. “Robbie, wait up.”

Robbie slowed down and turned to Dean. “Hey, Dean. I’m on my way to see my dad. Wanna come. Josephine is there?”

“No. I need to speak to you for a minute.”

Robbie looked at his watch. “Go on.”

“Gee, thanks. Anyhow. Answer me honestly. Did Frank kidnap Ellen?”

“No . . . well, not in a sense. He need to get away from the house.”

“So you know where they are?”

“Oh sure, at least the vicinity.”

“Great.” Dean let out a breath. “Is there anyway you can get in touch with Ellen?”

“Dean they won’t be gone long.”

“I know, I know. But she renamed the file for all of our respiratory ailment meds and I can’t find them. We have a lot of cases of pneumonia at the clinic.”

“Just for you.” Robbie laid his hands on Deans shoulders. “I’ll talk to them. But I have to go and your minute’s up.”

“Thank’s Robbie.”

Arrogantly Robbie nodded and smiled and moved to the bakery.

Dean watched him. “My minute was up?” He tossed his hands in the air. “He timed me?”

^^^

There was something about visiting the bakery that made the stop for Robbie all worth while. Not only was the smell really great but so was the sample of the new fudge cookies. Of course Robbie had to worry since Joe was there helping out.

“It’s about goddamn time.” Joe came from the back. “I’m finished here and I’m moving on.”

“I wish you would have told me. There were other things I had to do.”

“Robert. I needed you for something. I have several meetings this afternoon and you’re the key to my preparations.”

“I know I’m great Dad, but I can’t do . . .”

“Robert.” Joe shook his head. “Don’t. Anyhow, I know you know where Frank is.”

“I do. Well, the general vicinity.”

“Good. And I know he’s needs a little seclusion and alone time with Ellen, I’m understanding of that. But I need those damn field slash security schedules for my meeting with Cole, and I can’t find them. Any chance you can speak to Frank?”

“Oh yeah. I have to talk to Ellen for Dean. I’ll do that as soon as we’re done.”

“Good boy.” Joe squeezed Robbie’s arm and started walking with him. “Is Frank planning on coming back tonight?”

“Could be.” Robbie nodded. “But you know . . . ow!” Robbie jolted a foot in the air, then stepped to his right.

Little old lady Josephine, white hair pulled tightly up, smiled and winked at Robbie as she passed through him and Joe.

Robbie rubbed his rear end. “Enjoy that Josephine?”

She snickered. “Very much.” Her fragile voice answered.

“Tell me. Still firm enough?” Robbie questioned so seriously.

“Always.” Josephine smiled and kept moving.

“Cool.”

“Robert.” Joe scolded and pulled Robbie with him.

“What? It’s important to know.”

Joe merely grumbled and walked from the bakery with Robbie.

^^^

Dean sat in the 'Joe park'. The area center town that was set up like a park area. He ate something, a sandwich, and he looked solemn and in thought. Henry hated to break that, but Henry had to speak to him. So as soon as Henry spotted Dean, he sped toward him. "Dean!"

Dean looked up and brushed the crumbs from his hands. "What's up Henry?"

"I have something very important to talk to you about." Henry sat next to him on the small wall.

"Sure. What?"

"Um . . . I need to know if you think . . . If you . . . uh . . . shit."

"What?"

Henry tossed his hands up. "I forgot."

"Must have been a lie."

"No it wasn't. Why would you say that?" Henry asked.

"Henry, didn't your mother ever tell you when you don't remember what it is your supposed to tell someone then what your were going to tell them was a lie?"

"No. Did your mother tell you that?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Dean. That's terrible. Your mother shouldn't have told you that. Imagine the complex you carried around with you your whole entire life every time you forgot what you were going to tell someone."

"Imagine." Dean rolled his eyes.

"Anyhow. If I remember. I'll stop by and ask you. But I'm sure it wasn't a lie. But right now I have this overwhelming sensation that I'm forgetting something."

"You are." Dean said. "What you had to ask me."

"Nah, it's something else. Gees, what is wrong with my memory today. I know what it is. It's the Frank kidnaping Ellen thing."

Dean shook his head with a smile, raising his head and peering out.

Henry noticed the smile dropped. "What's wrong." Henry gazed out to where Dean looked. "Oh. I'm out of here. Bye."

Bev walked near them, waving her hand high and smiling.

Dean grabbed Henry's arm as he stood. "You aren't going anywhere. Sit."

"Oh no Dean. I can't."

"Face your sins Henry. Besides, I like watching you squirm."

Bev smiled an innocent smile as she neared the two men. An innocence her twenty-four years failed to have. She stopped before them as they sat. "Hot day."

Henry just started to whistle, his feet tapped and all he wanted to do was make his escape.

Dean was waiting for it. Bev to speak to Henry. But Dean didn't get what he expected. Bev sat next to him. Dean's views quickly jolted to her then

to Henry who sighed and snickered. "Did you want something Bev?" Dean tried to move when she sat so close to him her leg brushed against his. But Henry wouldn't move. Dean spoke to Henry through clenched teeth. "Move over."

"Nope."

"Dean." Bev spoke softly. "I realize Frank has taken Ellen somewhere. That's the rumor. And I want you to know, if you need any help with your family. Or you just need anything at all . . ." "Bev laid her hand on his thigh. "Call me. I know this is a rough time for you." Her voice softened even more as her hand slid further up his thigh. "I can really help ease your mind."

Dean chuckled, lifted her hand, removed it from his leg and gave it back to Bev. "No thanks. I have one rambunctious little girl at my house already. I don't need another. What uh, . . . What about Henry?"

"Henry knows my offer always stands." Bev stood up. "And now, so do you." She started to leave, stopped, looked back and smiled then kept on walking.

Henry nudged hard into Dean. "That wasn't very nice Dean. I hate her. She ruined my life."

"You ruined your life Henry. No one made you get drunk that night and make out with her on your couch. I wonder what she's up to?"

"Cats away the mouse will play thing. She probably just wants to get back at Ellen for burning her neck. But you know Dean. You should really consider taking her up on her offer."

"What?" Dean spoke with such shock.

"Seriously. You could get lonely. You should let her, like she said, ease your mind."

"What are you nuts Henry. She's a child to me. And besides that. Why would you even suggest that. Especially knowing how Ellen feels. And if I even, even let it remotely cross my mind, it could ruin what Ellen and . . . oh." Dean started to laugh. "I get it."

"What?"

"You want it to ruin Ellen and I. You want me to make the same mistakes you did." Dean laughed and stood up. "Forget it."

"No, Dean." Henry followed. "Really. You could be very lonely. You have a chance not to be."

"What about you Henry?"

"I'm getting back with Ellen after her and Frank get married."

"Henry." Dean stopped walking. "Granted you and El live together. But you know that was only temporary during this hard time about Brian. She moves back with me soon. And secondly, yeah, you have this special friendship back. But realistically, Ellen will never allow it to go back to where it was with you."

"And you think Frank is going to continue this understanding with you when he and Ellen get married."

"Ellen won't marry Frank." Dean walked again. "Trust me. It will never happen."

Dean walked off leaving Henry behind. Henry stood there watching, wondering which of them, him or Dean, was actually the one who wasn't being realistic. But Henry couldn't let his mind dally there for very long. He had to finish his work and go to his meeting with Joe. But he also had to work on trying to remember what it was that he was forgetting.

^^^

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters.

There was something fearful about George Hadly when ever he sat in his chair behind his desk in deep thought. It made those who worked close and alongside of him apprehensive about anything they had to tell him. But Jeremy Lyons couldn't let that stop him. Although he knew he wasn't bringing bad news, he was there at George's request.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" Jeremy entered the office.

George looked up from his thinking stare. "Yes. Come in."

Jeremy walked further in.

"What was the Chaldron loses today?"

"One ninety-two."

"Any word from the other two prisoners they kept?"

"No sir." Jeremy answered.

"All right, send out word when our divisions check in. I want ground troops out and about searching that side of the country. Obviously, this was a planned attack and obviously this wasn't from Beginnings." George ran his hand down his own face. "We have another force out there and it's one I haven't a clue about."

"So I take it we're searching for any leads that can tell us who this new force is?"

"Yes." George answered. "Have our most western camps be base sights. Have them bring in anyone who fits the standard militant description.. Question those they bring in but don't waste time on them."

"Sir, how will we get information from them if we don't waste time on them?"

"Simple." George leaned back. "You bring them. You question them. You tell them if they don't give you any information regarding this new force, then they will be shot by firing squad at sunup. If that doesn't frighten the information from them. Nothing else will."

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake 125 miles North - Beginnings

The second Frank stepped from the stopped truck, he knew. Ellen's long whine carried to him. "What now Ellen?" Frank walked to her.

"Here?" Ellen spun to him.

"You wanted to be close to home, but far away. This is perfect." Frank said. "Secluded. Near home. We have a lake." Frank's hand motioned to the lake in the distance.

"Yeah, but Frank. Here?"

"All right. I'll be a masochist. What's wrong with here?"

“This is the place.” Ellen took a step near the small log cabin. “The honey moon spot Joe used to authorize people to be allowed to leave Beginnings for after they got married.”

“Yeah.” Frank moved closer to her. “It’s a great cabin. Not used for a couple years. But great. It won’t take much to go in there and clean it up.”

“Frank.” Ellen said his name in a whine. “You know who the last people here were. Don’t you?”

“John and Jenny Matoose. So.”

“So.” She spoke long and drawn out. “Frank they probably had sex in there. I can’t sleep in a bed that John and Jenny had sex on. I can’t.”

“We’ll put the sleeping bags over it.”

“Still as soon as I lay there I’ll think about it.”

“Ellen.” Frank tired to remain calm. “We won’t sleep in the bed. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Ellen took a breath. “I’ll help you carry the stuff in.”

“Thank you.” Frank walked back to the truck and Ellen followed.

“Do you suppose it’s dirty in there?”

“Yes.”

“Frank, I don’t know how much dirt that I can . . .”

“Ellen. Can we try not to be such an Ellen and remember why were here? Please?” Frank reached into the back of the truck and handed her the sleeping bags. “Please? I’ll try to make the place as best as I can.”

“O.K.” Ellen waited for Frank to grab some things and she walked with him to the cabin. “Frank?”

Frank dropped everything and totally snapped. “What? What now Ellen? What can you possible bitch about now. Get it out of the way. Get it over with!”

Ellen stared at him for a second. “Are you finished? Good. I was just going to tell you I think that it’s going to end up be really nice for us.” She saw the expression drop on Frank’s face. “Feel bad now? Good. Because you certainly have hurt my feelings.” Tossing her head back and throwing her nose up, Ellen walked ahead to the cabin. She was impressed with herself for turning the situation in her favor and she promised herself that the gripe she *was* going to say to Frank, could actually wait until later.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Modular homes.” Danny stated to Joe with so much pride. “What do you think?”

“Modular homes?”

“Yes. They are prefabbed homes that basically come in two . . .”

“I know what modular homes are.” Joe took a moment to subside his frustration. “Why are you telling me about modular homes?”

“It’s the Beginnings wave of the future.”

“What?” Joe leaned back as he laughed.

“Sure Joe.” Danny spread out blue prints. “You wanted me to look at our prefabbed housing. To redesign and make it into more three bedroom

homes. Granted it can be done. But . . .” Danny held up a thinking finger. “Time wise we can get this finished much faster and with less man power.”

“By using modular homes?” Joe questioned.

“Yes. You wanted to erect two rows of housing. We can get ten modular homes lining them up front to back instead of side by side. All in about the same area without messing up your housing plan too much. And you know eventually, we can put more up. Leaving the town houses for the single people.”

“How many are you talking about immediately?”

“Ten to start. The way I calculated, including the split families . . .”

“What?” Joe was lost. “Split families?”

“Yes, the ones that share kids. There are four of those. Including those, there are nineteen families in Beginnings with children. Now . . . nine of them are fine where they’re at. They either have one child or two of the same sex. The rest have two of opposite sexes or three or more children.”

“Which four of those families are already in the three bedrooms we put up last year.”

“Exactly. Six needed. We can do this Joe.” Danny said.

“How long you talking and how many men?”

“Team of four. We can lay the foundation. Get the houses erected in two weeks.”

“Good plan. One fault. Where do we get the modular homes and how the hell do we get them here.”

“See.” Danny grinned. “About this point you’re gonna be like, ‘Wow, that Danny Hoi’.”

“I doubt that, but go on.”

“Highway 200. There’s a modular home sales place right there. Four trucks are on the lot. Take those four trucks, three trips to bring the houses in. Minimal amount of gas.”

“All right. Get started on this. Pick a crew from our new batch of guys. You have the list of families who are first priority for homes. Give them a time frame of when they’ll be moving. Clear a security team to go with you to pick up the trucks. Set it up. You know what is needed.”

“Thanks Joe.” Danny smiled and grabbed his blue prints.. “Oh and by the way. Since you married Andrea and Andrea is on the needs housing list. Two weeks.”

“Two weeks?”

“Can’t do it any faster. You guys only have two kids. So your bottom of the list. Start packing.” Danny turned to leave and when he did, Dean and Henry walked in. “And there’s Mr. Top Priority.” Danny pointed to Dean.

Dean looked almost frightened at that moment when he saw Danny pointing. “What?”

“You’re moving. Start packing.” Danny started to leave.

“Wait a second.” Dean stopped him. “I’m moving. Where am I moving?”

“Oh we’re doing new housing. So . . .” Danny closed his eyes and thought. “Your first on the list. One week tops.”

Dean gasped. “One week? How are you going to build the houses in one week.”

Joe slightly rolled his eyes when he answered for Danny. “Modular homes.”

Dean smiled. "You're kidding. No townhouse? I get a modular home. Hey, Danny those things can be nice. Get me a nice one for Ellen. She'll love it."

"How about when I go to the lot, I get you the deluxe model home?"

"I'd be grateful."

"What's it worth to you?" Danny asked.

"What do you want?"

"Can I get back to you?"

"Yeah, sure." Dean smiled and watched Danny leave. He turned around to see Joe staring at him "What's wrong?"

"Are we done?" Joe asked. "Can we sit down and be ready, because I'd like to start this as soon as Robbie gets here." Joe watched Dean give a fake look of fright. But Henry had a different, sad expression on his face. "Henry, what's wrong? You're not going to whine because you don't get a modular home, are you?"

"No Joe." Henry sulked to his seat. "I just have this feeling like I'm forgetting something." He brought his fingers to his mouth. "I just wished I knew what it was. I'll bet it's important."

"Can't be that important if you forgot about it." Joe said.

"True. But still." Henry drew up another thinking look. "I wonder what it is."

^^^

"According to John Matoose." Joe paced around a listening Robbie, Dean and Henry. "He says no one else is working for George. But how much can we believe him?"

Robbie shook his head in disagreement. "No. He knows he's on borrowed time with us. I think if he knew about someone else he'd tell us. He'd do anything right now to save his ass and stay with his family."

Joe nodded. "You have a point. All right this 'George insider' is top priority. And beginning tomorrow we try to figure out who this person is. Start from scratch. Compile a list of suspects and we'll go through the list one person at a time. Each one of us will do a list and we'll combine them."

Robbie added. "Sort of fine tooth comb it and come down to the most likely."

"Exactly." Joe said with a point. "The most likely suspects will get our full investigation. However each person that makes the list should be scrutinized through every scenario before they are even removed from the suspect list."

Robbie questioned again. "List of elimination questions. Motive and means?"

Joe nodded. "Yes. And this goes no further than this room. Just like we're keeping the news about John Matoose under wraps. We'll keep this under wraps. We don't need a community panic or a lot of finger pointing. We'll do this slowly and carefully even if it's putting one suspect a day under a microscope. When we're finished I'm sure we will know which individuals to place our full attention on."

Dean raised his hand slightly. "Any guidelines when compiling a list of potential suspects. I mean we can end up with half the community if we think

about it.”

Joe sat back down. “Let’s see. It’s safe to assume anyone who arrived after George’s departure is safe to eliminate. So let’s go from there. Henry any questions, you’ve been quiet.” Joe didn’t get a response. “Henry? Henry?”

“Huh?” Henry’s attention was gained. “What was that Joe?”

“Were you paying attention?” Joe asked him.

“Yeah, sure. But my mind keeps drifting.”

“To that thing you can’t remember?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that the oddest thing. The feeling is so strong.”

Joe merely sat back and gave a pacifying attitude to Henry. “Why don’t you, retrace the steps of your day.”

“Excellent idea. Thanks Joe.” Henry immediately stood up and flew to the door. “Catch me later to tell me what time we meet tomorrow.”

Before Joe knew it, Henry was gone. Joe ran his hand down his face then pointed to the closed door. “And that man has been voted to run the community when I retire? Oh boy.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ft. Peck Lake

Frank closed his eyes tightly in his final moments of lovemaking to Ellen. In the bed of the pick up truck, under a quiet starry sky, they lay on and under sleeping bags. His hands slid slowly up her back and under her hair, his fingers touched her face and then he kissed her, rolling over gently and bringing Ellen to her back. Frank kissed her once more, then quietly, he moved to his back, embracing Ellen and holding her to his chest. He stared up at the sky, saying nothing.

Ellen felt his sadness. With all that happened with Brian, it had been the first time in eight days that they had made love. So unlike Frank, who always tried to bury his hurt within intimacies, he did not turn to Ellen for that during his grief. They had touched and they had kissed. But what Frank needed most from Ellen was someone he was not afraid to break down in front of and that someone could only be Ellen. And Ellen could tell that Frank searched for something during their lovemaking. Frank was different. The act was more an act of holding on, clinging, rather than anything else. It was quiet, so quiet. Ellen wished she could read his mind because it frightened her a little. Perhaps that was why she waited for him to speak first.

And Frank waited so long before speaking. Clearing his throat subtly, swallowing harshly and kissing her on her forehead before saying a word. "I'm sorry." he kissed her again. "I know it wasn't very . . . it wasn't very good tonight."

Ellen lifted herself up on her elbow and looked down at him. He kept staring. "What are you talking about Frank? I loved making love to you."

Frank shifted his eyes to look at her. "Tomorrow will be better. I promise."

"Frank." Ellen spoke softly. "You're missing the point here." She kissed him lightly. "Making love isn't always about making your body feel good. It's about making *you* feel good, right here." She laid her hand over his heart. "Right now, at this point in our lives. Love making isn't a performance issue. It's healing issue. And on that, for me, you're doing great. I wish I could help you though."

"You have. Just this." He pulled her back down to him. "Even though we have to sleep in the truck." He felt Ellen chuckle. "Actually . . ." He looked up at the sky. "It's not that bad. It's so open out here. And I feel alone with you. That was the whole point of this trip."

"Kidnaping."

"That too." His kissed her on the top of the head. He whined some when in the distance, from the cabin the phone ringing could be heard. "Man, Robbie again. What's he trying to do, get all the calls he can in before the batteries die?"

"Maybe it's important."

"El, the last time he called he wanted to know if he could borrow my spare shoulder harness, come on. I'll call him back in a little bit. Right now . . ." He pulled Ellen as close as he could. "I just want to enjoy this."

Johnny Slagel would not have thought it odd seeing Henry pacing around Beginnings at ten o'clock at night. Henry often paced, sometimes too fast to even consider it pacing. But standing in the doorway of the social hall watching Henry, Johnny laughed. Henry actually paced as if he were on a mission. He carried a notebook and walked backwards most of the time. He'd scratch his head, move on, scratch his head again, back up. It was time, Johnny knew, to step in.

"Henry!" Johnny called to him.

"Shh." Henry held up his hand "Distribution . . . back to mechanics . . . the chapel . . . wait, Dean and . . ."

"Henry, what are you doing?"

"Going nuts. I've been over this a million times."

"Still trying to figure out what it is you're forgetting?"

"Yes." Henry nodded his head. "It's gnawing at me like nothing ever has."

"Can I help?" Johnny asked.

"I don't think you can."

"Sure I can. I think I know what it is?"

"You do? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I wasn't allowed."

"What is it?" Henry asked with impatience.

"Try this . . . Nick."

"What about him?" Henry asked, then after a second his eyes widened.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Henry began to run in circles. "I lost my son! Where did I put him?" Henry grabbed on to his own head. "Think. Think. Think. Think."

"Henry." Johnny said his name with a laugh. "My Pap has him."

Henry looked up to him. "What?"

"Actually now. Danny took him to the nursery this morning, Andrea picked him up. He's been there all night." Johnny started to laugh when Henry took off for the living section.

"Joe!" Henry bolted into Joe's house.

"Knock."

"Sorry." Henry backed up, knocked and ran back in. "Joe!"

"Yes Henry?" Joe stood from the couch.

Henry took a moment to calm down. "This is . . . this is a little embarrassing. But . . . do you have Nick?"

"What if I told you I didn't?"

"Oh, Joe please. I'd die. Do you?"

Joe grumbled and walked to the steps yelling up. "Andrea! He remembered!" Joe looked back at Henry. "She's giving him another bath. Seems Alex now has a hair infatuation and like someone else I know, she put a hell of a lot of Hair Hold on that kid's hair while he slept."

"He has bad hair Joe."

"He has your hair Henry." Joe scolded.

"Joe please." Henry ran his hand through his hair. "I work hard."

“You wouldn’t have to if you’d cut the shit off.” Joe switched his views to the steps when he heard Andrea singing and coming down. “Here he is. You can hand him over Andrea.”

“He’s such a good boy.” Andrea held him up to her eye level speaking that high pitch tone to Nick. “Aren’t you. Are you a good boy? Yes you are. You gonna go home now. Oh you sweet thing.” Andrea kissed Nick several times. “Grandmommy loves you.” She brushed her nose against Nick’s nose. “Yes, she does. She loves you. Yes she . . .”

“Andrea!” Joe snapped. “Give him his kid.”

Delivering a sequence of kisses to Nick, Andrea handed him to Henry. Immediately Nick started to cry. “Oh my.” Andrea reached, saw the glare from Joe, then held her hand up. “I’ll just make my nightly cup if tea. Night Henry.”

Nervous, Henry bounced Nick. “Well I’d better be going. Thanks Joe.”

“Hold it.”

Henry stopped in his escape to the door. He cringed before turning around. “Joe, he’s really fussy, I should go.”

“I want to talk to you.” Joe walked to him. “But first . . . give me the goddamn kid.” Joe took Nick. Nick stopped crying. “Sit down Henry.”

“No, I think I . . .”

“Sit!”

Henry rushed to the couch and sat down.

Holding Nick, Joe walked before him. “Now you know I’ve known you a lot of years. And I like to think of you as my oddball son.”

“Thanks Joe.”

“Glad to hear you appreciate that. Anyhow right now, I’m going to talk to you as if you were my own flesh and blood. Ready?”

“Yes.” Henry swallowed.

“What in God’s name were you thinking about!” Joe yelled. “Thirteen hours! Thirteen hours! You didn’t know you lost your baby for thirteen hours?”

“But Joe . . .”

“Shut up Henry! We all thought one hour. Two was pushing it. But when the end of the workday came and went, you pushed abandonment. Now listen to me and listen to me closely.” Joe neared him. “I know Frank looks at this kid as his own. I know he plans on raising this kid. But keep in mind one thing. Your wiry ass sperm created this kid and you will learn to be a part of this kid’s life! You will learn to take care of him! You will not! Not! Push the responsibility on anyone else when you are in the position to care for him. You hear me!”

“But Joe, he doesn’t like me.”

“Make him like you Henry.”

“I don’t know how.”

Joe handed him Nick. “Learn. Now is the perfect opportunity. Frank is away. Learn.”

Henry whined when Nick started to cry. “See.”

“No, what I see is you taking my grandson home and being a father to him.” Joe walked to the door and opened it. “Go.”

“But Joe . . .”

“Go.”

Henry slowly walked to the door. “Bye.”

Joe stopped him, kissed Nick, then let the two of them leave. He shut

the door with the loudest of exhales.

Andrea came from the kitchen. She handed Joe a cup. "For you."
"I hate tea."

"Drink this. You'll like this. It's perfect for how you feel."

Joe took a sip and gasped loudly.

"Too much whiskey?"

Joe looked back to the door and sipped again. "Perfect."

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Ft. Peck Lake

Frank laughed a silent laugh, so as not to wake up Ellen. He spoke in a whisper while on the phone to Robbie. "What was Henry's reaction?"

"Shocked." Robbie answered.

"Who won the poll?"

"Danny Hoi. He bet three work hours that Henry wouldn't remember for nine hours. He was the closest."

"Oh shit. You know what this reminds me of, don't you?"

"No. What?" Robbie asked.

"When Jimmy got married. Remember the day before he got married?"

Frank heard Robbie laugh at the recall of that memory and he continued. "Yeah, he dropped off Lindsay to get her nails done and he went off running around. And when he arrived home, you, me and Hal were there waiting. We went out drinking before the dinner."

"And Jimmy totally forgot what he did with her. Man, I thought they weren't getting married. She was so pissed."

"He kept telling us the same thing. There was something he was forgetting."

Robbie chuckled. "It was a good thing for Jimmy that Hal was such the word man. He talked her out of being mad at Jimmy."

"Yeah, the big dick. He blamed it all on me. Lindsay hated me from that moment on." Frank felt Ellen stir in his arms. "Hey, I gotta go. Talk to you later."

"Be careful out there."

"I will. Thanks Robbie." Frank shut off the phone and extended his arm laying it down above his and Ellen's head. He slowed down in his getting comfortable and stared at a sleeping Ellen. Frank's mind drifted and he smiled, thinking back to his brother Jimmy's wedding weekend. How long ago was that? Eleven, twelve years? Thinking of the length of time it had been, Frank's mind went back there . . .

"Frank."

Frank held a bottle of beer as he sat at the bar at the restaurant the night of the rehearsal dinner. He ignored the call of his name.

"Frank." The male voice called him again, this time tapping him on the shoulder.

“Go away Hal. I’m still pissed at you. Fuckin Lindsay reamed my ass out for nothing.”

“Come on Frank. I brought you a peace offering.”

Grunting and holding his beer bottle, Frank spun around on his stool. Hal stood there with woman, a smaller built woman, long, big brown hair, and her chest protruded far. Frank’s eyes hit there first then moved to Hal.

Hal grinned arrogantly. Looking so much like his father. “This is Jennifer.”

Frank hid his snicker and shook the woman’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Hal had his hand on Jennifer’s back. “She likes big guys. Stand up Frank.”

“What?”

“Stand up. Jennifer, if you think I’m tall . . . stand up Frank. Come on.”

Frank grumbling, stood from the stool. He towered over her and he smiled a fake smile.

Jennifer giggled. “Whoa.”

Hal nodded. “Told ya. And . . . he’ll be wearing his uniform.” Hal’s eyes raised. “She likes big guys in uniforms.”

“Hal says you’re a general in the Army.” Jennifer said.

Frank nearly choked on his beer. “Hal exaggerates. I’m a Lt. General. Hal . . .” Frank grabbed his bother’s arm. “Jennifer, excuse us.” He pulled Hal off to the side. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Fixing you up.” Hal said. “It’s the least I can do. She’s cute.”

“Why do I need fixed up?”

“You need a date for the wedding tomorrow. Even Dad has a date.”

“Dad always has a date. And what about your date.”

“Eh, Dad says his date’s open game. I plan on hitting on her unless you want to?”

“No, you go right ahead and hit on the old broad. I don’t need a date.”

“All right.” Hal took a deep breath. “Think about it. Sit at the bar, talk to Jennifer. You might hit it off.” He leaned to Frank. “And check out her boobs, Frank.” Hal cupped his hands in front of his own chest and mouthed the word, ‘huge’. Then he nodded and grinned. “Go for it big brother.” Hal gave a swift pat to his arm and moved on.

Frank walked back over to the bar, where Jennifer was seated. He sat next to her and grabbed his beer. He sat silently there, listening to her ramble on about something he couldn’t recall. Downing his beers fast and being grateful when he heard his father’s voice behind him.

“Slow down.” Joe laid his hand on Frank’s back and smiled at Jennifer. His eyes immediately shifting to the hard-to-miss chest. “Who’s your friend?”

“Dad, Jennifer. Jennifer, my Dad.”

Joe extended his hand to Jennifer. “Joe Slagel.”

Jennifer smiled with a tilted head. “You’re tall too. Are you a general also like your sons?”

“Nah. I’m not a military man anymore. CIA.”

Jennifer perked up.

Joe nudged Frank and leaned to him whispering. “Is she fair game or not?”

Frank rolled his eyes lifting his beer. “What about your date?”

“Robbie and Hal are irking me. They’re all over her and she’s loving it.”

Thinking, *What does this old broad have?* Frank turned around. He jolted back in surprise knocking his beer over, it spun on the bar shooting out onto Jennifer.

Jennifer shrieked.

“Frank!” Joe scolded.

“Sorry.” Blindly grabbing a bunch of beverage napkins, Frank shoved some to his father, laid some on Jennifer’s chest while the whole time he kept his focus on his dad’s date. Ellen. Who seemed quite content standing and flirting with Hal and Robbie. “Excuse me.” He marched directly over to the three of them. They stopped smiling when they saw Frank did not. “Robbie, Hal. Did you guys know she was coming?”

Hal snickered. “Uh, yeah Frank. Sorry, didn’t we tell you?”

Ellen looked passed Frank. “Cute date. Hal says your bringing her to the wedding?”

“Hal.” Frank huffed out his name. “Is an asshole.” Frank grabbed Ellen’s hand and pulled her from Hal and Robbie.

“Hey.” Ellen smacked his hand that gripped her tight. “We’re are we going?” She looked back to Robbie and Hal. “Help.”

Frank stopped, looked back at his brothers with a point and shook his head. He then kept pulling Ellen until they were outside. He released her hand.

Ellen, with both hands smacked him on the chest. “What are you doing?”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“You’re father asked me to come.”

“I asked you to come to this with me! I did! And you told me no. You were like . . .” Frank proceeded to imitate Ellen. “I can’t. I’d have to get my hair done. I have to do my nails. I want to enjoy my week without the kids. What would Kelly say?”

“Don’t you imitate me. You do it badly. Besides, you aren’t Joe. You can’t say ‘no’ to Joe. He came by this morning. Said ‘pack it up Ellen, I need a date’. We stopped and bought a dress and here we are. And I can’t believe you’re mad at me.”

“Yes, I’m mad.”

“Too bad. What do you care now anyhow. You have a date. I see I was easily replaced.”

“She’s not my date.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. I saw you getting all cozy with her at the . . .”

“Ellen!” Frank shouted her name.

“What!” Ellen shouted back.

“Shut up.” Frank leaned into her, grabbed her face and begin to kiss her.

Frank found himself leaning down to a sleeping Ellen, kissing her softly as he pulled from that memory. And it dawned on him at that moment, making him feel really good. He realized that he had been with Ellen for so long, he probably could think of a different memory every day for the rest of his

life and never have to repeat a single one. And to Frank that was the one thing in his life that could never be taken away.

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Dean didn't mean to find himself doing it again, but he did. Especially since Ellen wasn't around. The kids were in bed, the house was too quiet. And Dean laid on the couch, his eyes tightly closed while he clenched a teddy bear that used to belong to Brian. His cheek brushed against it, his nose took in the scent of Brian that still lingered on it. His mind swam in deep memories over the little baby he loved so much and missed at that moment with all of his heart.

Dean thought for a moment he had lost his mind when he heard the crying. It slipped into his thoughts, growing louder and louder until he opened his eyes and realized he wasn't crazy. Henry stood above the couch holding Nick. Dean jumped up, laying the teddy bear down.

"Henry."

"Help."

Dean rubbed his eyes and stood up. "I've been given strict orders from Joe."

"No, Dean. I need help. I'll stay here with you and help with the older kids. I will. But help. He won't eat. He won't sleep. He won't stop crying. I think he's sick."

"He's not sick Henry." Dean ran his hand down Nick's head.

"He hates me."

"He senses your uneasiness."

"He won't let me put him down." Henry followed Dean as he paced.

"That's because Frank has him spoiled. Frank always holds the babies. Always. Haven't you noticed. He never lays them down. So when you do, he cries. Trust me. I've been there. I remember . . ." Dean cracked a smile. "God, it was exactly a year ago. Frank went to Colorado to get Ellen. I had Brian. He had Brian so spoiled I couldn't put him down. Any work I had to do, I had to hold Brian. Close to my chest to because Frank would smother the kid in his big arms. I remember being so annoyed at first but then it felt good to . . ." Dean close his eyes. "It felt good to have that. To have someone . . . no matter how small, need you to just . . ." Dean stepped to Henry. "Let me have Nick."

Henry handed Nick to Dean.

Nick squirmed a little in Dean's arms. Dean carried him over to the couch. "Why don't you go over to your house and get me a bottle and some diapers. I don't think it would hurt if you guys stayed here tonight."

"Thanks Dean." Henry grinned with relief. "I'll be right back." He hurried from the house.

Slowly, Dean lowered himself to the couch, he sat down first then swung his legs up, propping his back against the arm of the sofa. He positioned Nick on his chest, letting Nick's little legs dangle over him while Dean wrapped his arms around the baby snuggling. He brought his lips to Nick's head and brushed his cheek against the softness of the baby's hair. Dean closed his eyes, felt Nick settle in contentment and he laid there enjoying the feeling of the tiny baby needing to be in his arms. A feeling that Dean missed so much and needed to have at that moment just as much as Nick.

CHAPTER FOUR

August 28

Bowman, North Dakota

A highway town six miles west of Bowman was their primary location or headquarters. A farming area could be seen in the distance. Small buildings set center town and mobile homes line up together as some type of housing.

The red brick building was the largest in town. Four stories high and on the corner just at the edge of town. A city building at one time. But now the Captain's office.

He stood near the window in his office peering out and leaning against the frame. In his one hand papers, the other a burning cigarette. He watched the training of his men, a look of pride upon his face. He wasn't old, by no means, but his face was rough and rugged. Thirty-six years old. He stood a little over six feet tall. His body brawny and muscular. He wore his long and dark blonde hair pulled neatly and tightly into a ponytail that draped just passed his shoulder blades. He turned from the window, setting his papers down when he heard the knock at his door. He grabbed his grey uniform shirt and placed it on over his white tee shirt. A shirt that sported a patch with the letters 'UWA'. He buttoned the last two buttons. "Come in." He called out in a strong voice.

A UWA soldier, wearing a blue uniform, stepped in, closed the door, then snapped to perfect attention.

"At ease James." The Captain motioned as he took a seat behind his desk. "What do you have for me on the Chadron raid?"

"Seventeen have returned sir. Seven of which injured."

"How badly?"

"Our medical man says he has it under control."

"Still." The captain rocked back in his chair as he looked at James. "Lets go ahead with the plan we made when we decided to start on these raids. Have a team of horses ready to take any of the injured that get serious to Beginnings for help. We want them to have a chance."

"Yes, sir."

"Any word of what we took out?" The captain asked.

"Corporal Haynes said he believes the raid took out close to two hundred."

"Excellent. Have Corporal Haynes prep another team, we want to hit this camp everyday until they either move out or die out on us."

"Yes sir. What about the new Kansas camp our scout found? The men are getting geared up for that.."

"I wanna hold off one more week. I believe, like the other one in Kansas, we can take that one out with one sweep, sixty, seventy men. It's a small camp that the society has. I want to concentrate on Chadron right now. Its too big, and too close. In fact . . ." The captain pulled a sheet of paper off the pile and handed it to James. "Do me a favor and run these orders to Mel. I want food rations increased for our men in the field. Tell him take from us if needed. We need our men strong out there."

"Yes sir." James stepped back, as he did another knock was heard at the door.

The captain looked up. "Come in."

A older man smiled as he entered, he too wore a uniform, his blue like James. "Captain sir." He stood at attention.

"At ease. What's up?"

He smiled again. "The new guy that's joined us. He's done it sir."

"No way?" The Captain stood up, a smile crossed his face. "Was it from the radio on that farm?"

"No. He said it wasn't strong enough. We left it there. He built a receiver from what we had in town. We're picking them up, some static but we definitely are picking them up."

"Excellent." The Captain hurried to the door. "Maybe now that we can hear what Beginnings knows, it can help our cause as well. Let's go."

It looked like police station. And before what looked to be the dispatch center, a young man in his twenties sat. Wires protruded from the radio and sprawled out across the small table top.

The Captain burst in with an air of enthusiasm. "They tell me you have good news, Bobby."

"I do." Bobby pointed to the radio. "We're only picking up what they say over the radio, but we have them. Not always as clear. I'm guessing it all depends where they are in Beginnings. Listen . . ." Bobby turned up the radio and the Captain leaned in with a grin. They were male voices rattling off back and forth.

"That's what I heard."

"Hey, doesn't it kind of remind you of that old kid's book. 'Are you my mother?'"

"Don't you mean father . . . oh, wait. I forgot who we're talking about. I heard Nick is becoming community property."

"Can you guys not discuss me, please." Another voice joined.

"What's the matter Henry." A fourth one interrupted, "Can't take it."

"Blow me."

"Bite me."

"Grow up."

"Me? I didn't lose my kid, no wait, you misplaced him."

"Don't you have a perimeter to check or something. Mr. I'm the Big head of security guy."

"I'd say, don't you have something to fix, but I know you can't handle it while I'm not there."

"You're an asshole."

"Fuck you."

"Robert! Henry! Knock the shit off and get your goddamn asses off this airway. And stay off unless you have something important to say. Christ."

"Right away Chief."

James smiled. He noticed the long, almost pale look on The Captain's face. "Sir, something wrong?"

The Captain blinked several times and wiped his hand down his face. "Um . . . no. I just . . . I thought . . . it's nothing." He cleared his throat and regained his composure. "I want a monitor on this twenty-four hours a day. I'll take a shift myself." he walked to the door. "And let me know if they discuss anything important. Please." The Captain opened the door, paused, looked back

at the radio and walked out.

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Ft. Peck Lake

Ellen's finger kept dipping into the jar she held, despite the fact that there were two spoons emerging from it. She walked across the small clearing to Frank who sat on a fallen tree. His back to her as he cleaned and checked his M-16.

"Morning." Ellen sat next to him. "Breakfast?" She showed him the jar. Frank shook his head. "Josephine peach cobbler? No?" Again Frank shook his head. "How are you?"

"O.K."

Ellen raised her eyes. "Short answer. Wanna talk about it?"

Frank let out a long breath. "I dreamt of Brian last night. I dreamt . . . I dreamt he was crying and calling 'da-da' and I couldn't find him. I just couldn't find him." He laid his weapon against the tree next to him. "Just when I think it's getting easier, fate hits me with something. Like a dream so real it hurts. I went through all this before when my kids died in the plague. I thought Brian was my second chance to be a good father. I really did. And I swear I never would have thought God would have been so cruel as to do this again."

The spoon dropped from Ellen's hand and she balanced the jar next to her. She rubbed her hands and stared out into the trees with Frank.

"How do you do it?" Frank asked.

"Do what?"

"How do you go on without feeling like you want to die every single day of your life?"

"Why . . . what would make you ask me that?" Ellen asked, her voice cracking some.

"You're just getting through this really well. You're handling Brian really well."

"Well no one's really given me a choice, now have they?" Ellen stood up. There was a certain defensiveness to her tone.

"Excuse me?" Frank looked up at her.

"No one has given me a choice. I've had to be the strong one. I've had to put my grief aside. Every single day. Every single hour, I have been helping you or Dean. Yet . . ." Ellen tossed her hand downward as if in defeat. "Yet, neither one of you have said to me. How can I help you through this. You guys seemed to forget he was my son too."

"Yeah, but you seem to forget who spent all the time with him. Me and Dean."

Ellen let out a long shivering breath. She nodded slowly with closed eyes. "My God how thoughtless of me. Here I was thinking I was his mother. And that somewhere in this whole thing, I had a right to miss him too." She reached down, grabbed her jar and walked off.

Frank followed Ellen into the cabin, she sat at the table by the unlit fireplace. "El. Look. I said something I shouldn't have."

"Yes you did. But you spoke the truth, didn't you?" Ellen looked up at

him.

“No.”

“Yes, Frank. Yes you did. I was a terrible mother. You know that, Dean knows that and I know that.”

“I never said that.”

“And you aren’t denying it right now, are you?”

Frank didn’t answer. He stood there, hands on hips, staring at her from the tops of his eyes.

Ellen gasped emotionally. “I didn’t think I’d get an argument from you. You have never once seen me as a mother to Brian. Never. I was the woman who gave birth to your son. That’s it!” Ellen stood up. “He was yours Frank. So easily last year you took him from me like he was your possession. I couldn’t see him. I couldn’t hold him. Your kid. You were super fuckin dad to him and I was nothing.”

“El, that’s enough.” Frank reached out his hand and Ellen swiped it away. “I don’t need this shit.”

“You don’t need this shit. It’s always about you Frank. Always. Your sorrow. Your grief. Your time away. That’s what this whole thing away from Beginnings is for. For you!”

“No, you’re wrong. It’s for us.”

“Us? Didn’t you just say out there that I was dealing with this fine. Forgive me, Frank, but if that’s the case then why in the hell did I need to leave Beginnings?”

“Nothing I say right now will be the right thing. Will it?” Frank moved to her. “El.” He dropped his voice as he faced her back. “I don’t want to fight with you. That’s not why we’re out here. To fight.”

Solemnly, Ellen turned to face him. “You’re right. We’re not out here to fight. We’re out here to help you through this. And we will. I’m out here Frank to help you. As your friend, as someone that loves you, I will be your sounding board. I will help you face this.” Ellen swallowed harshly. “But remember this. This kidnaping. Your implications. You have crossed the line with me for the final time. And the moment we step back into Beginnings is the last moment I have anything more to do with you.” Ellen spun from him and moved to the cabin door.

“Then I will not take you back there.”

Ellen stopped before she made her exit. “You know for as terrible of a parent as I am. It’s kinda of funny. *I’m* not the one forgetting I have other children back home.” Ellen walked out.

Frank stood there.

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Beginnings, Montana

Joe read off his clipboard as he blindly walked into Frank’s office. “O.K. Frank, help me make heads or tails out of this . . .” He looked at Robbie who grinned from Frank’s chair.

“Hey Dad.”

“This is ridiculous.” Joe walked to the desk and slammed the clipboard down. “I thought Frank would at least be back.”

“Nope, I’m it.” Robbie cleared his throat. “Head of security. I thought you knew I was filling in.”

“I did. What do you think I am, stupid?” Joe huffed. “Isn’t he back?”

“Um . . . no. Didn’t you wonder why you haven’t seen him? Or heard from him?”

“Robert!”

“What.”

“I want your brother back. This is too much. I gave him yesterday. And not that I don’t put every faith in your keen ability to protect this community, it’s just that I want Frank on it. And every day he hides away is another day we can face trouble.”

“I completely understand.”

“All right. So let’s go.” Joe motioned his hand and moved to the door.

“Where are we going?” Robbie stood up.

“To get Frank.”

“We can’t do that.”

Joe turned around and faced him. “You said you know the general vicinity he’s at. Right?”

“Yes.” Robbie nodded.

“Well let’s head there. I bet it’s sector nineteen.” Joe started moving and noticed Robbie did not. “He’s not in nineteen?”

Robbie shook his head.

“Where is he?”

“I know the general vicinity.”

“Robbie!” Joe yelled. “Where did your brother go?”

“Well uh . . . originally to Canada but he . . .”

“What!” Joe blasted.

“No, no.” Robbie held his hands up. “They’re closer than that. About a hundred or so miles away. North, I think. Yeah.”

“Oh my God! He left Beginnings? He took Ellen and left Beginnings?”

Robbie shifted his eyes around.

“Tell me this.” Joe stepped closer to Robbie. “Did Frank take Ellen from her home against her will?”

“I believe she wasn’t quite aware at the time that she was going.”

“Oh Jesus Christ.” Joe brought his hand to his own forehead. “He’s outside these walls. Why in God’s name didn’t you tell me he was out there?”

“You didn’t ask and I . . . ow Dad. My Ear.” Robbie found himself--or rather his ear--at Joe’s mercy as Joe gripped tightly to Robbie’s ear and pulled him by it from the office.

Henry spun some in the swivel chair in the communications room where he, Robbie, Joe and Dean were at. “Is this a secret suspect meeting Joe?”

“No.” Joe sounded perturbed. “Henry, quit playing and fix your eyes on the screen.”

“Why?” Henry asked.

“Just do it.” Joe ordered. “And Dean?”

Dean sat in the chair next to Henry. “Yes.”

“Watch the big board behind me.” Joe pointed to the huge electronic map of the United States. He moved to the control panel and typed. The large map of the United States became a map of Montana. “Keep your eyes fixed, both of you. Robbie, call your brother.” As soon as Joe saw Robbie dial, he hit the speaker phone.

There were four rings and Frank answered. “Yeah.”

At that instant, though low volume, a beeping occurred. Dean sprang from his chair when he saw the indicator light go off on the big board. “No.” His eyes widened and his face turned red. He spun to Henry. “Where?”

Henry grinned. “One hundred and twenty-nine miles north of Beginnings. Yes!” Henry clenched his fist. “I was right. I was right. I told you people that . . . Hey!” Henry was silenced when Joe lightly smacked him in the back of the head.

Mouthing the words. “Quiet” Joe nodded to Robbie.

Robbie sounded nervous. Like the little snitch brother when he spoke to Frank. “Uh . . . hey Frank.”

“It’s about time you said something. What?”

“There’s something that you . . .”

“Wait.” Frank said strongly. “I hope to God you aren’t calling me up to ask me a stupid fuckin question again. Are you? What the fuck Robbie. Can’t you people live in Beginnings without us. You call me constantly. Fuckin Dean can’t find shit without Ellen. And Dad, he’s whining about something that would have bit him in the fuckin nose if he looked.”

It was Joe’s turn. “Frank.”

“Oh uh . . . hey Dad. Am I uh, on the speaker phone?”

“Yes you are son. Now will please tell me what in God’s name was going through that thick skull of yours when you decided to leave these walls. And not too mention take Ellen with you.”

“I needed to get away. I got Robbie to fill in.”

“You took Ellen.”

“It’s a mini vacation.”

Henry watched Dean. Dean just stared with an anger filled look in his eye. Henry couldn’t recall when he saw Dean so mad that the veins actually protruded from his neck like they were. And Dean was literally red. Henry snuck up behind him whispering. “Dean. You better lower your blood pressure. A man your age could have a stroke.”

Dean’s jaw twitched, his nostrils flared as he took a step closer to Joe. “Tell him,” Dean’s voice graveled. “Tell him I want her back here now!”

Frank heard him. “Is that Dean? Tell him to shut the fuck up.”

“Bring her back Frank!” Dean yelled.

“No.”

Dean breathed heavily. “No? What the hell is the matter with you. Huh? You took her! You took her from the safety of these walls. You took her from her kids! What kind of stupid, asshole, arrogant, selfish kind of move was that?”

“Excuse me!” Frank blasted. “I hope you aren’t talking to me like that.”

“Who the hell do you think I’m talking to? You asshole!” Dean argued back. “You’re a dead man Frank. A dead man. The moment you step through

these gates I'm killing you."

Frank chuckled. "Oh, Dean stop. I'm scared."

"You think I'm kidding you? I'm gonna kill you. I swear to almighty God I will kill you! Put her on the phone."

"No."

"Put her on Frank!"

"Fuck you!"

The loudest and strongest voice ever to emerge from Dean's little body blasted out like a Lion's roar and Dean totally lost it. "Put her on the fuckin phone! Right now! Right now!"

Henry cringed, closed one eye and held his ear that rang from Dean's scream. He looked at Dean breathing so heavily. And he wondered if he should prepare himself to get Andrea because Henry could have sworn at that moment Dean was sending himself into a heart attack.

Ellen's voice seemed to immediately change the feel of the room. "Hello?"

Dean snatched the phone that was still in Robbie's hand and switched off the speaker. "El."

"Dean." Ellen said his same with relief.

Dean closed his eyes and walked further from the others. "El, I swear to you I didn't know he took you from Beginnings. I'm sorry. I am really sorry. I thought he had you somewhere here."

"That's all right. How are the kids?"

"They're fine. How are you?"

"I'm O.K. Things are a little rough right now."

"El, I know he took you to work through everything. Just tell me . . . is it helping you? I'll be O.K. with this if it is."

"It's supposed to be helping Frank."

"No, El." Dean kept his voice soft. "You. Is it?" There was silence. "El?"

"No."

A lump formed in Dean's throat. He swallowed. "I want you home. You belong home. You need to be around the kids, Henry, me. Just know that I miss you and I love you. O.K.?" Dean didn't get a response, "El?"

Frank's voice was not what Dean expected. "What the fuck did you say to her Dean. Huh? She was perfectly fine and now she's crying . . . Asshole!"

The line hung up.

Dean's hand clenched that phone so tight he could have broken it. With rage he handed it back to Robbie and spun around facing Joe. "This is wrong! He's wrong! He took her Joe. Took her! I want her back here. Back home where she belongs." Dean pointed as he walked backwards. "I will give him until tomorrow to bring her home. If he's not back tomorrow, I will go after her myself!"

"If he's not back by tomorrow. I'll send a chopper for her. I won't stop you from going."

Dean gave an angry nod and stormed out of the communications room.

Henry's eyes shifted to Joe, to Robbie and then to the door Dean barreled out of. "Boy is he mad. I told you he'd be mad when he found out. Joe? You don't really think he's going to kill Frank, do you?"

Joe raised his eyebrows as he bounced from heel to toe. He didn't have

an answer for Henry on that one.

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake

Frank used his chin to push the antenna down on the phone. He kept his eyes on Ellen who sat on the step of the cabin's porch. Her head rested against her knees and Frank sat next to her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do this to you. This wasn't supposed to be something bad. I wasn't thinking." Frank's hand hovered over her head in hesitation. "And I'm sorry for everything I said." He hand fell gently to her hair and he moved his lips close to her ear. "Tell me you'll forgive me. Tell me we'll use what time we have left out here to work through this . . . together. Please."

Ellen raised her head slightly then let it drop onto Frank's lap. He pulled her close and held her.

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Beginnings, Montana

Jason Godrichson whistled a happy tune in the cryo-lab because that was all he could do while watching a totally irate Dean fly about the lab. That and do his lab work. The buzz of the cryo lab door was a welcome relief sound to Jason. Something different rather than grunting, slamming and banging.

Andrea waltzed in with a smile and a wave. Jason shook his head in warning to her. Andrea merely gave Jason a 'don't be silly' look and moved to Dean.

"Morning Dean."

Dean looked up from the freezer case her peered into. He slammed the lid.

"Joe sent me to talk to you. He said you're upset."

"Upset! Upset? Andrea upset is an understatement!" Dean's voice was loud. "He took her! He kidnaped her! All because he needed her to himself. I need her! Do you see me snatching her up in the middle of the night and making an escape with her! No!"

Andrea didn't bat an eyelash at Dean's ranting. She stayed calm. "Dean. Take a breath."

"No!"

"Dean." Andrea laid her hands on his shoulder. "Breath with me. Ready?"

"Andrea . . ."

"Dean." Her voice was still soothing. "Breath with me. Cleansing breaths. In and . . ."

"Andrea I don't . . ."

"Dean!" She scolded loudly. "Knock it off and breath with me! Sweet Jesus, get it together boy. Now!" She closed her mouth and a startled Dean took in three long breaths with her. "Better?"

“No.”

“Tough.”

Dean grunted and moved about the lab with his work.

“Two things.” She followed him. “No wait three. Stop you little ass right now and face me. I deserve more respect than to speak to your back.”

Dean stopped and looked at her.

“Thank you.” Andrea smiled again. “First, Joe needs you at his office for a meeting about something. He said an hour. And second. Joe spoke to Frank again. Day after tomorrow, first light, he’s bringing Ellen home. Joe said to tell you he spoke to Ellen, she agreed to one more day. So . . .” Andrea pulled up a stool and sat down. “Are we feeling better now?”

“No.” Dean said. “I’m still killing him.” Dean walked back over to his freezer case.

“Oh Dean I know how upset you are. But I really don’t think you’re killing Frank. He’s not worth your soul burning for all eternity in hell. And keep in mind, as a Christian man, you know as well as I do that the thought is as bad as the act. So let’s wipe that . . .” Andrea stopped rambling when Jason laid a clipboard in front of her.

Jason cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows as Andrea read it.

Andrea quickly looked at Dean then back at the clipboard. “Oh my.” She handed the clipboard back to Jason. She whispered. “Perhaps we should start praying for Dean’s soul now.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

The Captain stared at the radio in the old police station. Beginnings’ transmissions played. He smoked a cigarette, listening to the meshing voices, his face serious. Occasionally he would crack a smile at the antics of a civilization that seemed to have it all together. He tapped a pencil from eraser to tip as he rocked back and forth in the chair, paying attention to every single word as if he were listening for something specific.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Dean was the last to enter Joe’s office that afternoon. Joe was in his usual spot, behind his desk. Robbie and Henry sat before the desk. An empty chair was waiting for Dean. He walked heavily, plopping down hard in his seat.

Henry scooted his chair over some.

“What?” Dean snapped at Henry. “Do I smell?”

Henry leaned into him and sniffed. “Not that I can tell. Are you still mad Dean?”

Dean only stared at Henry.

“You know, if you would have just listened to me the other night. You could have been past this pissed off phase and we . . .”

“Henry.” Dean said his name strongly. “Don’t.”

“O.K.” Henry held his hands up, hesitated then leaned to Dean again. “Just merely making an observation. You do know Dean you had me thinking you were gonna . . .”

“Henry.”

“Not another word.” Again Henry held his hand up and looked to Joe, after a few seconds he leaned to Dean again. “Just so you know. For a little guy you can get pretty frightening when you want to be.”

Dean snarled at Henry and gave a glaring look to Robbie who snickered. “Joe, can we just start this please.”

“You have to calm yourself.” Joe told him.

“I’m calm. I’m calm.” Dean pulled out his notes.

“O.K.” Joe said. “Before we begin. I just need to know from you Dean, what is this list of ways to kill Frank, that Andrea saw in your lab?”

“Exactly what it said.” Dean spoke nonchalantly, looking at his notes. “I’m killing Frank.”

Joe’s head bobbed back and forth. “And you plan on doing this . . . how?”

“Very carefully.”

“O.K.” Joe sat back and grabbed his notes. “Now that we have that out of the way. We can proceed.”

Henry’s eyes shifted. “A list of ways to kill Frank? Dean, you do know that’s against the rules here. You could get ousted.”

Dean’s hand slammed down hard on his notes.

Joe intervened. “Henry. If you don’t leave the man alone, I’m going to give him permission to make a up a list of ways to kill Henry. Now quiet so we can continue.”

“Oh Joe. I can’t believe you’re condoning this. Frank’s your son. Dean is . . .”

“Henry!” Joe yelled then saw Robbie raising his hand. “What!”

“I think we should let Henry ramble. I personally would like to see Dean kill him instead of Frank.”

Joe just looked at Robbie in silence. “You done being the smart ass?”

“Um . . . yeah.” Robbie answered.

“Good.” Joe pulled out a cigarette. “Let’s start.” Joe gazed down at the paper. “Now before I begin. I’d like to say why Dean is invited to participate. He’s not council, nor is he security. But . . . Dean is the only person who is one hundred percent, without a doubt, not a suspect. I think we can all agree on that.” Joe noticed Henry’s disapproval. “We can’t? Why can’t we all agree on that Henry?”

“I’m not saying Dean can’t be off the suspect list. I agree to that. I mean he was the one who cured the plague. If he worked . . .”

“Henry. Stop. What are you disagreeing about?”

“Me. I’m off the suspect list one hundred percent.”

“How can you say that?” Joe asked.

“Oh my God Joe. Do you think I’m working with George?”

“I didn’t say that.” Joe argued. “But what makes you think you’re in the clear?”

“He tried to blow me up.”

Everyone moaned.

Robbie shook his head. "Henry. Weren't you the one who proved that to be an accident?"

"Yes."

"Then he didn't blow you up." Robbie stated. "Henry stays on the list."

"So do you." Henry told him.

"What?" Robbie laughed. "He sent his SUTs after me."

"True." Henry held up a finger. "But he also sent what he thought was a cure. So how do we know, he wasn't trying to save you because you worked for him." He saw a speechless look on Robbie's face. "See, huh? Didn't think of that? Did you? No. I did. You were top on my list of suspects."

"Fuck you Henry."

"Joe." Henry tattled.

Joe held up his hand. "Robbie, you stay on the suspect list until we go through your scenario and clear you. So do I for that matter. Right now, we'll go through these people we all listed one at a time. And just for starters. Let's go with Ellen . . . What now Henry!" Joe's hand slammed down.

"I didn't list her Joe. You said people we all listed. And for that, I didn't list you either."

"No, you didn't Henry. We can't even count your list you only had two suspects. Robbie and Jason. Now let's move on to Ellen. Start with means. Does she have the means?"

Dean nodded. "Yes. The means was the reason I put her on my suspect list. Especially with this new plague. Jenny was intentionally given this plague. Ellen had complete access to it at any time. And . . . and the tubes of blood being messed up. I distinctively remember Ellen in the lab directly before I went in to test Jenny's blood."

"Stop." Henry held up his hand. "Do you realize how many people were taking blood that day? Let alone who was in the clinic and had access to the blood. You, me, Robbie, Johnny, Jason was still working. John Matoose brought Joe in the clinic. Melissa was one of the last ones to get sick. Patrick. And I remember a lot of them going in and out of that lab."

"True." Dean held up a pencil. "But did any of them have means to the virus?"

Joe answered. "We can't specifically say Ellen or whoever, used the virus we had here. Whoever was working for George could have easily had that virus in their possession. But we did establish means for Ellen. Now motive."

Henry shook his head. "She has none."

"Not entirely." Joe said. "If this post plague world could have a rich bitch, that would be Ellen. Ellen was the most materialistic person I knew in the old world. She has a chance to be involved with someone that would rule the world, she would. Hell, I remember her telling me she'd sleep with Ronald Reagan if it meant living in the White House."

Robbie, Dean and Henry cringed loudly and audibly.

Joe nodded. "See."

Henry disagreed again. "Not good enough motive. Not with all that happened to her in Colorado."

Robbie nodded. "I agree with Henry. Your motive isn't good enough Dad. And she did go through a lot of shit. So . . .with that in mind I gave it some thought. And it turned out perfect. Ellen's motive is revenge."

All three of them said at the same time "Revenge?"

“Yep.” Robbie said. “Using what happened to his advantage, George moved in for the kill at the right time in Ellen’s life. She was trying to get over what happened to her. Frank was being a dick because she did Dean. And George knew that and played on that. Listen to this . . .” Robbie proceeded to give his scenario. “It was late. It was during the time that Ellen was homeless and living from one place to another. Hoping to get back with Frank. Not speaking to Dean. Working all night in the lab. In comes George . . .”

“Burning the late night oil again, Ellen?” George asked as he walked in the cryo lab.

“Yeah.” Ellen said tired. “Dean has me trying to get to these passwords.”

“You look wore out.”

“I am.”

“I’m sorry for all that’s happening with you and Frank. He should just grow up and move on about it.”

“I was wrong George.”

“Ellen.” George sat next to her. He turned her stool to face him. “You were going through a very difficult time. Frank denied that time. Dean didn’t.”

“But still George. It was wrong. I lost my husband, my family.”

“You went through a very tragic time. Frank of all people should be understanding. After all, he did send you down to Colorado knowing full well it could be dangerous.”

“What?” Ellen looked at him in shock. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t know? Ellen. The only reason you went to Colorado with the scientists was because you were the most unlikely spy. Everyone knew.”

“I didn’t. That can’t be right. Joanna asked me to . . .”

“Joanna asked you to go because Joe told her to take you. Yes. I’m sorry to be the one to break this to you, but after you left there was meetings to determine how long to leave you there. Whether to bring you back if you found out enough information or not. We discussed it. If it was all that safe, then you tell me why we sent a body guard like Miquel with you.”

Robbie nodded. “She fell for it. He then began pumping her mind with how what happened to her was all Joe’s fault. How Beginnings caused her grief. And as far as putting my Dad under the Salicain. Ellen knew it wouldn’t really harm him, just inhibit him while George gained power. And she had total access to the computers in the cryo-lab. She could have loaded the destruct programs.”

Henry made a loud buzzing sound. “There’s where your story goes off. Ellen got caught in that explosion.”

Joe quickly looked at Henry. “What explosion?”

“The one that killed Dean.” Henry’s speech slowed. “In the time frame that . . . we erased when we . . . went back and saved Dean. Sorry.”

Dean interjected. “But going on Henry’s story. Even without the explosion. Ellen did one thing. She gave us the antidote that brought Joe out of the Salicain. She said her future self told her.”

“Of course she did.” Joe said. “But George could have easily let her know which was the antidote.”

“But why do it?” Dean questioned. “Robbie was in holding. Frank was on his way out. You were under the Salicain. Henry was clueless. Why did Ellen

give up the antidote.”

Robbie had the answer. “Guilt.”

Joe snapped his views to Robbie. “Ellen?”

All four of them shook their heads.

“O.K.” Joe tossed his hands up. “Someone give me a good reason to remove her.”

“A-ha!” Henry held his hand up. “I got it! Ellen was the one who came up with the cure that beat the original strain of the virus.”

Joe quickly looked at Dean. “I thought you said you did that.”

“Ellen insisted everyone think I did. Henry knew. That’s it.”

“See Joe.” Henry said excited. “You took Dean off the suspect list because of the cure thing. So Ellen has to be off.”

“Ellen’s off.” Joe scratched her off happily.

“Does uh . . . does this mean Dean’s back on?” Henry questioned.

“No. Dean’s not back on.” Joe answered.

“But why Joe? He didn’t find the cure.” Henry argued.

“But it was Dean’s bionic eye that saw the mouse that carried the virus. So . . . he’s still off.” Joe looked at his watch. “And this meeting has gone on too long. We’ll meet tomorrow at the same time. Let’s give some deep thought to scenarios like Robbie did. And let’s do it for um . . .” Joe skimmed the list. “The next two that are easy to eliminate. Frank and Andrea.”

Dean grinned. Dean grinned big time. At least he knew the rest of his day wasn’t going to be all that bad. He was just given permission to think of another way to eliminate Frank.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beginnings, Montana

In the evening a box laid on Dean's diningroom table and he stood before the cabinet there, shuffling through papers and tossing them in. He thought he heard Nick's crying and he looked up to the ceiling. He looked to Henry who seemed to look at everything Dean tossed in the box. "Henry, did you hear Nick?"

"No. Why, you need me to get him for you."

"Um . . . no. It's probably my imagination."

"Dad." Billy, Dean's six year old son, called as he sat at the diningroom table. "I found a problem."

Dean stopped packing and looked over Billy's shoulder as he read off a clipboard. "What is it?"

"Is the insulin strong enough to cause a deadly heart attack in Uncle Frank?"

"In large quantities, Yes."

"He's big." Billy said. "You can't inject him one time. You'd have to get him lots. How are you gonna hold him down?"

"Good point. Make a note of that. And neatly too." Dean returned to his box and noticed Henry staring. "What?"

"He's six?" Henry pointed. "Boy I hope Nick ends up that smart."

"He will Henry. Want to know why? Frank won't be around to raise him. I'll be raising him with Ellen. And between your mechanical inclinations and my teaching him, that kid can be another Einstein."

"Oh yeah?" Henry smiled. "Cool. And . . . he does have the hair for it."

Dean shook his head. His mood wasn't the greatest. And little did he know when he went to answer the knock at his door, his evening would only get worse. He opened it, huffed some and laid his hand on the back of his neck. "Yes Bev."

Bev slipped in, despite the fact that Dean didn't open the door wider for her. She waved her hand to Henry who looked the other way. "I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to go down to the social hall for a drink with me."

"No." Dean opened the door for her to get his hint. She didn't.

"I heard you were upset with everyone today. I know you're tense. I thought maybe I could help."

"Bev." Dean said her name with annoyance. "No. I'm not interested in hanging around with you. Your offer is noted and rejected. I don't know why all of the sudden you're putting this interest in me. And frankly, I don't care. But be forewarned, if starting trouble is what this is about. You have picked the wrong day to do it. Bye."

"I'm not starting trouble Dean." Bev said softly. "And just to prove it. I'll leave. But know this." She stepped to him, whispering near his ear. "You'll change your mind. Ellen or no Ellen, I can be that special friend. I can be . . ." Her words were breathy against his ear. Dean's expression didn't change, he still stared coldly forward. ". . . Everything you need." She smiled stepped back, trailed her fingers down his chest and walked out.

Dean shut the door, shook his head and turned around. His daughter Alexandra stood before him with her little arms folded.

“Daddy. What was *she* doing here?”

Dean looked down to her clueless.

Henry saw Dean’s lost expression and decided to help out. “Alex. *Bev* is going to be your father’s special friend.”

Alexandra shrieked at the same time Dean gasped. She swiftly swung out her leg, kicking Dean hard in the shin. “You jerk. I’m telling Mommy!” She raced up the stairs.

Dean grabbed his shin, reached for the railing and spun to Henry. “Why . . . Why would you say that?”

“That’s what *Bev* said. You know Dean, it’s welcome relief to see her dig her venomous claws into someone else.” Henry made a claw with his hand then hissed.

“Henry.” Dean said his name through a painful grunt. He then huffed loudly limping for the steps. “You are so lucky right now that my focus is on Frank. God! What is wrong with everyone today.” Dean charged up the steps.

Henry chuckled as he watched Dean stagger up still grabbing his shin. Henry looked down when he felt the tug to his pants.

Billy looked up to him. “You’re not funny.” He shook his head and moved to the steps to follow his father.

Henry still laughed. He didn’t care. “Such a Dean.” He shook his head and returned to the box Dean was packing. He was certain there was something in there he forgot to look at.

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Joe looked perturbed as he made his way to his diningroom. He kept looking at Robbie who stood by the front door, his hands folded in front of him. He could hear Andrea whistling in the kitchen. “Robert, do you mind telling me . . .”

“Excuse me.” Andrea sang her words as she came from the kitchen holding a long baking sheet, it was covered. She carried it to Robbie. “Now you be careful. It’s hot. I don’t want you burning those guitar fingers of yours.”

Robbie took a whiff and grabbed the pan using the towel Andrea provided. “Thanks Andrea, you are turning out to be a really cool mom.”

“Aren’t you sweet? Isn’t he sweet Joe?”

Joe grumbled as he sat down. “A pip.”

“We’ll enjoy this.” Robbie told her.

“I’m sure you will.” Andrea moved to the door opening it for Robbie. “Now, I’ll open my window.”

“And I’ll play you that song.”

“Thank you Robbie. Be good. Play good.”

“Yep.” Robbie grinned and carried his baking sheet with him when he left.

Andrea let out a sigh as she closed the door. She walked back toward the diningroom and kitchen.

“Why are you feeding him? He’s a gown man Andrea. Let him cook for himself.”

“He’s a very busy young man. He’s Mr. Security now and he has the band coming over to his house. He can’t have company without food. Those

boys can't play on an empty stomach, they won't be good. Besides, Denny will be there too. He has to eat."

"Want me to call Katie to the table?"

"Joe Slagel you really should pay more attention. She's at Dean's." Andrea went into the kitchen and emerged with a large bowl of salad. She placed it on the table, dished some to Joe, then herself and sat down. She folded her hands on the table. "You or me?"

"I'll do it. You take too long." Joe folded his hands and lowered his head. "Heavenly father bless this meal and thank you for it. Amen."

"Amen." Andrea smiled and tapped Joe's hand. "Touching." She lifted her fork and noticed the annoyed look on Joe's face. "Something wrong?"

"No, something is missing."

"What?"

"Dinner. I thought I smelled your pizza."

"You did." Andrea took a bite of her salad.

"Well where in the hell is it?"

"I made it for Robbie and the boys."

"Robbie!" Joe lifted his fork. "What about me?"

"You have a nice salad. Isn't this nice. Plus, I made custard for desert. You love custard."

"Yeah, I do love custard."

"What's the matter Joe? You seem grumpier than usual." Andrea became serious. "Is it Frank? Wanna talk?"

"It's Frank." Joe dropped his fork. "Andrea, I don't know. I don't what to do about him. What the hell was he thinking?"

"He was thinking about how much he needed to step away from his pain. Everything here is Brian, Joe. Out there it's not."

"It doesn't make it right."

"Nor, does it make it wrong. Joe, instead of being angry with him, try to understand him."

"Why are you defending him?"

Andrea shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I just see where he's coming from."

"But he took Ellen. And he didn't just take her, he kidnaped her."

"Again, look at it from his point of view. Frank isn't one to think things through. He acts. Ellen has been a part of his life forever. They lost a child. In Beginnings he can't grieve alone with her. He needed that. And . . . would she have gone if he asked her? No." Andrea continued to eat.

"I've got Dean being a mad man around this community. What about that?"

"Understand that as well. Dean loves Ellen. He needs her. And the worst part is. After all these years the unthinkable began to happen. Dean and Frank began an understanding. That takes trust. Dean put his trust in Frank. Put aside all the years that Frank betrayed him. And look what happened. It was fifty-fifty. And Frank decided he wanted Dean's fifty percent. Had Frank just said to Dean he needed Ellen for a few days, I know Dean. He would have agreed. But . . . he didn't. And I'll talk to Dean. We'll get him calm yet."

"Thank you Andrea." Joe smiled at her and picked up his fork again. "You're a wise woman." He leaned over to her and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm glad to have you in my life."

“Thank you Joe Slagel.”

“Not all that glad about this salad.”

“But you do get custard.” Andrea pointed her fork at him.

Joe grumbled as he looked at the lettuce on his fork. “I do get custard.”

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Jess Boyens extended a napkin down to Andrea’s son Denny as he sat on the couch eating his pizza. “Try this.”

“Thanks.” Denny smiled, his face covered with sauce.

“And wipe your hands off too.” Jess ordered nicely. “You don’t want sauce on that tambourine.”

“No way do I want that. Thanks.” Denny wiped off half-ass and continued to devour his pizza.

Robbie looked up to Jess. “Are you sure we won’t bother you playing in here. We can go outside.”

“No. It’s too hot out there. Play. I’ve no problems with it. Looking forward to it actually. I’ll just be upstairs.” He pointed backwards, then heard the knock at the door. “After I get that.” He saw Robbie standing. “Stay seated.” Jess walked to the door, Danny Hoi was there. “Danny.”

“Hey Jess.” Danny smiled. “Can I come in. I need to speak to Robbie.”

“Sure.” Jess motioned his hand inward for Danny. “Robbie.”

Robbie stood up. “Hey, Danny what’s up?”

Danny, so like his bubbly self walked in. “Robbie. I needed to talk to you. I’ve had this secret desire to be a back up singer. Can I join the Starters?”

“Um . . . uh . . .” Robbie looked to his band. “Are you serious?”

“No.” Danny laughed. “Just kidding. Anyhow. I just spoke to Joe, he said speak to you. I found something today when I was out with Cole on the Modular home search. I want to get it tomorrow but Cole can’t go. Joe says I can’t leave without a security escort. Can you hook me up with one?”

Robbie shifted his eyes to Jess. “You up for a short run?”

“Sure.” Jess nodded. “What are we running for? Supplies for the foundation?”

“Nah.” Danny shook his head. “We got that ready to roll. My guys start on that tomorrow. No, it’s for entertainment purposes. There’s not much to do here in Beginnings. And not like the Starters aren’t the greatest thing since the Beatles. But . . . we need more. So we’re gonna have the first “walk-in” here.”

A loud “what” erupted from everyone.

With a snicker, Danny held out his hands. “O.K. let me explain. I saw this big screen TV unit and I’m getting the projection unit. We have videos and we’ll show it off the back of distribution. Like a drive-in without cars. And Trish is gonna be the coordinator of feature films we view.” Danny heard the moans. “What?”

Robbie laughed and shook his head. “Trish. Great, we’ll be watching Mary fuckin Poppins every night.”

“See. That’s what I thought.” Danny said. “But she fully plans to implement, Friday night, late that is, as Adult movie time. She said that way the women are done with their meetings and the kids are all asleep.”

Robbie hooted with the rest of the guys. “All right. Now that sounds

good. Tell her we expect the first adult movie night tomorrow.”

“Without a doubt.” Danny moved to the door. “Thanks Robbie.” He opened it. “Oh, hey, I wanna test the external speaker system I set up. Feel like helping?”

Robbie shrugged. “Sure, how?”

“Give me fifteen minutes and put a radio on channel twelve. That’s never used. We’ll broadcast you guys like a radio. O.K.?”

Robbie looked to his guys for approval. “Sounds good.”

“Great. Jess, come help.” Danny waved him on. “And Starters. Be original and creative. The community will be listening.”

After the door shut, Robbie looked to Paul. “We can be creative. Can’t we?”

Paul blinked several times in thought. “Sure. How can we not? We’re musicians . . . aren’t we?”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

There was a special prayer service offered that night in the town’s old church. As always the captain attended. Never did he miss praying for his men in who were about to embark in battle. To him, God was their protection just as much, if not more than the swords that they carried. He walked from the huge crowd that seemed to gather, like the old days, at the entrance of the church after services. He wandered down the street, whistling one of the hymns he had just heard. His walking slowed when the sound of his whistling seem to clash with something else . . . music.

Raising his eyebrows in oddity, he listened where the guitar playing came from and he followed it to the police station. He hurried inside, opening the door and moving to the dispatch center that now was his monitoring station. “Private.”

The uniformed private stood up from his seat and at attention.

“Be seated. Did I just hear music?” The Captain moved closer.

“Um yes sir.” The young soldier said. “Beginnings’ channel twelve. I have all the other stations on, nothing but security checks and talk about some woman named Bev is going on. So I turned it up. Sorry sir.”

“No. It’s O.K., They designate a station to music?”

“I kind of think they’re amusing themselves with the radio.”

The captain chuckled and the instrumental song stopped. “That was good.”

“Acoustic act sir. Wait . . . listen.” The young man tuned in the radio.

It was a whispering voice, dark and deep. Soothing and they spoke close to the radio.

“Yes. This is D.J. Paul with it all. Coming to you live from Beginnings, Montana. Broadcasting for your listening pleasure. We have live and unplugged the Starters . . .”

The young soldier chuckled. “Starters, Beginnings, get it?”

The Captain closed one eye in a bit of annoyance. “Yeah. I get it. Shh.”

“And believe it or not, joining the Starters for tonight only, is Bob

Dylan.”

“Come on guys. Who’s Bob Dylan. Tell me now. Please.”

Paul’s voice went muffled. “Knock it off Denny, you’re ruining the professionalism of this.” The voice returned fully. “Bob, tell us what you’ll play next.”

It sounded like Bob Dylan. So close. “Wheel, ya’ knew paw. I lie ta play fir yew a little tune of ma own. He-he.”

The captain laughed and listened to the song as it started, and the man who sang it sounding so much like the Dylan he remembered. “This is good.”

“That guy sang Dylan doing Elvis. It was hysterical.”

“I missed that?” The captain pulled up a chair joining the private. “These guys must not have anything better to do with their time.”

“Begging your pardon sir, but we’re no better off. We’re listening to them.”

The captain smiled, leaned back and took in the sound of Beginnings.

CHAPTER SIX

August 29
Chadron, Nebraska

Predawn. A hiss of silence upon the Society camp soon became invaded with the joined voices, deep and proud, chanting out softly and carrying through the deadness of the air.

“I pledge allegiance to my country and for the alliance in which I stand. I will fight for my God, for my home and for my land. And for my brothers who have lost their lives. I will defend with my honor and soul, all that I believe in. And I will fight for the freedom under which we all should live.”

There was a pause of silence and the chanting continued. Stirred from their slumber the Society soldiers rose up. Upon the first opening of the first camp door, came the single blow of the trumpet. Not on horse did the attack come. The UWA soldiers hid within the camp. They had taken out the guards on post and awaited the enemy. A fierce struggle, hand to hand began, and in the midst of that, another bugle sounded and from the hillside charged another brigade. They joined their brothers of the UWA hitting the Society with skill and speed and with losses the Society did not expect to suffer.

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake

It was a long pier. It extended a good twenty-five feet into the lake. Frank sat on the edge of it, Ellen next to him. He fished. Ellen watched. He kept shifting his eyes to her in that early morning.

“El. You can say it any time.”

“Nope.” She rested her elbows on her knees. “I think I’ll wait.”

“Why?”

“Because. It bothers you.”

“No it does not.”

Ellen half smiled. “Yes, it does Frank. I know it bothers you.”

“No it doesn’t. So you can say it.”

“O.K.” Ellen shrugged. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks.” Frank kissed her on the cheek.

“God, you’re old Frank. What are you today. Forty?”

“Oh my God. No. Thirty uh . . . thirty-five.”

“See, I knew it bothered you.”

“Why would turning thirty-five bother me?” Frank asked.

“It didn’t bother you. I was there five years ago when you turned thirty five. You’re forty. And may I say, you’re looking every bit of it, if not more.”

Frank’s head raised up. “I what? Please. I look better than most of the men in the community younger than me.”

“You would think that. Old Frank. You look old. Dean says you aged without grace.”

“Dean says? Take a swim El.” Frank gave her a gentle push and into the lake Ellen went in with a shriek.

Ellen's head emerged from the water. She shouted quickly. "Frank. Asshole . . ." She went down and came back up. "I can't . . ." Under the water and then back up "Swim." Ellen went under.

"Oh shit. I forgot." Frank set down the fishing rod, laughed and jumped in the lake.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George's loud voice blasted out in the board room. Six men sat at the table. "Will one of you please tell me what the hell does UWA stand for! Someone!"

There was silence.

"No one knows?" George's hand slammed hard on the table. "Two hundred and three men yesterday! Three hundred and forty-five men today. All dead. This is the fifth hit these assholes have gotten us with. What is our total? Seven hundred and fifty-seven men. With the loss at Beginnings that is over a thousand lost. What the hell is going on?" George still received nothing but puzzled faces. "Out of nowhere these men show up. Where did they come from? These pansies in blue and grey uniforms sporting a UWA patch are taking out our men armed with M-16 and high tech weapons, and they're taking them out with fuckin swords and handguns. Someone give me an answer or at least a logical goddamn explanation of what's happening and where they came from. You men were part of a team of fifty that went out as ambassadors. Talk to me."

Jeremy Lyons nervously spoke up. "They have to be a new organization."

"Well no shit. Did we see them before?"

"No." Jeremy shook his head. "I was predominant in the west. They could have been people that have survived our raids out there. We know some of them are defectors."

"How many are defectors?" George asked.

Jeremy opened his notes. "Knowing what we've lost on our raids and the ones the UWA takes as prisoners, CME's included. They may have close to two hundred of our men."

"That can't be right. That has to be one hell of a large group. And we can't find them?"

"It's a big country. How many times did we pass that one place in Canada and they had living in that community close to three hundred." Jeremy said. "If it's any consolation, Beginnings doesn't know they exist."

"Beginnings is starting to look like peanuts compared to these guys." George shook his head with a huffing breath and sat at the table. "They now have to take top priority. I'll notify our person in Beginnings that we have problems. I haven't spoken to them in almost a week . . . O.K." George calmed down. "Now if we can scour this continent for the four million our scientist estimate are alive, we can scour the west for them. We have to nail this resistance. And we have to build a force that can take them out with the precision they are taking us out with."

Another man at the table raised his hand. "We've been shipping our elite to Alabama. We still need a better guidance in training there."

“I’m working on that. Right now. This resistance. And gentlemen we have to find them before Beginnings does. I received word this morning our ships will be done in approximately a month, two tops. I’d like to launch them with our men, but I’d like to launch them with nothing else on my mind. The last thing we need is this country going into civil war. And I’m afraid . . .” George paused as he stared at the faces at the table. “If we don’t end this soon. That is exactly where we’re headed.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe grinned as he swivelled in his desk chair, reading the papers Henry hand delivered from the communications room himself.

“Joe?”

“Never. Never.” Joe snapped forward laying the papers down. “Since we located George, have we seen this much activity to him.”

“Twenty-two calls.” Henry indicated. “Twenty-two were made to Quantico in the past five hours alone.”

“He definitely knows we know his location and he know he’s too big for us to take out. That’s why he’s letting all these calls in. So . . .” Joe leaned back. “Did you tell George Henry? Huh?”

“Oh my God Joe. How can you say that to me?”

“Just kidding.” Joe laughed and read the papers. “But still, all these calls. Something is up. Looks more like a panic instead of check ins. And my gut tells me, Georgie boy may be having some problems.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

“No!” The captain called out, racing into the field where his men trained on horse. “No.” He tossed his cigarette and grabbed hold of the reigns of a horse stopping it. A frightened young man of eighteen sat upon the animal. “Son, speed is important. Speed. Precision in the sweep is secondary. Trust me. You swing down at a man with your sword going full speed it’s not going to matter where you slice him, he’s doing down. But if you are not doing it with speed. He will see you coming and he will take you from that horse. The most vital thing is that you returned home to us in the same shape you left. That is why you must do this correctly. Understand?”

The young man nodded slowly.

“Good boy. Now impress me. Because I know you can.” With a smiling nod, the captain stepped back then walked to his observing and training position. He heard the call of his name and turned to it. Sgt. Ryder, one of the captain’s most trusted men. A thin man, in his thirties. His dark hair and Mexican features made him look mean. Sgt. Elliott Ryder was the Captain’s right hand man because he was strategically smart.

“Captain.”

“Yes, Sergeant.” The captain kept his views on his training men.

“We have news you may not like.”

“What is it?” The captain smiled watching the young man speed across the field. He called out to training boy. “Yes! That’s it! Excellent!”

“Captain.” Sgt. Ryder spoke again.

“I’m sorry. What is it?” The captain faced him and was handed a sheet of paper. The smile left his face. “When did our scouts return with this?”

“Just now Sir.”

“All right.” The Captain handed the paper back. He stayed calm. “Let those scouts rest and send two of our best. One north, one south. Scout out both society camps that arrived. I want numbers, buildings, positions and armory on these camps. And I need them immediately. If we have the society that close to us, we have to get rid of them.”

“Yes sir. I’m on it.” Sgt. Ryder stepped back with a salute.

The captain returned the salute then re-engaged in watching his men.

^^^

Jason Godrichson was walking from the line of utility buildings as Dean was nearing them. Dean was on his way to the second suspect meeting when Jason stopped him.

“Dean, glad I found you.” Jason stood in Dean’s pathway.

“What’s going on.”

Jason shook his head. “Wanted to let you know that there’s no way it can be done.”

“Are you sure?”

“Checked it with Forrest. Ever since he fixed the power supply on the time machine. It stays in control.”

“Damn it.” Dean twitched his head. “Your sure there’s no way you can barbeque Frank in a bogus time trip?”

“Positive. However . . .”

Dean’s eyes brightened. “What?”

“I could ship him a hundred years into the future, leave him there. It would have no bearing on our time now. Of course we’ll need someone to go with him so they can come back and shut the door.”

“I’ll give it some thought. Thanks Jason.”

“You do know Dean, you can always take the direct approach and walk up to Frank and shoot him”

“Nah, I don’t want ousted. I’d rather use that as a last resort and stick to making it either look natural or like an accident.” Dean lifted his hand in a wave and started walking again. “Thanks, Jason.”

“Not a problem.” Jason continued walking, knowing his mind would keep churning on ideas to help Dean.

All voices ceased the moment Dean entered Joe’s office. He looked at Joe, Henry then Robbie. “What? Were you guys talking about me?”

Robbie answered. “As a matter of fact Dean. We were. Henry was just sharing with us your new sex symbol status with the young female population of Beginnings.”

Dean closed his eyes and shook his head. "Henry's really close to me kicking his ass." Dean heard Henry snicker and he quickly looked at Henry.

Henry wiped the smile from his face. "Sorry. Hey, Joe, tell him. Go on."

"Dean, the reason we were discussing you is." Joe took a breath. "I stopped at the school today. Saw Alexandra. She told me she's mad at you because you have a girlfriend while her Mommy is kidnaped. Says she saw Bev kissing you."

Immediately and with surprise Dean sprang from his chair going after Henry.

Henry saw it, he jumped from his and hurried backwards trying not to laugh. "I didn't say anything."

Robbie too tried not to laugh as he pulled Dean back. "Easy."

"Dean." Joe scolded. "You're making *me* tense. Now cool it."

Dean pulled away from Robbie and plopped in his chair. "Henry, one more thing out of you and I swear while you're sleeping I'm cutting off your hair."

"Oh Dean, you wouldn't do that."

"Watch me." Dean stared forward. "Can we do this Joe?"

"Can we lose the mood?" Joe asked.

"I'm sorry Joe." Dean held up his hand. "I feel like I'm the most miserable person in Beginnings today."

"I have news for you Dean." Joe said. "You are. Now this should make you happy." Joe pulled out his notes. "We're gonna discuss Frank as a suspect. Everyone ready? Let's talk means." Joe saw Henry's hand raised. "Henry?"

"Frank should be eliminated immediately from the suspect list. No arguments at all."

"Why?" Joe asked.

"Because if Frank was working for George then why would he kill him?"

"What?" Joe asked. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Robbie rolled his eyes. "Bet me it's another one of those time trip memories none of us have."

"Yes. He killed George in the time frame that Dean died."

Joe tilted his head. "The one that was erased when you brought Dean back to life?"

"Yes." Henry nodded.

"Well it doesn't count!" Joe scolded. "And how in the hell did bringing Dean back effect bringing George back?"

Dean quickly shifted his eyes. "It'll be a Henry explanation, do you want to hear it?"

"Yes." Joe answered. "Henry?"

"Easy Joe. Ellen went back and blabbed to herself about the antidote so there wouldn't be a lab explosion. In the original time, the explosion occurred. George was prancing around singing about Dean and Ellen being dead, thinking he was cool and surprise, you were awake and he got busted. But . . . in the rippled time frame he had that diversion of you getting up and he made his escape."

Joe stared for a moment at Henry. "O.K., Frank. Give me means. I have that he was taking blood at the clinic. He could have easily switched the Jenny

tubes.”

“Dad.” Robbie scoffed. “Frank? Frank isn’t smart enough to think like that. Give him a war scenario, yes. Come on let’s face it. If intelligence was a primary requirement for living in Beginnings, Frank would have been out years ago. Frank didn’t switch the blood. The only means Frank has is his security position. I put Frank on my list. Yes. But he shouldn’t be there. Frank hated George. George hated Frank. From day one.

Henry agreed. “Especially while you were under the Salicain. They went at each other tooth and nail. Besides, when the SUTs invaded us, Frank was too prepared they . . . yeah. Frank *was* prepared. Like maybe he knew how they were coming. It could have been all a big act, to build his trust with us in Beginnings. Boy now that I think about it. Our defense was pretty good. Too good for four hundred men.” Henry smiled. “Yeah.” The smile dropped. “No. Frank likes being the hero too much.”

Dean nodded. “And that’s exactly what I came up for as his motive. Frank loves to be the hero. Yet, who in Beginnings thanks him. How many times has Frank saved the day? How many times has he rushed to the rescue. Everyone takes him for granted, they have from day one. George used that. Played on that. Promised him an army to train. A big one too. And Frank would get the glory because he would be there from the ground up.”

Joe blinked in thought. “What about Ellen? I know my son loves her.”

“Yeah, and he took her.” Dean answered. “How do we know right now he isn’t turning around and heading to home. Quantico that is.”

Robbie shook his head. “Frank is Mr. Father. He wouldn’t take a chance no matter how small, of something happening to the kids. Brian for example. He lost Brian.”

Henry’s head bobbed side to side. “Yes, but, meaning no disrespect to Frank and this is just a thought. What if his whole grief thing was an act to make his escape.”

Joe’s hand slammed down hard. “An act? He lost his son for crying out loud.”

“Not really.” Henry said. “Brian was Dean’s kid. What if . . .”

Robbie and Joe both shouted. “What!”

Dean cringed.

“I thought you . . . I thought.” Henry shifted his eyes around. “I mean . . . geez, there I go again. Forget it. My mistake.”

Joe tilted his head, he spoke to Henry but watched Dean. “Another ripple in time?”

Henry nodded. “Exactly.”

“Dean?” Joe questioned. “A ripple in time.”

“Yeah.” Dean sat up. “Oddly enough in the time frame that Frank screwed up, and where Ellen was married to Robbie, Brian was my son. Because Robbie can’t have kids.”

Robbie grinned. “Wait. You guys screwed up time? I was married to Ellen? I didn’t know this.” He looked at Henry. “Hey, do you guys have the history disks from that. Can I see.?”

“No.” Henry answered. “We fixed it.”

“How did it happen?” Robbie asked.

“Robert.” Joe interrupted. “We’re getting off the subject.”

“I want to know. No one tells me this shit. Henry?” Robbie questioned.

“You got to Ashtonville too late in the original time. So Frank wanted you there earlier to help Ellen. Only when he called you he forget to tell you how early. You took off. Hooked up with Ellen and were married ten years when we came back through the time machine. But . . . we went back, stopped Frank from making the phone call and he mailed you a letter instead.”

Robbie looked so arrogant. “I wish I would have seen my big brother’s face. Anyhow . . . back to Frank. Dad, scratch him off the list. Nothing is feasible.”

“I agree.” Joe looked at Dean. “Dean?”

“As much as I hate to admit it. Frank isn’t working for George. Take him off.”

“Henry?” Joe looked at him for an answer.

“Sure Joe take him off.”

Joe’s pencil moved in a line. “All right. Andrea. I think . . .” Joe saw Henry’s hand wave fanatically. “What Henry?”

“Can I share my motive theory? Please?”

“We do means first.”

“Come on Joe. It’s good. Can I Joe? Huh? I want to tell it before anyone else does.”

Joe pretty much gave up. “Go on.”

Henry so, excited looked at his notes. “Thanks Joe. O.K., I’ve been giving this a lot of thought. Meaning no disrespect Joe.”

“None taken.”

“Thanks. I think it’s quite plausible that Andrea is working for George. Her motive simply is . . . her and George were lovers.”

Laughter erupted loudly from the group.

“No, I’m dead serious. What? We’re gonna dismiss that, why? George killed Miquel. George had no reason to kill Miquel unless it was a personal issue. Get Miquel out of the way so he could have Andrea. And . . . and . . . I asked. Yes I did. I asked everyone if they remembered where she was when Joe came out of the Salicain. Do any of you? No. I know in my history she appeared out of no where. I’ll tell you where she was. She was the inside man. She was getting things ready. She knew what had happened and she was with George. How else did he get his things together so fast and make his escape?” Henry proceeded to tell his version of what happened . . .

“Hurry.” Andrea tossed items into a duffle bag which sat on George’s bed.

“Andrea, are you absolutely positive.”

“I’m certain of it. I heard something about vial seventeen when Dean and Ellen were in the lab. They’re testing it now George. It’s only a matter of time.”

“How did they find out. We had that rigged.”

“I don’t know.” Andrea hurried and packed his things. “Now you’re taking a jeep right.”

“Yes.”

“How long until your people pick you up?”

“Six hours.”

“Then you have to throw Frank off, because you know as much as I do

they are gonna be searching for you.”

“I have a plan for that.”

Andrea let out a breath as she zipped up the bag. “I wish I could go with you.”

George moved closer to her. “I wish you could too. But you can’t. I need you in here for me.”

“I know.”

George laid his hand on the side of Andrea’s face. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

“Please, please be careful out there.”

“I will.” George kissed her on the cheek. “I have to go.”

Andrea only nodded her head with sadness.

“Andrea, I love you.”

“And I . . . love you.”

Henry gave a closed mouth proud look as he added the final dramatics to his story. “There. George escaped, because she helped him get out. And we know she had the means. She has the medical knowledge.”

Robbie shook his head. “What about the switching of the tubes? She was sick when Jenny came in.”

“True. But.” Henry held up a thinking finger. “We never established for certain that the tubes were actually switched. Have we? There were so many hands in the blood those days who knows if it was accidental or on purpose. We don’t. We can’t use the switching of the blood as an out for someone. We can’t. And Andrea is perfect. The God fearing Christian woman. Isn’t she. But look at her personality. One minute she’s loopy and we can’t figure out what’s wrong with her, the next wacko woman. If she’s hiding her true colors, of course it’s going to emerge. Didn’t anyone ever wonder why Andrea never cares if she attends a council meeting. She only says fill me in. And we do. And . . . look who’s she’s with. Joe. The leader of the community. Perfect position to find out what she needs to know. What she doesn’t find out as council, she finds out as his wife. She’s a smart woman. Cunning that Andrea is. I’m surprised none of you didn’t have a field day with her either.”

Joe was speechless. “Henry gave . . . Henry gave some valid points. Can anyone give me a reason to remove her from the list?” Joe waited and received only silent stares. “Even though I know my wife. And even though I know she has nothing to do with George. Henry, gave some arguments. And though I hate to do it . . . Andrea stays.”

Henry grinned, he grinned big time and clenched his fist in excitement. He convinced them all to consider Andrea with one of his really ‘cool’ Henry theories. And because of that, he added a little gloating to his expression as well.

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake

The sounds of Frank coughing carried to Ellen as she sat on the porch of the cabin watching him take things to the truck. He’d walk, cough and move again. He smiled at Ellen when he walked back to her, plopping on the wooden

step beside her.

“A few more things.” He sniffled. “We’ll save those for tomorrow.”

“Frank you look a little pale. How are you feeling?”

“I’m good.”

Ellen reached up to him touching his face, her hand slid to behind his neck. “Frank, you’re warm. And you’re coughing. You know what Dean told you about the pneumonia. Just because you feel better doesn’t mean it’s gone. Six weeks it stays in your . . .”

“El, I’m fine.” Frank coughed again. “If I’m sick it’s all your fault anyhow.”

“My fault? How is it my fault?”

“I had to jump in the lake to save your ass.”

“You jumped in the lake asshole because you shoved me in. Probably need a Frank hero boast so you found a way to save my life.”

“Yep.” Frank smiled and kissed her.

“Oh.” Ellen touched her lips. “Frank, your lips are hot.”

“For you.”

“No I’m serious. They’re really hot. Maybe we should consider going home now, get you started on an anti infection.”

“No El.” Frank shook his head. “I’ll be fine. Besides the sun will be going down soon and we’re leaving tomorrow anyhow. And . . .” With a smile he pointed. “It’s my thirty-fifth birthday.”

Ellen laughed and swiped his hand away. “Thirty-five. I recall five years ago how we did celebrate your real thirty-fifth birthday.”

“So do I.” Frank leaned into her, he held a shitty grin.

“Frank come on. I don’t think you’re up to this.” Ellen felt his lead, she moved from him.

“You don’t think.” Frank neared his lips to hers.

“Besides, you’re really old now.”

“I’ll show you old.” Frank extended his arm plowing into Ellen, causing her to shriek and knocking her down to the wooden porch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beginnings, Montana

Henry sat on Alexandra's bed that night. Her covers turned down, and he brushed her hair.

"Uncle Henry?"

"Shh. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine. One hundred. Done." He set the brush down.

"Is my mommy coming back soon?"

"Tomorrow."

"That's what my Daddy said. He said that if she doesn't come back, he's going to kill uncle Frank. Will he kill Uncle Frank?"

"Oh I don't know Alex, he may. He's not been in a very good mood lately. You know he threatened to cut off my hair."

"That wasn't very nice." Alexandra said.

"No it wasn't. That's why we made him watch the movie tonight." Henry helped Alexandra into bed and covered her. "Hopefully watching the adult movie will put him in a good mood."

"Let's hope." Alexandra snuggled. "Goodnight Uncle Henry."

"Night Alex." Henry leaned down and kissed her. He then walked to the door.

"Uncle Henry, call me if you need help with Nick."

"Oh you know I will." Henry smiled, pulled the door closed some and left the room. He walked into the bathroom and pulled from his pocket a plastic hood. Hating to do it, but afraid not to, Henry secured the hood to his head, tucking his long hair underneath. He wanted to be prepared incase he fell asleep and Dean made good on his threats.

^^^

There was nothing unusual about the way Danny Hoi walked to the grassy area behind distribution. Bubbly and upbeat. He carried a bowl of popcorn and found Dean who sat further back from the rest of the men. Dean laid on his side staring at the wall waiting for the movie to start.

Danny plopped down and placed the bowl in between them. "Hey Dean."

Dean raised his eyes. "Hi Danny."

"Excited about this? Oh wait, bad question, not yet huh?"

"Why would I be excited?"

"Adult Movie night." Danny smiled. "Isn't that cool of Trish to start this. I hear it's a lesbian flick."

Dean stopped into his reach for popcorn. "Why would you think that?"

"Trish said it was. She said it was an adult movie about women. She got it from Ellen's video collection. I didn't know Ellen was into lesbian flicks."

"Danny, Ellen . . ." Dean paused. "Never mind. If I know what Ellen likes, and I do. You'll love it."

"Excellent."

Dean shook his head with a smile as he reached into the bowl. Just as he

opened his mouth to eat. He stopped. “Shit.”

“What? Danny asked, then saw why Dean made his remark. Danny’s eyes followed the pair of very exposed legs, up to their owner, Bev. Danny grinned. Bev looked at Dean.

“Hi Dean. I thought you and I could watch the movie together.” She asked softly.

Dean said nothing. He grabbed another handful of popcorn, gave a raise of his eyebrows to Danny, stood up and walked off.

Bev turned to look and watch Dean walk away.

Danny looked as she rolled on her side, again he cased her. “Hey uh Bev . . . if you’re uh looking for someone to watch the movie with. I’ll watch it with you.”

Bev just tsked, rolled her eyes, got up and stormed off.

Danny shrugged and pulled his popcorn closer to him. “Maybe not.”

It wasn’t exactly Jess’ thing, but since every other male in Beginnings was there, he figured he might as well be too. The area was packed with the men waiting on Beginnings’ first adult movie night. And trying to find Robbie wasn’t too difficult, he merely followed the noise to the loudest bunch. The band The Starters all sat together. Robbie on the end. Denny, blindfolded in front of him.

“Can I join you guys?” Jess asked as he approached.

“Jess, my man.” Robbie patted the empty spot next to him. “Join away. Just on time. We’re waiting on Trish.”

“Thanks.” Jess sat down next to Robbie. “Why is Denny blindfolded?”

“Check this out.” Robbie said. “Strict orders from our mom. He’s not allowed to see. So . . .” Chuckling Robbie reached out and rubbed Denny’s hair. “He’s not watching.”

“Aw.” Denny tried to get Robbie’s hand but missed. “Come on guys I won’t tell.”

Robbie grinned his arrogant smile. He looked when he heard the cheering. “Trish is coming. Yes.” Robbie grabbed the edges of his shirt lifted it off and tossed it forward. It landed on Denny’s head. “Have to be ready. Not like it’s not hot enough.” Robbie whistled.

Jess shook his head as he held his finger blocking out the ear piercing noise Robbie made. He looked at Robbie and smiled, then looked to Trish who bravely stood before nearly the entire community of men.

Trish held her hands out in a ‘quiet down’ manner. She was upbeat and perky. “I know all of you are impatient. So I’ll get it started. It’s not my sort of thing. But I’m sure you men will enjoy it. So, let’s get this started.” Trish smiled. The men clapped and she walked across the maze of them. “Hey!” she yelled. “Stop that. I’m telling Jeff.” She held the skirt she wore closer to her body to stop the ‘peeping toms’ and she finally arrived at the projection unit.

The movie wasn’t what the men of Beginnings expected. Not in the least. Prepared and ready for the first adult movie night featuring a lesbian flick, the men were a little shocked to find out the feature was less than what they anticipated. But they made the best of it, hooting and hollering like they had

planned to do With Robbie being the worst. Everything said or done in the movie was taken entirely out of context. And despite the fact that the men were stuck watching LITTLE WOMEN, in their deprived minds, they made it what they wanted it to be.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

The hours crept into late ones and the police station was quiet. The Captain sat staring at the radio as if he were in the old world watching television. He smiled at the antics of Beginnings and sifted through the boring hourly check ins from the guards. He took notes as he sat there, feeling pulled to listen and taking in all that he heard.

"So what am I supposed to do." A male Beginnings man spoke.

"Christ, why are you calling me with this shit. Find Mr. Big head of security." The second one responded.

"Mr. Head of security is part of the problem."

"Ignore it."

"I can't. I'm just trying to walk my beat in the living section. Gemma grabbed me three times and told me to do something about it."

"Blow her off. And they can't be making that much noise. I can't hear them and I'm closer than she is."

"She says it's interrupting her sleep."

"What the hell are they hooting about anyhow?"

"It's the first adult movie night. They're watching something called Pornos."

"Pornos."

The captain laughed.

"Some movie about midget lesbians."

"What?" The second voice blasted. "Midget lesbians?"

"Yeah the guys love it too. It's called Little women."

At that point a loud roaring laughter emanated from the captain. He laughed so hard he completely missed a few of the things they had said.

"All right." The second voice said sounding so perturbed, "Go down there tell them I said, pipe their asses down or I'm coming down. If I come down there will be no more adult movies about midget Lesbians. Got that."

"Got it."

"And tell Mr. Security his ass better not be getting drunk or I will kick it."

"Got it chief, right away."

The final response from the second voice did not come in the form of words. He merely grumbled in annoyance and disconnected the radio call.

There was something about the transmissions of Beginnings the captain monitored, that pulled at him. The normalcy perhaps, civilization, or the fact that they were so wrapped up in their own little world. Beginnings was more oblivious to what was going on around them than they cared to admit. Their antics, their zest for life. Whatever it was, the captain was not alone in his enjoying them. Everyone in Bowman seemed to slip into the police station at

least once during the day to catch some Beginnings chatter. But at that moment, the transmissions grew more fun as the one guard in Beginnings tried with diligence to settle the hooting men. The entire episode carried over the airwaves. The Captain drew a peaceful look upon his face with a partial smile. He rocked back and forth in his chair, a pen clenched between his teeth and he kept on listening.

CHAPTER EIGHT

August 30
Ft. Peck Lake

It wasn't what Ellen wanted to hear, it was worse and had gotten that way, steadily all night. Frank's coughing. Now deeper, more frequent and the rumbling had hit it. She peered out the cabin door, the phone tight to her ear watching Frank finish placing things in the truck. He didn't walk in his usual manner. He slumped a bit and staggered.

"Robbie. I don't know." Ellen looked once more out the door then turned her back to it. "He's not well."

"Want me to fly on out and met you?"

"I do. But I know your brother. He'll get pissed if we act like he can't do this. I'm just worried about him. Can you let Dean know the pneumonia's back."

"I can do that." Robbie said.

"I'm just worried about him Robbie that's . . ." Ellen felt the phone slip from her hand. "Hey."

Frank talked into it. "Robbie. I'm fine. See you in a few." Frank hung up the phone and handed it back to Ellen. "Ready?"

"Are you sure . . ."

"El."

"All right." Ellen placed the phone in the back pack and lifted it. "Promise me when you get home you will go straight to bed."

"I'll promise that if you promise you will be my nurse."

"I don't know Frank. I'm still mad about the drowning thing." Ellen smiled. "I'll be your nurse."

"Good." Frank smiled, kissed her quickly and took hold of her arm. "Let's go." He led her from the cabin, closing the door.

He walked Ellen to her side of the truck, tossing her bag in then waiting for Ellen to jump up. Frank lent a hand boosting her by her backside. He shut the door and walked to his side, grabbing the M-16 from the bed of the truck and getting in.

Ellen watched Frank's hand reach for the key, his other hand gripped and released the steering wheel as he blinked several times staring out, "Frank? You want me to drive."

"No." He shook his head. "I'm fine." He started the truck. "I want to make it home in one piece to rest." He leaned over to Ellen and kissed her softly. "Thanks for these past few days." He said. "Even though you hated it."

"You drowned me Frank."

Frank slipped his hand further behind her head and kissed her again. He pulled Ellen into him, intensifying the kiss. His hand slipped to the top of her head.

"Frank. . . ." Ellen tried to pull from the kiss and she felt his lips move to her neck. "Frank what . . ." She felt the pressure of his hand pushing on her head. "What are . . ." Harshly Ellen's head was shoved and she met face first with Frank's groin. There was a screech of the tires and the truck sped forth. "Frank!"

"Stay down!" There was a loud bang on the hood of the truck as Frank

careened into two society soldiers sending one flying on the hood and rolling off.

“Oh my God what’s going on.” Ellen gripped tightly to Frank’s thigh as her head hit several times off the steering wheel with each bounce the truck took.

Frank, staying calmed, peered out the rearview mirror. He could see the large Military style truck close behind him and in the distance, another picking up soldiers. “Fuck. El, where’s the phone.”

“In my bag.”

“Where’s the bag,”

“Over there.” Her arm pointed to the bag on the floor.

Frank’s eyes shifted between the road, the bag and the mirror. “Get it. Stay down. I need you to call Robbie. Tell him we had to head north and we need his help.”

“Oh my God you’re calling for help. It must be bad.”

“Well . . . it’s been better. Call him now. Now!” Frank slammed his foot harder on the gas and shifted gears. He watched the second truck close in, and the truck behind him so close he could see the driver. “El.” Frank looked ahead. “Shit.” In the distance, drawing nearer and heading right for them, was a third truck.

Ellen scooted over staying down. Shaking and bouncing around she reached into her bag and pulled out the phone. Her fingers fumbled in nervousness as she tried to dial.

“Hold on.” Frank told her.

“What . . .”

SLAM! Frank saw it coming. He tried to avoid it as best as he could but the third truck slammed into the side rear of the small pick up. The pick up swerved and Frank clenched the wheel fighting it back into control.

Ellen flipped over from the hard moving pickup. She slid half from the sat backwards, banging her head off the door and dropping the phone. She reached down and picked it up.

“Call him El.”

“I’m trying.”

With determination Frank shifted gears, keeping his views straight ahead. “El. I need you to take the wheel.”

“Frank.” Ellen tried to dial.

“Take the wheel.” Frank reached in to his shoulder harness and pulled out his revolver. He wound down the window. “El.”

Breathing heavily and frightened Ellen dialed the number and scooted over. “Please don’t tell me you need me to drive.”

“I need you to drive now.”

Holding the phone with one hand, Ellen reached for the wheel.

“Take the gas.”

Take the gas, drive the car, call Robbie? Ellen could barely react and think. She sat up, grabbed the wheel better, slipping her foot to the gas.

“You got it?” Frank asked.

“Yeah.” The phone began to ring.

“Get ready?” Frank felt the pressure of the peddle go to Ellen.

“Get ready for . . . Frank!”

The door to the pick up opened bringing in a blast of air as Frank swung out on it. The pressure of the air behind him caused a loud roaring in his ears. He gripped the open window with one hand, planted his feet, one on the door, the other in the door frame, and he held out his revolver aiming and firing at the three trucks that now followed.

Robbie answered his phone. "Security." He heard nothing but shots. "Hello?"

"Robbie." Ellen sounded frantic. "We had to head north. Help us." The pick up bounced hard and the phone fumbled from Ellen's hand and onto the floor.

The military trucks moved back and forth avoiding Frank's shots. He kept them sparing, taking only shots he knew he would be hits. Frank saw it, holding tight, ignoring the bad road they drove on. He spotted the eyes of the driver of the closer truck. Frank fired. Then the windshield shattered at the same instance the drivers blood spewed outward like a shower. The truck careened off the side of the road, and Frank quickly slid back in.

In the transferring of feet on the gas peddle, the pick up slowed down. Frank reached out his arm to shut the door but retracted it with speed when a society truck flew by them taking off the driver's door and sending it rolling off to the old overgrown highway.

"O.K." Frank drove fast seeing the truck that passed him pull sideways and block the road. "Hand me the M-16.

Ellen reached down for the weapon that fell to the floor. As she lifted it she saw the truck ahead. "Frank it's close."

"I know."

"We're gonna hit it." She handed him the weapon.

"Nah." Frank took the gun.

Ellen's eyes widened in horror. *The truck so close.* Frank grabbing the M-16. *The truck-closer.* Frank tossing the strap over his head. "Frank . . ." Ellen jammed her foot to the floor as if she had her own break. She could see at their high speed, the faces of the soldiers that stood before the Society truck aiming. "Frank!"

"Hold on!" At the same time Frank moved the weapon under his other shoulder, he jolted the truck hard to the left. The tires screamed as the pick up nearly went on two wheels, missing the society truck and going from the road that wasn't that great to begin with, off to the deeply over grown side. They headed toward the woods. Fast and furious Frank drove jerking the wheel and barely squeezing between the tress.

"Oh God." Ellen bounced high. "We're gonna hit a tree."

"Probably." Frank pulled Ellen closer to him staying almost too calm. "When I tell you to, hold on tight and don't let go."

"Are we getting out?"

"Yes. Ready?"

"Wait. Aren't you stopping?"

"No, we're on fire."

"What . . ." Ellen turned her head back to see the bright orange blaze ripping from the bed of the pick up. "Oh shit."

"Hold on." Frank gripped her.

"Frank . . ." Ellen shrieked as she felt herself being pulled from the truck.

Together they hit the ground. They rolled intertwined together only briefly. Their bodies careened over a small hillside, bouncing off the rugged ground, and separating. At different speeds they slid down the hill. Frank caught himself mid fall, rolling into a semi stand and running down the hill.

Ellen just rolled until she hit the bottom, landing face first on the ground.

“El.” Frank raced to her reaching down his hand. “You O.K.?”

“I . . . I think.” Ellen lifted herself by her hands, raising her chest from the ground. “I think I’m fine just . . .” Ellen never got to finish her words. Frank gripped her arm, jolting her up to her feet and brushing her off.

“Let’s book.” Without waiting for Ellen to say anything Frank tugged her along and they began to run.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

There were very few things in life Robbie took serious or did with seriousness. But when he was needed to take the role, he filled into his big brother’s shoes without any disappointments. With a look of determination on his face, Robbie bolted from Armory with Joe and they both jumped in the jeep. He peeled out fast and drive the quickest route to the hanger.

“Johnny.” Robbie spoke into the headset. “Just get it in the air. I want you panning north, north east, I’m headed north west. Got it.”

“Got it.” Johnny answered. “I’ll be in the air in two.”

“Excellent.” Robbie shifted gears.

“Robbie, nothing else was said?” Joe asked.

“Nothing. Just that they needed help. I heard gun shots.”

“Damn it. It has to be bad if Frank is asking for help.”

“Frank’s sick.” Robbie kept his stares straight ahead seeing the hanger come into view.

“He’s what?”

“Sick. El called me this morning. His pneumonia is back. I’m just hoping it’s not that bad, he’s just not well enough to handle it.”

“Let’s hope that the . . .” Joe stopped talking when they pulled up near the hanger. He saw Dean by the chopper. “What’s *he* doing here?”

“Probably making good on your offer to go.” Robbie jumped from the jeep.

Joe grumbled as he followed. “I’ll take care of this for you.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll handle it.” Robbie approached the chopper and Dean. He slid open the side door. “So Dean. You my gunner and spotter.”

“You need me to be?”

“Yep. Get in, let’s go.” Robbie saw the odd look that Joe gave him. “Dad.” Robbie grinned and pointed to his own eyes. “He has built in binoculars.” He hurried to his side, jumping in and without hesitation, started the engines.

Joe stepped back. In the distance he could see Johnny’s chopper flying off. He felt the whipping wind of the blades and squinted his eyes from the dust. He stood there watching Robbie lift off, and Joe didn’t leave until he couldn’t

see them anymore.

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake

Frank stood behind Ellen, his hand covering her mouth. Quietly he turned slowly clockwise, looking at the trees that engulfed them. Once he gained his direction, he stopped turning. He slowly removed his hand from Ellen's mouth.

"Frank." She whispered. "How bad is it?"

"We're surrounded."

"Shit."

"O.K. Listen." Frank brought his lips closer to her ear. "Our only hope is to make it back to the highway. Robbie should be over head in about twenty minutes. If there's that many down here we stand a chance of getting one of their trucks. That's what we have to strive for."

"If they're surrounding us, why haven't they come for us?"

"They think they have us."

"Do they?"

Frank fluttered his lips and kissed her on the cheek. He reached down and grabbed her hand. "When I say run, you have to run, staying close and staying behind me."

Ellen nodded as Frank stepped ahead of her.

"Ready?" Frank asked.

Ellen nodded again.

"Now!" Pulling Ellen's hand before releasing it to jump start Ellen, Frank took off running.

The footsteps over the crushing leaves and twigs were like a runner's starting gun going off. The moment Frank and Ellen made any distance, was the moment the brigade of society soldiers moved in at them.

Frank pulled his M-16 to in front of him. He saw the line of soldiers aiming. Waiting until he and Ellen were within ten feet of the soldiers, Frank opened fired. Like a thunderstorm, blood showered outward as Frank gunned down six of them. They dropped like toy soldiers. And seeing his opening, Frank reached behind him, swept Ellen up into his arms, charged forward full speed and leaped over the down bodies and through his opening. He set Ellen down, grabbed her hand and they raced to the hillside not that far ahead.

Ellen looked back. The soldiers chased them and neared them.

"Get ahead of me." Frank ordered, letting Ellen run up the hillside as he ran up backwards firing at the soldiers who came.

Ellen struggled, climbing up using her hands and feet. She could see the top getting closer and then she saw boots. And then Ellen screamed.

Frank heard the shriek and turned around. Ellen dangled inches above the ground. A soldier clenched her up by her hair, holding her as a shield. Frank fired a single shot into the foot of the soldier. His grip released, and Ellen dropped to the ground. As she slid in a roll passed him, Frank reached down, snatched her to her feet and fired forward again. This time the shot was deadly. And this time into the forehead of the soldier. The soldier teetered and his body

fell in a timber manner straight toward Frank and Ellen. Frank stepped forward, grabbing hold of the falling body. And using the fall and the hillside to his advantage, with a grunt, Frank hoisted the body over his head and down to the soldiers who closed in. The dead body crashed into them and the fell like pins.

A window of opportunity opened and Frank took it. Getting a head of Ellen and to the top of the hill, he reached his hand down, pulling Ellen up. Abruptly but up.

On the highway smoke bellowed and the pick up could be seen down in the distance, smashed against a tree and burning.

“Our truck’s fucked.” Frank scanned the situation and the three military trucks stopped on the road. Holding Ellen’s hand he headed to the one where the door was open. “Let go.” He quickly helped Ellen inside.

Ellen slid over making room for Frank.

Frank knowing the type of truck well, found no keys. He reached down to hot wire it when he heard the pumping of shotgun chambers. At the same time, he and Ellen looked over their shoulder’s only to see a now open curtain and a line of shotgun barrels.

“Shit.” Frank yanked Ellen with him from the truck.

Ellen screamed and as her feet hit the ground, her ankle twisted and her leg buckled. Just as Frank began to help her, he saw them coming,. From any direction they could, many soldiers, too many to count moved in to them weapons pointed. Pulling Ellen away from the truck, Frank shoved her behind him and fired out. He hit as many as he could but it wasn’t enough to stop them. Faster they came charging at him. And as they neared him, Frank, using the rifle as a bat, swung out, blasting a soldier in the face, he spun quickly taking out another. The more Frank hit, the more they came after him. One, two, then three or four at a time. It was more than Frank could keep up with.

But he tried.

Fighting off one, Frank felt the crash of a rifle hitting into the side of his face, blood shot from his cheek and a soldier jumped on his back. Frank flipped him over and he felt the smashing of a weapon into his spine then another to the back of his knees. As his knees weakened, a blow nailed Frank to the temple then another to the back of the head. Frank’s head flung to the right and his eyes rolled. He felt them pummeling him, bodies, weapons, blows, and Frank’s body wobbled. His eyes rolled back and in a drastic sway, Frank dropped. His knees hit the ground slamming hard and then Frank’s towering body followed, falling forward--face first--to the concrete. The hits upon him stopped. Voices surrounded him, calling out. Male voices deep, slow and distorted. And in his fading of consciousness Frank received his most painful blow. The sound of Ellen’s cry out ‘no’. A cry he could do nothing about.

^^^

In the air Robbie looked from the windshield to Dean who peered with intensity out the window. His face stone serious and there wasn’t a blink of his eyes. “Dean. You O.K.? Anything?”

Dean shook his head, but kept on looking.

Robbie lowered his headset. “Prodigy this is Eagle one, do you copy?”

“Roger that Eagle one. I copy.” Johnny spoke.

“Are you seeing anything at all?”

“That’s a negative nothing.”

“We see smoke up ahead, what’s your make on that?” Robbie asked.

“It’s too far west. Want me to turn around and check it out.”

“Negative we’re heading that direction. We’ll keep you posted. We have the Bionic man keeping watch. This is Eagle one over.” Just as Robbie disconnected the call, he saw Dean spring forward, his hands went flush against the window and his eyes took on a horror look. “Dean, what is it?”

“Hurry up Robbie. Tell Johnny to meet us. We have to get to that smoke.”

“What do you see?”

“Signs that we may just be too late.” Dean closed his eyes tightly gathering his composure then he kept looking out again.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

With his hands folded and his chin running over them, Joe watched the radio in his office listening to the transmission of Robbie and Johnny. The door to his office flung open and Henry, frazzled came running in. He had been out checking the tracking devices.

“Joe I just got back. Tell me . . .” Henry walked further into the office. “Tell me it isn’t true.”

“I’m sorry Henry.” Joe said sadly.

“Any word.”

Joe shook his head.

“Frank called for help? Joe how bad does it have to be for that to happen?”

“Frank is sick Henry. We’re hoping that’s the reason he called. Maybe. Maybe it isn’t as bad as we think.”

“Can I sit and wait with you.” Henry reached for a chair.

Joe said nothing, the simple nod he gave was his answer. He didn’t want to talk, because he didn’t want to take a chance on missing a single word said.

^^^

Ft. Peck Lake

The smoke was black but thinning out. It had hit the smoldering phase of a fire. The helicopters landed on the once highway, and together, Robbie, Dean and Johnny followed the trail of blood and bodies that led them into the woods. They found nothing in their search, only bodies of society soldiers. No Frank or Ellen.

Dean emerged up the hill and onto the road ahead of Robbie and Johnny. He was solemn and looked slowly around, walking small steps in the scene before him.

Robbie watched Dean walking. He saw Dean stop cold and stare intensely to the ground. "Dean." Robbie called out then he and Johnny ran to him. "Did you find something?"

Dean held up his hand then brought himself to a squat nearer to the ground.

"What is it?" Robbie asked.

Dean looked up at Robbie. "You saw the tire tracks. How many trucks do you suppose were here?"

"Two possibly three." Robbie answered. "Why?"

"That's a lot of men. We also saw a lot of bodies. Frank was here. He fought hard. So where are Frank and Ellen?" Dean spoke his thoughts out loud returning his views to the ground. "I'll tell you where. They took them. They wanted them. Because Frank's good. But he's not good enough to take out all those men." Dean's hand motioned to the ground. "Look at this. See this blood." He pointed to a small circle of blood and droplets that smeared out from it. "There's saliva mixed in this blood."

Robbie crouched down. "Not that I can see the saliva, but I see where you're going with it. Saliva, blood, that's consistent of someone passing out. Always face first."

"Exactly. And if they wanted to take Frank. How were they gonna get him? They took him down. And they took him down right here. This is where he fell."

Johnny breathed slowly out. "Someone took down my dad? Oh my God. No one takes down my Dad."

"Oh yeah they took him down." Dean said. "But he took them down right along with him though." Dean indicated to the bodies scattered around. "He fought. There were just too many of them."

"All right wait." Robbie held up his hand. "Saliva, blood. One of those men could have fallen and gotten back up. How do we know that Frank and Ellen didn't just do damage and are running?"

"Because this is where Frank fell. I told you that." Dean kept looking at the ground.

"How can you be sure Dean. How?" Robbie questioned.

"Because." Dean spoke with a calm seriousness. "What is it that you and Frank call me? The Bionic Man? Bionic eyes. Henry enhanced microscopic vision. Well if I've seen Slagel DNA once, I've seen it a million times. And this blood here . . . is Frank's."

The reality pummeled Robbie right there and then. His breath escaped him. Frank and Ellen were gone. Taken by the society. "O.K." Robbie stood up. "We can start a search us three. But I think we should radio home. Tell them what happened and get an organized search party going right away. Sun up till sun down. Get a direction, get a plan. Because we know they took them. We just have to find where."

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

The captain stood with Sgt. Ryder and another man in his office. They

stood around the captain's desk, a map spread out. The Captain's huge hand smoothed the air over the map. "This region north here is where . . ."

A single hard knock and the door opened. Corporal Lewis stepped in and at attention. "Captain, Sir." He looked panicked.

The Captain noticed the look on the young corporal's face. "At ease. What is it?"

"I'm sorry to bother you sir. But we just heard over the radio. The society has two of the Beginnings people. A man and A woman."

The captain spun in surprise. "They what? How?"

"From what we heard, Eagle one said they were beyond their walls. Eagle one is headed home now to put together a search party."

"Where was this?" The Captain asked.

"About a hundred miles north of Beginnings sir."

The captain's eyes widened. "That's much too far north for us to offer assistance in the search." He paused to think. "Damn it." The captain's hand slammed on the desk. "What the hell were they doing that far from their walls. And a woman."

Sgt. Ryder grabbed the Captain's hand that now laid on a map. He slid it down. "Sir, we may be to far too offer assistance in the search, yes. But look at where they were and look . . . at where the society has their new camp."

The captain stood upright. "Corporal that will be all. Keep manning the radio, let us know anything. Absolutely anything."

"Yes sir." Corporal Lewis backed up and left the office.

"All right." The Captain took a deep breath. "Here it is. We know these camps exist and we know they have to be dealt with. We're foregoing the plan gentleman to wait a few days. Right now, I want two teams put together. I want them large and strong. We will lead them. I'll take one, Sgt. Ryder will lead the other. We're headed north and south. If the society has these people, which I think they do, they have them at one of these two camps. And unless we hear Beginnings has found their people we go ahead with a new plan." The captain spoke with passion. "As of now we hit them simultaneously. We hit them hard and we hit them . . . at dawn."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe's office was so jammed packed with men, he couldn't move to his desk. All were there to sign up for the search. Two of their own were gone. No one asked them to be there. But the spirit of the community called out and so many answered.

Joe stood before them all bringing them to silence with the raising of his hands. "I know every single one of you are here to help. My God, do I appreciate this. This is what coming together is what Beginnings is built on. I wish I could use every single one of you. The father in me wants all of you to go out and find my children. But the leader in me knows better." Joe spoke with sadness. "Sending too many out would leave us defenseless and vulnerable to the society hands. Frank would have a fit if we let that happened. He worked too hard to build an elite force here. So right now, Robbie is putting together teams.

He's working on where they will go. Six teams, four men each. As soon as he picks them, he'll let you know. We hope to be back in the air in one hour." Joe gave them a closed mouth look. "Thank you." Slumping he walked behind his desk and sat down.

His head was down staring at his hands. He didn't need to lift his eyes to hear the shuffling of footsteps as they left the room. But he didn't hear someone come in. Henry.

"Joe." Henry called out softly.

Joe looked up. Henry carried a rifle and a knapsack. "Henry, what are you doing?"

"I'm here to get your permission to take a motorcycle."

"What for."

"Robbie refuses to put me on a search team. I have to go. If I don't go with Robbie, I go alone."

"I can't . . . I can't with a clear conscious give you a bike and send you out there on your own Henry."

"And I can't with a clear conscious, sit back and let others look. You either give me a bike or I walk." Henry sat before Joe. "Whatever the choice. I go."

"Henry, listen to me. I would like to go too. I can't. You can't. I am the leader and you are second in line. You have an obligation here."

"And I have an obligation to Frank and Ellen to search until I can search no more. If I have to look for the rest of my life, then so be it. My best friend is out there. My life is out there. I cannot sit here and do nothing. I can not." Henry spoke soft but heavy words.

Joe leaned back in his chair. He stared at Henry. "All right. Take your stuff back."

"But Joe . . ."

"Take your things back." Joe paused. "Because I'm sure Robbie will have a list for you to bring. I'll speak to him. You'll go."

Henry smiled in relief. "Thanks Joe."

"I want them back Henry."

"I do too." Henry said. "And I promise, I will do everything I can to help bring them back."

"I know you will." Joe leaned forward again folding his hands on the desk. "I know you will."

^^^

Society Camp - Williston, North Dakota

The only window in the small room was boarded up. A small kerosene lantern was the only light. And had Ellen not looked at Frank's watch, she wouldn't had known whether it was day or night. She really didn't care. She just wanted Frank to wake up.

His eye needed stitched, yet all they let Ellen have was a basin of water. And she used that not only to clean him off but to try to break his fever as well.

Frank coughed, his eyes opened slightly. His right eye somewhat swollen and already turning black and blue. As soon as his moment of focus was

over, Frank sprang up from a lying to sitting position, grunted and swung his legs over the bed. “Fuck.” He stood up.

“Frank.” Ellen tried to get him to sit back down, she watched him sway some.

“We have to get out of here.” Immediately Frank began to check out the room.

“Frank. You’re sick. You’re hurt.”

“And I got us in a bad situation.”

“You got us in a bad situation. How do you figure?” Ellen followed him around.

“My God El. They got us.” Frank’s hand felt for the door. He pulled the handle. He then felt the creases. “Are you wearing a belt?”

“Yes. Why.”

“Give it to me.”

“My pants will fall down.”

“Hold them up. Give me your belt.” Frank held out his hand, his eyes focused on the hinges of the door. He felt the belt hit his hand. He checked out the buckle. “This should work.”

“What should work? Frank, are you all right?”

“I will be, once I get us out of here.” Frank grunted as he used the buckle to pop the hinge from the door.

Ellen let out a slight shriek of excitement. “You’re getting us out.”

Frank merely turned his head to her the crouched down to the other hinge. After he popped that out he handed Ellen back her belt. “I don’t know how far we’ll get. Any idea how many there are out there.”

“A lot.”

“Explain a lot.”

“More than we have people in Beginnings.”

“Shit.”

“It looks . . .” Ellen paused to think. “It looks like they settled here.”

Frank peered under the small crease at the bottom of the door. “Looks like one guard out there. Stay behind me.”

“Trust me I have no intentions on leading the way.”

Frank stood up, looked back at Ellen and kissed her. “Ready?”

“Are you sure you’re O.K.?” Ellen’s hand reached up to his face. “Look what they did to you.”

“I will worry about me, when I get us out of here. Get ready.” His large fingers gripped as tight as he could to the side of the door where the hinges used to be. He counted to three, mouthing the numbers to Ellen, then with a strong growl he pulled on the door, causing a crack when it broke at the lock. Stunned, the guard spun around. Frank smiled “Hey.” And then greeted the guard with a single punch. The guard swayed and fell to the floor, and Frank grabbed his weapon.

Checking out the hall first, Frank took Ellen’s hand and led her down the corridor.

“El, do you remember any of this?”

Ellen looked around. “Frank I was worried about you. I didn’t think . . .”

“Shit.” Frank stopped cold, the door opened and two guards stood there, they raised their weapons at him. Frank knew he couldn’t shoot. If he did

that, he would alert everyone of their escape. So doing the only thing he could he spun the rifle, slammed the butt into the face of the one guard, sending him flying to the right. And as Frank spun the rifle again, he used the force of the spin to nail the other guard to the floor.

“Frank.” Ellen said his name calm.

Frank reached down for the weapons of the soldiers.

“Frank.” Ellen said his name again.

At first Frank wondered, why would Ellen call his name in the middle of all that was happening. Then he heard the click of a chamber. He turned to see a soldier smiling arrogantly at Frank as he held a gun directly to Ellen’s temple. Behind them two more soldiers.

“We don’t need her. One of you would do for information.” The soldier was tall and blonde, not as tall as Frank. And he wore lieutenant bars on his lapel. He pressed the gun tighter to Ellen’s forehead. “Put down the weapons or I shoot her. Your choice.”

Frank closed his eyes briefly then laid down the rifle and two hand guns he had taken.

“Hands up.” The Lt. ordered.

Frank rose his hands and looked at Ellen. “I’m sorry.”

Ellen just shook her head in a ‘not your fault’ fashion.

The lieutenant smiled. “Weakness.” He motioned his head to Ellen. “Or is she your strength, Either way. We found the way to keep you calm.” The Lieutenant’s head twitched back to the two soldiers behind him. “Take him to another room.”

The two soldiers walked in front of the lieutenant, each of them took a hold of Frank’s arms and they led him down the hall. Calmly.

Frank showed not one bit of fear. That wouldn’t be Frank. He stood, the Lieutenant before him. His eyes never left the Lieutenant’s. The two soldiers, stood before the door. Ellen sat in a chair.

“Sit.” The lieutenant ordered to Frank.

Frank sniffed arrogantly and didn’t speak. He shifted his eyes once to Ellen then back to the Lieutenant.

“I said sit down.”

Frank didn’t budge not even when the Lieutenant pulled his revolver on Frank. Not once did Frank flinch.

“You seem to forget who has the upper hand here.”

Another slight shift of Frank’s eyes to Ellen.

“O.K., you want it to be this way. Fine.” The lieutenant still held his gun pointed at Frank. “We want to know about your people. Their whereabouts.”

Frank couldn’t help it. He tried not to, but it slipped out. Frank laughed.

The Lieutenant saw red, but he didn’t see it coming. In his mistake, he revved back his gun in a striking mode. Frank snatched the revolver from his hand, smashed it into the side of his face, fire two single shots hitting both guards, grabbed hold of Ellen and took off from the room.

They tried the other way since their first route on their first time failed them. It led them to a door, and to a set of stairs. Frank ran up, still holding Ellen’s hand. He stopped, listened and continued on. He could hear footsteps

and they came from behind.

Up the two flights of steps Frank ran, Opened the door at the top carefully, saw a clear path and pulled Ellen to continue on.

It was a bank. Dusty, dirty, the teller windows busted, papers, and flyers sprawled out on the floor and they flew upwards into the air as Frank and Ellen sped through the mess. Frank leaned to the glass door looking out into the street. "El, I asked if anything looked familiar. You wouldn't remember they brought you to a bank?"

"They brought us in the other way." She held on tight to his arm. "Good going down there Frank. Predictable."

Frank looked at her and smiled. "It's clear. You ready to run?"

"Yep."

Just as Frank opened the door, two shots fired out, shattering the glass on the double door. While Ellen screamed Frank just pulled her along.

"Fuck!" Frank shouted out, looking up and down and seeing the oncoming troops. Moving slowly in a taunting manner. They knew Frank and Ellen were trapped. They stood center street with no where to go, Or at least that's what he thought, only for a second.

The large round blackness caught Frank's attention, and dragging Ellen to it, in a race against time. Frank knelt before the manhole cover, placing his fingers in the holes and lifting the heavy object with a painful grunt. "Go down."

"Oh my God I . . ."

"Now!" Frank shouted as he saw them moving faster.

Ellen climbed down the hole quickly, Frank followed.

"El, jump. Hurry."

"Shit." Ellen let go and landed six feet below with a splash and a scream.

Frank lowered himself with her. He didn't care like she did about the rats, and gripped her arm, running with the flow of the small trickle of water.

They ran for a while and their feet splashed in perfect rhythm down the dark damp tunnel. Echoing footsteps. But only their own.

Finally Ellen stopped to catch her breath.

"El, come on." Frank halted in his run ten feet ahead of her.

"They aren't following us." She grabbed onto her knees.

"There has to be a reason. Now let's move. This leads out somewhere."

"Can we just . . ." Ellen saw Frank look past her. "Frank?"

"Shit."

"What?"

A loud rush, growing louder and louder, almost thunderous. As soon as Ellen turned to see, she was blasted with the tidal wave force of the rushing water that filled the tunnel. She shrieked loudly as the water picked her up and carried her. Frank quickly grabbed hold of Ellen just as she passed him. And in a current they could not battle, Frank held on to Ellen, holding her head above it, and they rode it out fast and furiously. Ellen's screams entailed every single time she came up for air.

The tunnel grew lighter, the sun. Hope. An escape . . . The society.

As soon as Frank and Ellen emerged from the sewer system tunnel and into the small creek that wasn't deep enough to float them away in, they were greeted by thirty soldiers, all armed, smiling and pointing their weapons at them.

"Fuck." Holding onto Ellen, Frank stood to his feet as the water rushed

by them. At that instant as they rose, the aim moved to Ellen and so did the closeness of all thirty rifles. And for the second time only in his life. Frank raised his hands in surrender.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry was the last to step from the helicopter, almost as if he lingered behind on purpose. He, like all the other men held a look of disappointment, and punishment. As if they were mad at themselves for having to come back empty handed. As if the sun would have only given them more time, they would have completed what they had set out to do.

Joe stood on the edge of the field, watching as one by one, the teams of men, heads down walked by him. Robbie only looked at Joe and kept on walking. No words needed to be spoken. There was no Frank and Ellen nor was there any sign on where they had gone.

“I’m sorry Joe.” Henry laid his hand on Joe’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry too Henry.” Staring only forward, Joe felt Henry’s hand slip from him. Joe was filled with a sadness and feeling of loss, that nothing but the return of his children could change.

^^^

Williston, North Dakota

Handcuffs secured Frank’s ankles and wrists, like a hardened criminal they could not control. He sat on the floor by the bed in the small room. Ellen sat next to him. The Lieutenant, face bloody paced in front of him.

“Under orders.” He spoke coldly. “If you try to escape again. The woman will be shot. Immediately. No bargains. Understood.”

Frank’s jaw twitched in anger.

“I thought we’d find an agreement. Now . . .” The Lieutenant stopped walking, he hunched down fearless to Frank’s level. “There’s nothing more I would like to do than to put a gun to your head and blow your brains out. But again under orders, you are given till sun up to save your lives. You will tell me what you know. Your people’s vulnerabilities. And if you don’t. You will be shot by firing squad at sun up.” The Lieutenant ignored the cold stares he got from Frank. He stood up. Indicated to the guard and the two of them left the room, leaving Frank and Ellen alone.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Dean held so tight to a sleeping Alexandra. She cuddled on his lap as he lay on the couch. Her little head pressed tightly to his chest. His lips grazed through her hair over and over, taking in the softness. So many times while

holding her his hand would run over her fragile face. Touching her nose, making it crinkle while she slept. Bringing forth the only smile that could come to Dean.

His heart ached. His stomach ached. An emptiness filled him and he tried to hide it away within the arms of his daughter. But it didn't help. Dean didn't really think it would. How could it? From Alexandra's small features, her sleeping expression, all the way to the texture of her hair, every bit of Alexandra reminded Dean of Ellen. Perhaps that was why he held his daughter so long and so tight. Even if it was just in Dean's heart and in his mind, a little part of him was holding on to Ellen.

^^^

Williston, North Dakota

"Know El how sorry I am that this is happening." Frank spoke near whisper that evening.

"Don't be." Ellen told him as she sat next to him, leaning on his arm.

"I failed somewhere. All I've ever done is try to protect you. And I failed. Look at us."

"Yeah." Ellen said with a shiver. "Look at us."

"I'm sorry." Frank looked at her so sadly. "I don't know what to do. If I try to get us away again, they'll shoot you. If I don't, they shoot me. And what happens to you."

"I don't know." Ellen shook her head. "What do you think? Are we pretty much screwed? Be honest Frank."

"O.K., well . . ." Frank huffed. "Things are tight right now. They aren't looking as prosperous as I'd like them to look."

"So we're never getting out of this?"

"Never say never. Who knows. But just remember I'm sorry it got to this point."

"Will you please quit apologizing. You did all you could do and more. I know that. And I want you to know something. I'm not afraid. Of course . . ." She smiled a little at him. "I'm not the one who's facing the firing squad tomorrow. Am I?"

"Thanks." Frank shook his head. "This is supposed to be a solemn moment here. This could end up being our last night on this earth."

"Yeah, and if it is, why would you and I spend it being mushy?"

"How else are we supposed to spend it?"

"Like Frank and Ellen." Ellen lifted herself, pushed down Frank's bent knees and straddled over his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck tightly.

"You mean, go out with a bang?"

"Yeah." Ellen nodded, slowly bringing her lips to Frank's. He smiled after the short kiss. "Let's go out with a bang."

So soft the chuckle was that came from Frank when Ellen's lips slid down his neck, How badly he wanted to hold her but was unable to with his hands behind his back. "El." His voice cracked some as he called her name.

"Yes." Ellen lifted her head holding her face close to him.

"I have to tell you something."

"What's that." Ellen spoke with seduction and warmth brushing her lips

over his.

“If we, um, make it out of this situation. This uh . . . handcuff thing, could be a really cool new thing for us.”

Ellen’s lips stopped moving on him. She looked seriously at him and silently, then Ellen laughed.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Sweaty, dirty and exhausted, The Captain returned to his home. A small apartment which sat above a former drug store. The windows weren’t as open as he wanted them to be, the rain that scattered about every once in a while made the Captain close them. But the night was hot and he walked slowly to his front window, opening it up and letting the cool--after rain--breeze hit against his body.

He could see the people walking slowly down the street. He knew where they were headed. A special prayer service would entail on this evening. A service for the men about to embark on another freedom fight. But this one was different. This one involved many of his men, more than the captain had ever sent out. The captain wanted to be a part of the service, and he knew he would be. He’d forego his tired body from maneuvers, he’d get cleaned up and he’d join the community that he ran.

After, though his mind was full, he would try to rest. He needed to be strong and at his best. He was going to lead his men into battle. Fight alongside of them. Doing exactly what he himself had trained them to do. There was a drive in the Captain. Strong and vibrant. A rush of need, urgency filled him. Was it the pull to eliminate the close society camps? Or was it the desire to try to help Beginnings, knowing, even without certainty, that somewhere within the two new society camps, were the two people that Beginnings now searched so diligently for. Something inside of the Captain told him this fight was different. This fight held more importance than any he had been on before. Why exactly that was, Captain Hal Slagel just didn’t know.

CHAPTER NINE

August 31

Bowman, North Dakota

A quarter of a mile outside the town of Bowman on the overgrown highway they spread to the fields. An army, two hundred and forty strong. On horseback they manned together like a carpet of hope that spread out. They waited in silence, and in uniform. The soldiers from corporals down wore the color blue, navy blue, UWA sewn onto their sleeves. Their hands wore homemade gloves, gold in color, the fingers exposed. That gold color was the same color that they wore on their heads. No hats, caps, or covers. A golden bandana, like the sun, covered their head and came down to just above the eyebrows and tied in the back. Their rifles were strapped to them. And to their waists, their swords, so polished they reflected the moon's light.

Drawing closer to them was the horse's gallop. Steady and not too fast. It made some of the UWA soldier's hearts beat faster. Captain Hal Slagel rode to them. So strong on horseback, sitting so straight. He slowed down, accepted his salute from Sgt. Ryder, then rode around the gathered men to where he could be seen.

Wearing a gray uniform with a red bandana and gloves, Hal pulled on the reigns of the horse to stop him. The horse danced a little in antsyness before settling down.

Hal waited for the faces to be on him, the silence was his signal. He spoke to them strong, a seriousness on his face. "In Corinthians, Paul tells us, *I plead with you . . . to be of one mind. United, in thought and in purpose.* And like Paul, I plead with you the same. We together have seen many tragedies, but none as tragic as the oppression this great land of ours faces now. We are not in the thick of it, but only the beginning. A long hard war lies ahead of us, and if we fight hard now, we will only grow stronger. Though our camp divides in separate ways, in a few short hours we will synchronize in yet another battle for freedom. We will bring our mighty sword to those who try to change what this country was founded on. We ride together not only in unity, but in spirit and heart. We ride tall, holding our heads high. Let our voice carry out, loud and strong. Today is our call, our warning, let it be heard. We will not fall so easily to their tyranny. We will not diminish without a battle. This is the fight of our forefathers, and our fight now. This is our land, our home, our freedom. We will not stop. We will emerge victorious. And we will . . . take it back!" With a swift motion, Hal pulled out his sword raising it high.

There was a synchronization of metal sounds as all the men pulled forth their swords, raising them high, and with pride joining their leader in his signification motion.

Hal, his sword still held high above his head, saluted Sgt. Ryder and nodded to the soldier beside him. The soldier lifted his bugle, gave a simple blow and united, the men cheered, the horses divided up. And together in two separate ways, they rode off and onto their freedom fight.

Beginnings, Montana

Dean's head swayed slowly back and forth as he sat on his front porch. The steam from his coffee hit against his nose. He hadn't slept all night. He brought his lips to his mug, and as he did he heard his screen door open and close.

The large brown hiking boots were the vision Dean saw first, followed by the khaki pants. He turned his head to see Henry had joined him on his seat on the step.

Henry hesitated before saying anything. He looked out into the quiet predawn streets of Beginnings. "I heard you pacing last night, Dean. You should have come down to talk if you couldn't sleep."

"Henry . . ." Dean spoke so softly. "I couldn't even think last night."

"We're going to find something today Dean. I feel it in my heart, we'll find something."

"Does your heart tell you if it's good or bad?"

"I know what my heart tells me." Henry said. "But you don't need to hear my heart. You need to hear yours. What does yours tell you?"

Dean closed his eyes. "She's in so much trouble Henry. I feel it. If it's physically possible for a heart to ache, mine's doing it." He shook his head. "I'm so worried. She's out there. And we know Frank's hurt. What if he can't protect her anymore. Then what?"

"We'll find her Dean, If it's the last thing I ever do in my life, I will find Ellen."

"Find her soon." Dean looked to Henry. "Find her soon. Because I'm just so . . . I'm just so lost right now."

^^^

Sitting at the diningroom table with his head slumped forward and laying on his two hands was not the normal stature Jess got used to seeing his new friend Robbie in. Jess cleared his throat to alert Robbie that he was in the room. "How are you?" Jess asked him.

"Worried."

"Need to talk?"

Robbie shook his head. "Talking won't help."

"It might." Jess joined him at the table. Like Robbie, he wore his Beginnings security uniform, he was dressed and ready to go out with the search party that would leave with in a half hours time.

Robbie breathed slowly out as he sat back in his chair. "I'm worried if I'm doing the right thing."

"What do you mean?"

"If me leading the search is the right thing. It's my brother Jess. My big brother." Robbie closed his eyes in pain. "With him and El out there, my mind is so frazzled. What if I miss something, what if I'm not thinking clearly. This isn't something little, this is big. My screw up can be their life."

"You won't screw up." Jess spoke with certainty. "I can guarantee it. Would you like to know why?" He waited for simple nod from Robbie. "The one who will search his best is the one searching with his heart. Yeah,

Beginnings sticks together. But there is nothing like family. I haven't known any of you for very long, but I know this. You Slagels have this connection. All of you. When one hurts, you all hurt. And when one cries out. You all hear. You'll hear your brother Robbie. Just listen for him. And you can follow it."

"I hear him all right Jess." Robbie shook his head. "My gut hears him. It just doesn't like what Frank's saying."

^^^

Williston, North Dakota

Ellen's scream was long and painful. A loud "NO" came from her as two guards held her back and she watched two more bring Frank to the door. She struggled and fought, trying to pull her body from the clenches that held her back.

Frank didn't struggle. He stood tall. His hands still cuffed behind his back. He watched Ellen, making nothing but eye contact with her as he was moved backwards and near the open door.

"No!" Ellen cried. "Don't take him. Please don't take him. I'll tell you anything you need to hear. Don't take him."

Frank shook his head once. "El." He spoke her name calmly. "No. My life. Our kids. Who is more important."

Ellen calmed herself and took one more look at Frank. Just as they started to move again, she gave it everything she had and charged forth to him, they tried to stop her.

"Let me say goodbye. Please." She begged the two guards. "Please." When they stopped moving Frank. She laid her hands on his face. "I love you."

Softly Frank's lips touched to hers, then he moved them harder against Ellen's, kissing her fully and with his heart until he was pulled from her. "El." He swallowed as they moved him out. "I love you."

The two guards that held Ellen released her and walked from the room pulling the door closed. Ellen raced to the door, flinging herself to it, pounding on it. "Frank!" Her head rested against the wood surface. And in defeat she slid down to the floor crying.

Sgt. Ryder looked down at the face of his watch. "Two more minutes." He lifted his binoculars and peered to the town in the distance. He looked to his bugle boy. "Be ready. I'll signal."

Hal placed the pole which held the American flag, firmly in his youngest soldiers hand. "This is your moment,." Hal told him. "You are the deliverer. You will mark our victory and freedom. You stay back here and you watch. When you see our victory in imminent. You ride down, raise that flag high and secure it center of our battle. Understand."

"Yes sir."

"I'll see you down there." Hal gave the young soldier a proud look then

rode a few feet to his leading position. He faced the town his men were about to charge forth on. And Hal looked at his watch.

Set up toward the center town in a grassy area were two large posts. The soldiers led Frank to them and uncuffed him. Not once did Frank flinch when he passed the ten soldiers who lined up twenty feet before the emerging posts. All armed.

His hands weren't free for long, they were secured by rope, one each to a pole. Frank's feet stayed planted firmly to the ground and his arms extended in a crucifying position. He faced what would be his firing squad.

The lieutenant walked from behind the line of twenty men. He moved to Frank. "Last chance."

Frank shifted his eyes to him, then faced the soldier who were weapons ready.

The lieutenant stepped back. "On my call!" He ordered out. "Ready."

A simultaneous pumping of chambers.

"Aim."

All twenty soldiers lifted their weapons.

The lieutenant looked at his men, then to Frank. He opened his mouth to give out the order and the sound that emerged was a single trumpet blown. He quickly jolted backwards to what sounded like a stampede. His eyes filled with horror. Charging forth, fast was a long line of horses. Riding on them men, swords held high and they moved so swiftly the cloud of dust beneath the horses feet swirled around as if a cyclone. Gun shots entailed.

Ellen stood by the boarded up window and her heart sunk to the floor when she heard the shots. She moved from the window sobbing from the depths of her soul. It was over.

Frank pulled at the ropes that bound his hands. So vulnerable he was, as firing went mad around him. He looked to his wrist trying to figure a way to free himself. And he stopped when a horse approached him. He saw the grey pant leg and he followed it up to the man with a red bandana. He held a sword high and in a swinging motion. Frank kept his eyes on the sword as it swooped down. And with the sweep of the blade, Sgt. Ryder freed Frank, then quickly cut the other rope, nodded to Frank and ran off in his battle with his men.

Frank sped forth, grabbing the first rifle he saw laying at the hands of a dead society soldier. He ran towards the building he knew Ellen was at. So much confusion, so much firing, Frank only worried about getting caught in the exchange. In his race to the bank building Frank slowed down. He saw him. The lieutenant taking cover behind a military truck. Hating to take the time, but not wanting to miss the opportunity, Frank pumped the chamber on the rifle, quietly hunched down and ran up to the lieutenant.

Before the lieutenant knew it, he felt the cold steel of the weapon to the back of his head. He dropped his revolver, raised his hands and slowly turned around. He looked at Frank.

Frank smiled, stepped back, raised the rifle and fired a single close shot

directly into the center of the lieutenant's forehead. Feeling complete, he took off into the bank.

At top speed through the confusion and with a typical huge Slagel grin, Hal rode. He knew that the horses had thrown the society off and added confusion to their already staggering state. With the wind whipping in his face, he raised his sword high seeing the aims of the society soldiers at him. He swung down at the first soldier so fast, the head flew from the soldier, bounced off the horse and dropped to the ground in a roll. One by one he took them out as he rode by them. In the camp he descended upon, south of Bowman, the society dropped fast. Too stunned to defend themselves properly. Not trained well enough even if they were prepared.

As Hal rode near the end of the camp, ready to turn around and sweep through again he saw one of his men fall from a horse and lose his weapon. A society soldier aimed at Hal's man. Turning the horse around and using his body weight to guide the horse faster, Hal rode to his own man and grabbed the society soldier in his quick pass by. He carried the soldier another fifty feet before finally dropping him. Like it was instinct, Hal looked back, pulled out his revolver and while still moving, Hal shot him dead then continued in his fight.

Ellen heard the footsteps running to her door. She slowly stepped back away from the door. Three gunshots were fired and Ellen covered her ears. She heard the bang, saw the wood splinters, watched the door blast open and saw Frank charge in. She shrieked and ran to him, grabbing him and kissing him.

"What did I tell you." Frank embraced her quickly then grabbed her hand. "Never. Say never."

"What's going on?" Ellen asked as he ran with her, pulling her the whole way.

"Someone attacked. Saved my ass." Frank checked out the staircase. "I was screwed."

"Someone saved you?" Ellen asked as they barreled up the steps.

"Not just someone a whole fuckin' brigade." They reached the main bank floor. Frank looked out first. He could see the fighting in the street. "El. It's fuckin' awesome." Frank grinned and ran with her across the bank floor.

He stood by the broken doors, making Ellen stay off to the side. He raised his rifle and saw an opportunity. A horse ran in circles riderless a few feet away. Taking Ellen's hand once more, Frank careened out the doors of the bank, firing at the society for cover and grabbed hold of the confused animal. Frank helped Ellen to the saddle, then joined her.

"Can you ride?" Ellen asked.

"We'll find out. Hold on." Frank snapped the reins and the horse took off. They rode quickly through the hand to hand combat war that surrounded them and straight to the edge of town. He looked back and watched the new men on horses battle the society soldiers and they looked as if in trouble. Frank stopped the horse. "El, the reins control him. Pull back when you want to stop.

Ride far enough away.”

“What?”

Frank jumped from the horse. “Wait for me, but not for too long.”

“Frank what are you doing?”

“Be careful.” With a loud ‘ha!’ Frank smacked the backside of the horse and it took off with a screaming Ellen. After seeing her ride off, Frank raced back into town. He knew what he was going to do. After stealing more ammo from a dead soldier, he would go to a rooftop and do what he did best. He would take a sniper position to help this new army. And Frank did.

Sgt. Ryder in a rare occurrence didn’t see it coming. In his attack on a soldier, another took hold of his leg pulling him from the moving horse. He fell hard to the ground and on to his back. Before he could pick himself up a foot slammed into his chest and a rifle aimed directly at him. He thought it was over, he thought wrong. He heard the shot but didn’t think twice about it until he saw the forehead of the soldier veer off and blood sprayed outward. The soldier dropped, Sgt. Ryder stood up. He looked around, grabbed his weapon and as he did so, he saw another society soldier take a head shot. Single shot precision was not something he had seen often in his life. His views went up as he lifted himself back on the horse. He saw Frank on the rooftop aiming down. He smiled and mounted his horse to finish off the battle that neared it’s end.

^^^

Amongst the large mound of dead, the UWA soldiers cheered loudly as the youngest soldier planted the flag. And as the flag stood on his own, Hal raised both his arms high in the air in a victory mode.

He backed up, still on his horse and took in the scene that his men had just created. He felt in his heart that north of them, they accomplished the same. How could they not. The UWA had something that the society lacked. Spirit.

^^^

Sgt. Ryder closed one eye and gave an odd look as he watched Frank walk up to every single society soldier. It was something Sgt. Ryder had never seen. A man so serious, nudge a body with his foot. If he moaned or twitched, Frank fired a single shot into the head securing their deaths, then he’d move on.

“Is this necessary?” Sgt. Ryder approached.

“Never leave any stone . . .” Frank heard a moan from the soldier beneath him. He fired. “Unturned.” Frank moved in to the next.

Sgt. Ryder moved beside Frank. “The rest of my men have moved out.”

“Go on. Just send my wife back.” Frank fired, stepped over the body and moved to the next.

“Your wife? And you want your wife to see this.”

“She’s seen . . .” Frank shook his head at another moan. “Worse.” He fired. “Fuck, don’t you teach your people to take them out without leaving them still alive.”

“The man you just shot had no arms. What’s the point?”

“Hey. Some of these guys got fuckin microchips in their brains, how do we know the society can’t just come by, pick up the limbless ones and make a bionic man army out of them. We don’t.” Another shot, another step. Frank paused retracted his footsteps and bent down.

“What is it?”

“A really nice luger.” Frank picked up the hand gun. “Whoa.” He stood up, went to put it in his shoulder harness and missed. It wasn’t there. “Fuck.” Frank secured the weapon in the back waist of his pants.

“Do you have to do this? Don’t you feel that walking up to these men is a desecration?”

Frank snickered, reloaded the revolver and walked on. “You people come in here swinging your swords around. Yeah, that’s a real tribute to the human body.”

“Us people? I saved your life.”

Frank spun hard to the sergeant. “And I save yours, so get off my back.” Frank coughed took a step and coughed violently.

“You’re not well, are you?”

“Well enough to finish this off.”

“I’m not understanding this hostile attitude. And you could show some respect. ‘Sir’ would be nice.”

Frank laughed loudly, it bred another cough. “Sir? I call no man sir. People call me sir.” Frank fired another shot. “I’m sorry.” He faced Sgt. Ryder. “I’m usually not this much of an asshole. Frank.” He held out his hand.

“Elliott.” Sgt. Ryder shook his hand. “You’ve done this before.”

“Many times. This is how we finish it off. And it looks good.” Frank nodded. “Now you’re certain Ellen is safe with your men.”

“Positive.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“Are you two going to join us?” Sgt. Ryder walked with Frank.

“You mean go with you?”

“You’re welcome to.”

“Thank you. But . . .” Frank coughed. “We have a family, El and I. I’m sure they miss us.”

“You look pale. Where is home.”

“Where are we?”

“North Dakota.”

“Fuck!” Frank stopped cold. “Fuck! Fuckin’ North Dakota. Can I be any fuckin further from home. Son of a bitch. I’m gonna need one of your horses to get to Montana.”

“Beginnings?”

Frank looked oddly at the Sergeant. “How did you know.”

“We figured you were Beginnings people. Why don’t you come with us? We’re about seventy miles south east of Beginnings. Rest up there, get well, then well escort you home.”

“Thank you. But we can’t. We’ve been gone long enough.”

“I understand. Your people are worried about you.”

Frank looked at Sgt Ryder after that comment. But he didn’t question it. He would, but at that moment getting out of that town and to Ellen was foremost on his mind.

A tin cup of water was extended in front of Ellen as she sat on a fallen tree. “Mam,” The soldier gave her water. “Drink this please.”

“Thank you.” Ellen took the cup. She saw another approach with a pan of water, he set it down before her. “What’s this for?”

“Your injuries look as if they weren’t tended to.” The other soldier said. “May I. Unless you prefer I do not touch you.”

“Touch away.” Ellen shrugged. “They didn’t give me anything to clean up with.”

“You don’t want infection.” The second soldier dipped a cloth and brought it to Ellen’s face. “Spring water, It’s fresh, but cold.”

Ellen jumped back at the frigid water. But it felt good. She saw yet a third soldier approach.

“We have rations Mam. Are you hungry. You should eat.”

“I am hungry.”

The third soldier knelt down by her opening a sack. “It doesn’t look appealing, but it tastes good. It’s like beef jerky, and it’s the protein you need.”

Ellen reached into the bag and pulled it out. She sniffed it, shrugged an bit it.

The third soldier stared at her. “Is there anything else we can get you. Do you need us to fetch anything for you.” A fourth soldier walked behind the third extending down an apple. The third soldier gave it to Ellen. “Here.”

Ellen blinked in surprise. “You’re being very nice. Thank you. This is almost too nice.”

The second soldier looked at the others. “Too nice? But Mam, you’re a woman.”

“Yes I am.” Ellen shifted her eyes around them. “And as a woman, let me just say. Great uniforms. So civil war like.”

The second soldier snickered as he finished cleaning her off. “They are civil war. Our Captain got our uniforms from a re-enactment center.”

“No kidding?” Ellen said with a smile. “Where is he?”

“South.” The soldier answered. “He was leading another attack.”

“Oh, I thought for . . . Frank.” Ellen stood up when Frank walked with Sgt. Ryder.

Immediately, as soon as Frank neared Ellen, a wall of soldiers stood before her and held out their weapons.

Frank rolled his eyes. “Excuse me. I’d like to see her.”

The one soldier kept his aim serious. “You can see her from there. Please keep your distance from the woman.”

Sgt. Ryder laughed. “Lower you weapons. The woman is his wife.”

Four of the ten that protected Ellen all said the same thing with such shook. “Wife?”

Ellen agreed with their questioning. “Wife? I’m not his wife.”

Sgt. Ryder looked at Frank. “You said she was your wife.”

“She was.” Frank moved to her. “And will be again.”

Ellen lost her sarcasm as she neared Frank. “How are you?”

“Better now.” Frank embraced her tightly, lifting her from her feet.

Ellen let out a breath as he set her down. “God, Frank. Can you do anything less dramatic.”

“Me?” Frank coughed. “You’re lucky I . . .” He coughed again. “Hold on.” He turned his head away from her, coughing.

Ellen closed her eyes with a shaking head. She reached down for her water and handed it to Frank. “Here. And sit. For a moment, O.K.?”

Frank’s hand laid on his chest as he tried to catch his breath. It hurt him with every breath he was taking, but he didn’t want to tell Ellen that. He just agreed to sit, because at that moment. Frank needed to more than he let on.

“The United Western Alliance.” Sgt. Ryder explained to Frank and Ellen. “You can call us Freedom fighters. We’re fighting the society. Only they’re just realizing we’ve declared war.”

Frank sipped slowly from his water. “There’s so many of you.”

Sgt. Ryder nodded. “Now there is, yes. When I first joined back up with the Captain about nine months ago. He had some trouble with them. It’s a long story. And he was already leading about two hundred men. We began search parties much like you do and the society, getting people who have seen the wrath of the society and getting them to join our cause. We’ve trained for this moment and have for a little over four months. We’ve just started hitting their camps. Anything that crosses over Kansas we plan to take out.”

“Securing this half of the country.” Frank said. “Until you’re big enough to take it all out?”

“Yes. We’ve gained many defectors. Many. Those who have the microchip as you put it. We’ve found if you lock them away for two weeks then gradually expose them to our men, we become the ally and no longer the enemy.”

Ellen snickered as she enjoyed her apple. “My friends Henry and Danny erase their microchips in a second.” Ellen snapped her finger. “Then they just reprogram them.”

“Your people are much more high tech than ours.” Sgt. Ryder commented. “We like to think of ourselves as old world.”

“Like the calvary.” Ellen commented. “Come in and save the day.”

“Yes, exactly.” Sgt. Ryder said.

“Frank is a one man calvary.” Ellen looked at Frank and smiled.

Frank had to question. “Why haven’t you contacted Beginnings? We’re on the same side.”

“We realize this now. We’ve begun to monitor you constantly. Your radio transmissions that is. Sometimes it’s entertaining. Anyhow, I believe in due time we will. Right now, we have our work cut out for us.”

“And you do your work well.” Frank said. “Someone trained these men well. And with some style.”

Sgt. Ryder smiled proudly. “Our Captain is a good man. He inspires us. We believe in him. And I’m sure he’d feel much better if you and the woman came to our home and stayed until you are well.”

Frank shook his head. “We have to go.” He shifted his eyes to Ellen.

“Then let us at least get you to the Anderson Farm. You can rest there. There’s a radio, you can contact your people in Beginnings. To come and get you.”

“Where’s this at?” Frank asked.

“About fifty miles east of Beginnings. A little south. An old man and a

woman lived there. They both survived the plague. The woman died about six months ago. Mr. Anderson died three months later. They used to feed our men and let them rest there. We've kept up their place in their memory. And we use it for the purpose that he would want. A safe place pretty hidden for the UWA."

Ellen saw the hesitation on Frank. "We should do this. We can call Robbie, he can fly and get us. We'll get you home and get something in you for the pneumonia."

Frank reluctantly agreed and he looked to Sgt. Ryder. "We appreciate it. If you people ever need to retreat to Beginnings. Or need a place to stop, rest, eat. Whatever. You just ask for me. You're in."

Sgt. Ryder nodded in appreciation. "We'll remember that. But there is one thing we would like to ask of you. We're heading into dangerous battles. We've lost lives and have injured men. We know Beginnings, medically is very versed. All we ask is that if our men can't be treated by us, that we can bring them to you to try to do your best to help them."

Ellen was the one that responded. "Without a doubt. I'm a nurse there. And you can be reassured that we have the best medical staff. In fact." Her voice became chipper. "We have this doctor, he is not only the greatest mind in the world, but he is so good with his hands. And he has this vision and he..."

"El." Frank shut her up. "Can we not praise Dean."

"Sorry." Ellen bit her bottom lip then looked to Sgt. Ryder. "Just bring them to us."

The UWA began to disperse, heading home while Sgt. Ryder stayed behind until Frank and Ellen were rested enough to journey to the Anderson farm. He kept behind men to escort them, though Frank insisted he could handle it. But to Sgt. Ryder one couldn't be too careful when it came to the society. They were showing up everywhere. And little did he know, one stayed in the trees near by them, listening to every word they said.

CHAPTER TEN

Quantico Marine Headquarters

He sounded sacred to George. He had noticed the trembling in his soldier's voice. But through the trembling George received a message that helped ease the pain over the loss of his camp. The position of Frank and Ellen. Not only did George know where they were, but he knew where they were headed.

The soldier heard the name Beginnings. And in hope to divert the anger of the President he told him about the two, describing them to George. And what made it all better for George was the fact that his group in South Dakota would be checking in. And as soon as they did, he knew just where to send them.

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It was something Robbie wanted to land and check out for himself. From the air it was an odd sight. He swooped down close catching as good of a glimpse as he could. Then remembering where it was, he flew east thirty miles to the area where the search parties moved.

Henry looked up in oddity when he saw Robbie landing and turning off the chopper. Henry was on Jess' team, and all four of them stopped walking and faced Robbie who moved toward them. At the instant Henry saw his face, he knew something was up.

"Robbie." Henry approached him first. "What's going on."

Robbie raised his head in acknowledgment and closed into Henry and Jess. "Jess, radio the other search teams in the area. Tell them to hang tight. I think I found something. Let's go I need you guys."

Without hesitation and without a real response, Henry followed and was the first to board the chopper, waiting for Jess, Mark and Cole to join.

The helicopter landed not far from the town of Williston North Dakota. A half a mile out on what used to be a highway. They turned off the chopper, and unloaded.

"I saw this from the air. You guys are not gonna believe this." Robbie said.

"What is it?" Henry asked.

"You especially Henry." Robbie told him. "I hope your stomach is strong today."

The sound of buzzing flies, many of them, greeted them first in ear shot, the next thing they saw was the American flag, and further into their footsteps into town, the massacre.

Henry immediately covered his mouth. "Oh shit."

"All society soldiers." Robbie looked at them. "I think this is way too close to not be where they took Frank and Ellen."

Jess breathed outward, the smell tripled in a bad effect from the heat. "But they're all dead." He nudged a soldier's body with his foot. It was stiff. "Three four hours maybe more."

“Someone massacred these men.” Robbie said. “And as hard as it’s gonna be. We have to look among all these bodies and through this town for Frank and Ellen.”

Cole’s voice sounded distant even though it was close. “I don’t think we’re finding Frank or Ellen here.”

“Why?” Robbie asked.

“Come here.” Cole raised his hand to him.

Robbie hurried over with Henry and Jess. “What?”

“Frank’s signature.” Cole pointed. “This is a Frank thing. He makes us men do this.”

Robbie took a closer look at the body. A single bullet hole in the center of the forehead. “Anyone could have done this.”

“True.” Cole said. “But there’s more than one person shot in the head. The assurance bullet. And . . .” Cole took his M-16 and nudged a body with it. “This guy doesn’t have any arms. Only Frank would shoot him in the head to make sure he’s dead.”

Robbie looked all around. More, than he realized, contained that single head shot. “Henry? What do you make of it?”

“Frank’s work. But we have to think. As much damage as Frank can do. He’s only one man. He didn’t do this alone. But the bullet hole in the forehead is definitely Frank’s shot.”

Jess joined the group. “The bullet to the head to make sure that they are dead is Frank’s thing. But . . . Is this?” so nonchalantly he held up a decapitated head, clenching it by the hair, and emerging it into the circle of men.

Henry shrieked and jumped back. “Put that down. Oh my God, that is gross.”

Robbie laughed. “Cute.”

Jess tossed the head and wiped his hands on his pants. He looked curiously at Henry who made a loud audible sound of disgust. “What Henry?”

“I am not sitting next to you on the chopper.”

“O.K.” Robbie held up his hands. “We should comb this town. But I don’t think we’re finding Frank or Ellen either. Something happened here, and if they were here. Frank did his share and he and Ellen moved on.”

Henry nodded in agreement. “Then you should put the chopper in the air and search. If they’re on foot, they can’t be that far.”

“Good idea. But there’s only one problem.” Robbie stated. “Which way did they go?”

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Mildred, Montana

Hidden and tucked away was an understatement when the UWA soldiers left Frank and Ellen at the Anderson property edge. They were apprehensive walking through the high brush and thick trees. Wondering what they had gotten themselves into.

But like a light at the end of the tunnel they emerged into a scene that could have been set twenty years before their time. A small farm, perhaps at one time bigger. A farmhouse tall and wooden, the paint on the shingles weather

worn some. The porch was long and spread out the front of the house, straight from some summertime lemonade commercial.

Frank and Ellen walked slow toward the house. Ellen felt the effects of the hot sun, Frank, he did not. He moved slower than usual, his hand so hot as it held tight to Ellen's. So old fashioned the house looked from the outside. A hand pump water well was off the back, set further from that, two graves where the grass had barely time to grow yet.

The wooden screen door squeaked when they opened it. The front door was open and they walked in. The house smelt old, dusty, but it was neat and evident someone had stopped by recently.

"Oh Frank." Ellen said breathless as she walked into the living room. "Look at this place." She immediately walked to the long table that was placed against the far wall. A thin table and sprawled across it tons of photographs. "This must be them." Ellen lifted a picture of a couple, embraced, and elderly. "This is us in thirty years."

Frank moved closer to Ellen. "It's amazing, they had all this family. Kids and they both lived through the plague."

"So did we." Ellen set the picture down and smiled at him. The smile dropped when she noticed how pale he really looked. "Frank. You look bad. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. The one guy said, the radio is in the kitchen. I'm uh . . . gonna check it out. Why don't you open some windows for some fresh air."

"I'll do that." Ellen watched Frank walk away, staggering some, slumping. She walked to the front widow, struggling at first then lifting it with a grunt. A warm breeze blew in flapping the lace white curtain out at her. She moved on to the other windows, stopping and looking at the photographs many times.

Frank looked disappointed when Ellen made her way into the country kitchen.

"What's wrong?" She asked as she walked in.

"It doesn't work." He laid down the microphone. "Power supply is bad."

"O.K." Ellen walked to the table. "So now what?"

"We can start walking home."

Ellen laughed in ridicule. "You think? Look at you. You're sick. You've put up this big front. We're here. Why don't we stay here. Find you a bed and make you rest. Maybe tomorrow you'll be strong enough. And you heard Sgt. Ryder. They have search parties out for us. We can flag the house some how. Hang a bed sheet out so Robbie can see it from the air."

Frank breathed loudly and slowly out, laying his face in his hands. "Would you be O.K. with that?"

"I suggested that." Ellen grabbed his hands. "I'm sure Robbie will spot us. If he doesn't. Day after tomorrow we'll start walking. Frank, if you don't get well, you won't be able to do what you do best. Besides, I'm in a really nosey mood right now. Do you realize how long it's been since I've been in a real house. And those pictures. I love them. I'm sure I can find more."

"They're strangers El."

"Yeah, but they're a little bit of the old world aren't they?" She gripped tightly to his arm. "Let's go upstairs and find you a bed. And me? I'm gonna try

that pump thing out back.”

With no energy, Frank rose from his seat. Ellen put her arm around his waist and he immediately embraced her. As her head rested against his chest she could hear the gurgling of his breathing. And Ellen knew without saying anything to Frank, that if Robbie was going to find them. He had better do it soon. Because for the first time ever, Frank had been worn down.

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Bowman, North Dakota

From the roof of his apartment building Hal could see the digging of the graves for the men lost in the battle. Nineteen of his men died as a result. He held a certain sadness even though he knew he was victorious.

“Captain!”

Hal heard the calling of his name from below. It echoed up at him and he peered over the roof’s ledge to see Sgt. Ryder below. “You’re back. I’ll be right down.” Hal hurried from the rooftop, into the stairwell, racing to the street below. “Sergeant.” Hal walked out to the street. “Where are they?”

“Who?”

“The Beginnings people. Your men that arrived before you said you found the two they’ve been searching for.”

“We did.” Sgt. Ryder said. “But they didn’t come back with us.”

“Why? I heard the man was ill.”

“He is. But they wanted to go home. We secured them safe passage to the Anderson farm. They can radio for help there.”

“But we’ve been monitoring radio transmissions. Nothing was heard.”

Sgt. Ryder was silent. “Do you suppose the radio isn’t working.”

“That’s a possibility.” Hal ran his hand over the top of his own head. “All right, I’m gonna send a team of six up with them. If he’s ill he can’t protect the woman he’s with. Let’s just have some men go there crack of dawn and watch the house.”

Sgt. Ryder nodded. “I think that’s a good idea. He’s a stubborn man. He’ll get upset if he knows they’re there.”

Hal sort of chuckled. “He’s from Beginnings. All of them hold a certain arrogance about them.”

“That they do. Has anything been said about our raid. I’m mean with them searching, have they found it yet?”

“Our radio monitor said Eagle one spotted it. Let’s go to the station and see if anything else is happening.” Hal and the sergeant began to walk. “Maybe they’ll start searching for their people in the farm area.”

“If they’re as determined as the Beginnings man, they will. Do you realize he walked up to every single society soldier. If they moaned or moved he shot them in the head.”

Hal stopped walking. “He what?”

“Shot them in the head. Killed them for assurance.”

“It’s uh . . . that’s kind of sadistic.”

Sgt. Ryder shook his head with a laugh as they started to walk again. “This guy was the apodeme of sadistic. And may I add mean.”

“Really?”

“Sir, I kid you not. If this man is a representation of what they are breeding in Beginnings. I could be a little apprehensive about ever visiting there.”

Hal fluttered his lips in Slagel arrogance. “Don’t you think you may be exaggerating?”

“No. Check out the lack of respect this man has. He said to me ‘Sir? I call no man sir. People call me sir’.” Sgt. Ryder heard Hal laughing as they stopped in front of the police station. “I’m telling you in both size and appearance. This big, mean looking son of a bitch, makes Mad Max look like a puppy dog.”

Hal Slagel stopped laughing.

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Beginnings. Montana

If it wasn’t for the air of sadness that hung over Beginnings like a rain cloud, all would look normal there. In the living section, beyond the last row of house, Joe stood with Danny Hoi. The day light hours were fading as Danny’s team worked in finishing the foundations. The helicopters flying in caught Joe’s attention. They were back a little early. And Joe’s heart sunk. Something must have gone wrong.

Dean wasn’t wanting to work, but since Andrea insisted she be home to prepare the Slagel Sunday dinner, Dean was stuck doing rounds. He stood before the John Doe that had been dropped off, wounds cleaned at Beginnings front gate. A quiet man who didn’t speak much. They learned his name was Tom, and that he was shot running from the Society army.

“How’s this.” Dean held a needle at his ankle. He poked him. Tom didn’t move. “Nothing?”

“No.”

“How about here?” Dean ran the needle up the sole of his foot.

“Nothing. I’m not gonna walk again am I?”

“It’s too early to tell.” Dean explained. “You’re still healing.”

“I’m not feeling anything.”

“No.” Dean stated in his doctor mode. “But the fact that the paralysis is confined to the lower region is a good sign. With therapy, who knows.”

Tom nodded and leaned his head deeper to the pillow. It snapped back up and he looked to the window when the helicopter noises came into ear shot. “It’s still light out. They’re back?”

“Shit.” Dean closed his eyes. He knew if they had found Frank and Ellen a radio call to Beginnings would have been made. There was no call. And with some day hours still left, and Robbie back already, Dean feared that the old saying, ‘no news is good news’ wasn’t going to hold true.

Dean stayed behind at the clinic. His hands shook as he worked dreading the news that he knew would soon come to him. It had been fifteen minutes since Robbie landed. No phone call, no radio call. Nothing. And then he heard them. The unison footsteps walking down the corridor of the clinic. Combat boots. It had to be Robbie. He could hear the others with him, and Dean, in the last room of his rounds, froze solid. The pounding of their footsteps went through him, aching him the closer they drew.

“Dean.” Joe called him, peeking his head in the room. “Can we talk to you?”

Every bit of Dean’s insides trembled, he knew his face was pale. “Um, yeah Joe.” Dean grabbed his chart. Took a long breath and stepped out of the room. The minute Dean stepped into the hall, something about Robbie’s look, not Henry’s, made a lot of his fears disappear. Robbie flashed him a quick smile.

“You found them?” Dean tried to contain any premature happiness.

Joe shook his head. “Not yet. But . . .” The was a sense of relief to Joe’s tone. “We believe they are fine and possibly on the way home.”

Dean’s eyes closed he backed up and leaned against the wall. “How do we know this?”

Henry answered. “We found a camp that looked like belonged to the society. About a hundred miles from where Frank and Ellen disappeared. They weren’t there, Frank and Ellen. And all that was left was about one hundred and twenty soldiers.”

“Frank?” Dean asked. “Could he have done that?”

“We know he helped. He left his signature.” Robbie said.

Dean nodded slowly. “A single shot to the forehead. So where are they now?”

Robbie raised his hands. “We think they’re on their way home. It had been a minimal of four hours since the soldiers were killed. We circled and didn’t see them. My gut tells me they got away. But how far is the question. That’s what we need to know from you. When I last spoke to Ellen she said Frank was ill. Fevered, coughing. You know Frank. How far would he be able to go?”

“If his pneumonia relapsed.” Dean explained. “Which is possible, and then he was let’s say, beaten? Didn’t sleep much.” Dean thought for a moment. “He’d go a couple hours, before he’d get to the point Ellen would make them stop. She knows how bad this can get without rest and treatment.”

Joe agreed. “My guess too. I’m thinking they found shelter and are letting him rest up. That’s why we didn’t see them.”

“So what happens now?” Dean asked.

“We send out choppers.” Joe said. “First light, waves of them. Robbie, Dan, Johnny. Alternate shifts and circle the area. If they move, we’ll spot them.”

Dean’s hand clenched his chart tighter in gratefulness. He didn’t want to let himself get too excited. But this was the first good sign or news he had heard since Frank and Ellen disappeared the day before.

^^^

Eight men wearing grey uniforms sat on the long front porch that early evening. Hal emerged from the house. He carried a tin cup filled with coffee. He took a seat on a wicker rocking chair joining the circle of men who sat around for after dinner talk. They talked of the victory, the minimal losses. The ability to save the Beginnings people. And they talked of the six men going up to the Anderson farm at sun up.

“I think it could work in our favor. A good idea.” Sgt. Ryder spoke. “Don’t you Captain?”

Hal snapped from his day dream state. “I’m sorry. What’s a good idea.”

“An open door policy with Beginnings for us.” Sgt. Ryder said. “The man made mention if we need anything just stop by.”

“It could work in our favor.” Hal spoke. “Since we do know for sure we’re on the same side. Especially with winter coming. We know they produce more food than they need. Obviously, they drop it to the wildcats. Maybe with all our manpower we can work a deal. They have all those fields they don’t use because they haven’t enough workers. Exchange workers for food. I thinking that. I’m working on a deal to present them with soon. At least now I feel at ease about dropping off our people if medical attention is needed.”

“The woman said she was a nurse there . . .” He saw the stunned expression from the other men including Hal. “Yes. A nurse. She works there.”

“Their women work?” A soldier questioned. “Really?”

Sgt. Ryder shrugged. “I’m guessing. She said she works with a brilliant doctor. They would assure the best care.”

Hal shook his head quickly. “No. She’s probably the exception to the rule. Her skills are needed. And you did mention she is the wife or will-be-wife to this neanderthal. That’s probably why she can interact. Would he let someone near her?” He raised his eyebrows. “I’m curious now to see how many other woman loan their skills to that community and how the Chief handles it.”

“Carefully.” Sgt. Ryder commented while sipping his coffee. “Of course anytime I’ve heard him on the radio, he seems to get rather annoyed quickly. What do you think Captain, you listen to the radio quite a bit. As a matter of fact, if you don’t mind me asking sir, why is that. You are so intrigued by it.”

“I don’t mind you asking. It’s a little embarrassing.” Hal smiled. “It’s just I find a little bit familiarity in their voices. You know, your mind plays tricks on you. But I just like listening. The family-style bickering they have reminds me of my childhood.” He noticed the odd looks on the men’s faces. “My brothers and I always bickered. We fought, we beat each other up. You name it. But I loved it.” He took a sip of his coffee. “I loved it.” He leaned back in his chair with a look of remembrance.

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Beginnings, Montana

Alexandra sat on the kitchen counter. Andrea stood before her, holding the little face in one hand while wiping it with a wet towel.

“Oh just let Grandmommy clean this precious face for you.”

Dean leaned in the doorway cringing.

“So pretty.” Andrea wiped. “Maybe daddy will let you stay tonight with me and Pap. So you can play longer with Katie.”

Alexandra looked to Dean. “Can I daddy?”

“Um, sure.” Dean tossed his hands up. “I’ll run home and get your clothes for school.”

“I’ll go with you.” Alexandra said. “I want to get my doll.”

“I can get your doll.”

“Daddy, you never get the right one.”

Andrea lifted Alexandra from the counter and set her on the floor. “What does mommy teach you about that.”

Alexandra nodded. “He’s a man, he doesn’t know better.”

Dean rolled his eyes at Andrea. “Must you encourage Ellen style thinking in her?”

“Someone has to until Ellen’s back.” Andrea softened her voice and walked to Dean laying her hand on his cheek. “Which will be soon. I believe it. We prayed in services for her and Frank today. God will answer those prayers.”

“I know. I have hope.” Dean felt the tug to his jeans. Alexandra looked impatient. “And . . . let me walk her home. We’ll be right back.”

Alexandra darted through the livingroom, she kissed Joe who sat on the couch reading reports and shrieked when Robbie intercepted her lifting her up. “I have to go.” She told him.

Robbie, still holding her extended her out. “You aren’t gonna pee on me are you.”

“No silly.” Alexandra laughed. “I’m staying with Pap tonight. I’m going with daddy to get my dolls.”

“Oh.” Robbie brought her closer and kissed her then set her down. He looked when he heard Henry whine. “Why do you sound disappointed she’s staying here Henry.”

Henry held Nick as he talked. “Andrea doesn’t do her hair well. Which means I’ll have to stop by the school and fix it and listen to Jenny bitch at me that I’m anal.”

“You are.” Robbie stated.

“Thanks.” Henry looked at Jess who had joined the festivities. “How do you live with this guy?”

Jess smiled. “Robbie? I love living with Robbie. He’s a great guy.”

Immediately Joe lowered the reports and his eyes lifted above his glasses. He stared outward for a second, shook his head, shrugged and went back to reading.

Henry laughed. “Joe, what was that for?”

“Huh?” Joe looked up again. “Nothing.”

The smile dropped from Henry’s face when he saw Dean walking out with Alexandra. “Dean. What about Nick. He’s getting fussy.”

Dean stopped before opening the door. “Hold him for a little while longer Henry. I’ll be back.” He grabbed Alexandra’s hand and left with her.

Dean loved holding his daughter’s hand. So small and so lost in his. Her little arm swung happily as they walked to their home right down the street.

“Daddy, we won’t be this close to Pap when we move. Will we?”

“Nope. Closer to Uncle Frank. Not that it’s a good thing.”

“I’ll have to stay longer at Pap’s when I visit then, because he’ll live so

far away.”

Dean smiled at his daughter’s perception of distance. Six rows of houses was not that far. But he supposed in a world as small as Beginnings, to Alexandra it could have been miles. He slowed down walking when he got to his house. “Shit.”

Bev sat on the step, she stood up. “They said you get home about this time from Sunday supper.”

“Excuse us.” Dean tried to get passed her.

“Dean, if you aren’t busy tonight. I’d love to just sit outside and talk to you. How long has it been since you’ve had female company do that?”

Dean said nothing, he gripped Alexandra’s hand and moved to his door. “Come on Alex.” Dean tried to pull the little girl who wouldn’t budge. “Alex.”

Alexandra stared hard at Bev. “You know, there was a reason my mother burned you.”

Dean’s eyes widened, he quickly spun around to look at his daughter and the shocked expression on Bev’s face. Bev just gasped and walked away. Dean hid his chuckle and took Alexandra into the house. “There are times when that Ellen-type mouth you have comes in so handy.” He bent down and kissed his daughter in appreciation.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

“About an eight hour drive from our Suix Falls location.” Jeremy Explained to George. “They should be at that farm in the morning.”

“What about our Alabama team. That’s the bigger sight.”

“On their way to Suix Falls. They’ll escort Frank and Ellen to Alabama. You’ll have to get the CME team there though.”

“The train returns tomorrow. I’ll get two men on that and ship them out. I’ll head out in a few days.” George said. “Medical staff. You thought ahead when you spoke to them?”

“Yes.” Jeremy answered. “Nothing is happening in Alabama so the two doctors are on their way to Suix Falls with the escorts. Just incase, we know Frank. If we need to injure Ellen, they’ll be able to help.”

“You gave the Suix Falls troop strict orders if injury is necessary they are to shoot only to injure.”

“The sergeant in charge is sending his best two snipers.”

George grumbled. “Yeah well, sorry that’s not a reassurance to me. The best two snipers we have are the equivalent to Beginnings worst.”

“But that will change.” Jeremy said with a smile. “Isn’t that one of the reasons we’re doing this.”

“That and others. Biggest reason.” George spoke. “Leverage to get what we want. Remember what I told you. Take them down from within. Hurt them from within. And that’s exactly what we are doing.”

^^^

Anderson Farm

It was so quiet as Ellen sat on the front porch of the farm, the loudest noise she heard was the flapping of the signal bed sheets in the wind. The ones she hung from two of the second floor windows. Occasionally Frank's cough would carry down to her. The rocking chair creaked some as she sat, holding a towel to her blistered hands. Never did she imagine pumping well water would be so difficult. But she had to do it. Frank had done nothing but sleep since she got him to bed. Something he desperately needed. She stared out into the bright moonlit yard ahead of her. So peaceful and so safe she felt. And as she sat there, staring out, it dawned on her. She didn't quite understand when she met the UWA, why they were doing what they did. Why they were now fighting so hard. But she did as she enjoyed the porch. Exactly what Ellen was doing was the exact reason they fought. To live in a world without worry, without safety walls. To live in a world with freedom again. To live in a world that wasn't just safe to move around, but safe enough to do something so simple as to sit on the front porch of a home.

CHAPTER TEN

September 1
Bowman, North Dakota

Kicked back in the early morning, Hal sat with his legs on the table, listening to the radio. A tablet rested on his lap and he switched between the pen in his mouth and the coffee he reached to. He smiled as he listened and wrote. The male voices went back and forth so much, it sometimes got hard for Hal to distinguish them.

"So what do we do?" The one voice asked.

"I'm doing stupid head of security paper work. Figure it out." The second voice answered.

"No, I need an answer."

"Bring them in the back gate." The second voice said.

"Then where?"

"To the living section. You aren't gonna prop them in the middle of fuckin town."

"Which route."

"Why is this important?"

"Because the trucks are too big to take through town."

"Then take it around the fields."

"Yeah, but that's ten miles out of the way. What about gas?"

"Why are you using gas?" The second voice asked. "Bring the alcohol with you. It's under forty miles round trip."

"Yeah but Danny said it's gonna mess up the fuel injection. And we can't do that because we have three more trips."

"We'll flush it out. Besides, I checked it with anal Henry. And he says it'll be fine. We do this all the time. What's the problem."

"Danny says . . ."

"I'm going with Henry."

"Danny's smarter."

"Hey!" A third voice entered. "He is not."

"Yes I am. And . . . and . . . I have better hair." The fourth man snickered.

The second voice huffed. "Get off the radio this is important. O.K., we'll let the chief handle it. Chief? Chief. Chief!"

"What! I'm not a goddamn Indian for crying out loud."

"Yeah but Chief we need you to decide. Gas or Alcohol."

"Go with what ever Henry says."

The third man came back on. "Oh yes! Ha!"

There was a loud grumble from the chief. "Is that it? Good." He sounded so annoyed. "And don't bother me again for this stupid shit. That's Henry's division, let his skinny ass handle it. You got it."

"Yeah Chief but I knew you were listening so it really wasn't bothering you. And while I have you on the line . . ."

"Does it have to do with running this community, the divisions I'm working or my division?"

"No."

"Then either deal with it on your own or find the person it deals with."

The Chief said. "Otherwise, can you leave me alone I'm doing work schedules."

"But . . ."

"Handle it Robbie."

SPLASH! The tin cup toppled from Hal's hand, and hot coffee splattered across his tablet and lap. He sprang up flicking the hot liquid from himself as he stared at the radio. "No." Hal closed his eyes and shook his head. He bent down to pick up his fallen cup. "No. My mind is playing tricks. Wishful thinking that's all." He let out a breath, a shuddering one and returned to listening to the radio.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

A single knock on Joe's door, loud and hard, brought in a peeking Johnny with Joe's "come in."

"Pap?" Johnny stepped inside. "I'm back."

"Nothing?"

"Nope. Would have radioed."

Joe huffed and tossed his pencil. He rubbed his eyes. "Which direction."

"Due east from where we found them. I even scaled more south. Nothing."

"All right. I'll send Dan more south and if that ends up with nothing. We'll send Robbie even further."

"But Pap, wouldn't they just head due east. My Dad knows direction."

"Yeah, but your dad is sick. Anything can throw him off." Joe sat back. "Lets just hope that it doesn't throw him off enough to leave him vulnerable."

^^^

He was wearing a baseball cap. An unusual occurrence because Danny hated to mess up his hair. And he was the first thing Dean saw when he raised his head to the light knock.

"Dean?" Danny looked into the lab.

"Oh hi Danny. What's up?"

"Just wanted to let you know, we're off to get it now." Danny grinned.

"Really!" Dean so excited stood up. "Is it the one you told me about?"

"Yep, deluxe model modular home. Joe said 'no' but I said they only had so many finished there and it was one of them."

"Excellent."

"Oh and Dean." Danny held up four fingers. "Four bedrooms. Of course two of them are really small. And . . . there's a small room off the kitchen. This place is decked out."

Dean clapped his hands together once. "O.K., I have this feeling Ellen's coming back soon, so when will it be ready?"

"We'll have it pieced together and ready to move things in by Thursday. I should have the plumbing and power hooked up by then too. Friday the latest." Danny noticed the happiness Dean showed. "You really want this for

Ellen, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do." Dean nodded. "I know, it's so trivial. But we never had a chance in the old world. If we did, I would have given her anything. Here, I can't do that. I can't give her special things."

"You can now. A big house. Well, big by Beginnings standards. It's kinda of more long than anything."

"Yeah, but it's something no one else can give her here. So did you figure out what you want?"

"Um, no. Not yet. But I'm working on it."

"Just let me know."

"Oh I will." Danny grinned and stepped back. "Take it easy Dean."

"Thanks." Dean moved across his lab to his work. He felt better, a part of him told him Ellen was returning soon and his being able to show her the new house made him anxious. The only problem Dean had was the fact that Danny wanted something in return, and what that was frightened Dean a bit. But he was sure it couldn't be too drastic. After all it was Danny. He probably just want Dean to invent a new hair spray.

^^^

Anderson Farm

Set some distance from the farm house, in the midst of the high grass, Frank and Ellen sat. On a white sheet. Their signal to Robbie or Beginnings should they fly over.

Frank chuckled as he lifted the edge to the white, summer time thin dress Ellen wore. "This is not you."

"It's so old fashion huh?"

"And feminine."

"Thanks." Ellen fiddled with the dress. "I found it in the house. Do you think they would mind that I borrowed it?"

"El, they're dead."

"No." Ellen shook her head with a smile. "Not the Anderson's. The Calvary."

"Who? Oh them. Ellen, I think they're a pretty whacked bunch. Look at how they dress."

"It's nice."

"It's fuckin goofy." Frank said, his voice still raspy. "They could have gotten uniforms, but they dress like civil war soldiers?"

"The one told me it was their leader's idea."

"Bet me their leader thinks his General fuckin Custard. But . . . they do their jobs."

"Yeah, they do." Ellen became peaceful. "You're looking better today."

"I feel better today." Frank looked up to the sky. "I think Robbie will spot us. IF not, we can move ahead tomorrow."

"It's a clear day." Ellen took in the bright blue sky.

"I wanted to get you alone. I'm sorry it turned out like it did."

"Hey, it's been an adventure." Ellen leaned to Frank and kissed him. "You don't feel as warm. How's your chest?"

"Massive."

Ellen laughed and saw Frank starting to get up. "Where are you going?"

"To get something to drink?"

"I'll get it for you." Ellen grabbed his hand.

"Nah. I want to walk." Frank kissed her. "I love you."

"I know. And I . . . I love you too."

Frank winked at her and pulled his hand from hers. Slowly he rose to his feet. No sooner was he standing when a shot rang out. It hit into Frank with a deadening 'thump' searing into the side of his gut and spraying a rain of blood outward. Ellen shrieked and another shot was fired. Frank reached down to lower her when he was hit in the left shoulder, the force of the shot caused him to spring up. Then another came . . . into his leg, then into his arm, his right shoulder and then Frank, amidst Ellen's screams, teetered. His eyes rolled to behind his head and he fell to the sheet below him.

It all happened so fast, within seconds Frank was shot and had fallen. The gun fire ceased and Ellen screamed. She couldn't stop screaming, emotional, deep and panicked. She reached to turn him over and watched the white sheet become absorbed with Frank's blood. Saturated slowly as it flowed from him. "Oh my God. Frank." She grunted and rolled him partially to his back. His eyes were closed. She shook his face. "Frank. Frank." No response. Ellen's chest felt heavy, she couldn't breathe. It ached her. And she began to cry, as she lowered herself to him, holding on to Frank, feeling the dampness of his warm blood seep into her clothing.. "Frank."

Then she heard it, the rustling of the high grass. In her hover over Frank, she lifted her head and she saw the society soldiers moving in. Trembling, not only her hands but her body as well, Ellen grabbed hold of Frank's revolver, fumbling it and finally holding it out in an aim. They drew in closer and she fired. She hit one and he fell, but the others kept on coming., and Ellen kept on firing, hitting some but not as many as she would like.

"El." Frank called out weakly. His eyes opening a little. "Run."

"I can't leave you." Her hands gripped his face

"Run." His voice barely spoke. "Run." His eyes closed again.

Ellen hesitated, her breaths choppy and short. Holding tight to the gun, she kissed him quickly, raised her head to look and she stood fast, racing into the field where they didn't come from. Ellen didn't make it far. Three shots rang out, one hitting just below her shoulder blade, one in her arm and the other grazing against her knee causing her legs to buckle and Ellen to fall to the high grass.

She cringed in pain, lifting herself up some, clenching to the gun and to the grass and bringing herself to her knees. The foot steps grew louder and faster. Just as she began to stand, her hair was grabbed and she was yanked backwards and dragged across the field.

She felt the hard ground as it scraped against her hips while she struggled. Her legs kicked as she fought against the pull. One hard tug and Ellen was tossed hard to the ground. She rolled into a stop on her back. Frightened, yet trying to get her wits about her, Ellen lifted her head only to feel the tip of a boot careen into her face sending her back down and her arms out. The gun flew from her hand and she quickly rolled over onto her stomach to grab it. As her fingers gripped on to it a boot slammed down on her hand. She brought her other hand up, giving it all she had and digging her fingernails against the pant leg and into

his shin. The society soldier's leg released some, enough for Ellen to pull her hand up. Just as she secured the revolver, her body was violently flung over. She felt the hands on her exposed legs, grabbing them. And when Ellen saw the soldier near her, she lifted the gun and fired straight at him erasing any face he could have had..

Scurrying herself up, the gun was taken from Ellen, tossed aside and Ellen was punched once hard in the face. As she started to fall she was stopped, her hair grabbed again.. In caveman style the soldier began to drag her again. Only this time Ellen was weak, she didn't fight as hard, and the screams that came from her were barely audible.

REALMS OF SORROW AND LOSS . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal squinted in near blindness when he emerged from the police station. He had been monitoring the Beginnings transmissions since dawn and he hadn't realized it was getting that late in the day.

"It lives." The young voice spoke. A voice that sounded younger than his age.

Hal gave a raised eyebrow look down to the Craig. A short man about thirty. One of the ten men in Bowman who never sported a uniform. There were four things that inhibited a man in Bowman from fighting. One, his age, if he felt he didn't want to fight. Two, health reasons. Three, skills that were essential. And four, an unbreakable attitude that wouldn't fit with infantry and was more suited for menial jobs. Such as the case with Craig.

"Craig, what did I tell you about being sarcastic with me."

"Not to."

"So why did you make that comment."

"I don't know. It just was funny when you walked out of there." Craig laughed, it was high pitch, inhaling type. "You made this face." Craig pointed. "Like a . . ."

"Craig!" Hal blasted his name. "Bye." Hal shook his head and started walking.

"Oh hey, captain."

Afraid to respond, Hal turned annoyingly around. "What is it?"

"The doc wants to see you at the hospital. Says, it's important."

"Is it a problem with one of my men?"

"Nope. I think it's one of our hidden."

Hal nodded. "Thank you." Hal started walking. Again, he stopped and looked back to Craig. "You aren't lying to me again are you? I'm not going to go to the hospital to find out I'm not needed am I? I'll kick your ass, tell me now."

Craig raised his hand. "Telling the truth."

Hal moved on, telling himself that if Craig sent him on another goose chase, Craig was going to be used for maneuvers practice.

The medical building sat further from town. Just after a huge white house where UWA soldiers stood out front as guards. Hal was saluted by them, as he passed and made his way to the small facility. He spotted the only medical person in Bowman. He was a stocky older man, nearly as tall as Hal. Wisdom was in his eyes. He never was a doctor before, a Coreman in the Navy was the most medical training he had. That was until he had happened upon a group of people and after one of them got sick, this fifty-five year old man began to learn from books, all that he could.

"Blue." Hal called him by his nickname as he entered the facility. A nickname given to the man who had gone so prematurely grey, his hair held a blueish tint to it. It was a nick name Hal gave him nine months earlier, and it was one that fit. "Tell me you called for me."

"Yep I did." Blue sported a long white lab coat. "Sorry it was Craig who was the messenger."

“I’ll recover from that.” Hal huffed. “What’s wrong?”

“The woman with child is having difficulty. She told me that the last child she had carried died because it was born prematurely.”

“Is she giving birth now?”

“No.” Blue shook his head. “I’m giving her alcohol at four hour intervals. The labor has stopped. As long as she rests, we can probably inhibit from happening any further. However, she is upset and I wanted to see if you could reassure her somehow.”

“What would happen if she gives birth now?”

“She’s only six months along. The child will die.” Blue stated with certainty. “Bed rest is what she needs. But with her history, chances are she’ll deliver early.”

“How early was her last child?” Hal asked.

“Eight weeks. However, she wasn’t given anything to slow it. We haven’t the medication, but grain alcohol holds the same effect. So in essence we’re one step further than she was the last pregnancy. But it’s still not comforting enough to her. I think you know what I need you to tell her.”

“I do.” Hal said. “And I’ll do that for you. Which room?”

“Seven.”

“Thank you.” Hal gave a squeeze to Blue’s arm and walked to the hall where the patient rooms were. He didn’t need to see a room number. The UWA soldier posted at the door was enough to tell him that was the room he needed to go to. Hal knocked once.

“Yes?” The woman’s voice called from the other side.

“Captain Slagel Mam, permission to enter the room?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Hal opened the door and stepped inside. He closed it and stayed close to the room’s door. “How are you today Monica.”

“Better now.” Monica, auburn hair, laid in bed. She had arrived in Bowman already pregnant. Her partner killed in a society attack.

“Blue tells me you’re upset.”

“I don’t want to lose this child captain. And I fear if it’s born too soon, I will.”

“As you know, there is nothing we can do if nature decides to take control.”

She closed her eyes and nodded once.

“If I assured you that we would seek the best care for the child, would that make you feel better?”

“If you tell me that my child will be brought to the doctors in Beginnings, yes.”

“The considered it done, if that happens to be the case.”

“Thank you Captain. I needed to hear that.”

Hal moved back to the door.

“Captain?”

Hal stopped. “Yes.”

“I would like my companion with me while I am confined to this bed. I would like you to make that possible.”

“I will do that.”

“And our privacy shall be insured. We will not be bothered or disturbed?”

“No.” Hal gave a half smile.

“I feel open and vulnerable being in such a public place. In my condition, you understand I should not have these fears.”

“Understandable. And I’ll place a second guard on the door.”

Monica gave a smile, a snobbish smile, leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Seeing how Monica’s sudden resting seemed to be his clue to leave, Hal stepped from the room pulling the door closed. He paused in the hall before going any further, he rolled his eyes some in annoyance and clenched his jaws. After shuddering the irritation he kept hidden inside, he moved down the hall.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

With a clipboard in his hands, and his headset microphone on, Robbie switched his conversation between his guard and Joe who walked along side of him to the hanger.

“Perimeter nine.” Joe stated. “Did mechanics get there at all yet?”

“They were there when I left.” Robbie moved quickly. “Pretty much everything is done for the afternoon. I’ll go back through after I get back.”

“Where you headed. More south?” Joe asked.

“Yeah. I can’t see how that would be though. But we’ve gone over the direct route here too much. They aren’t there.”

“No obvious structures they’re hanging out in?”

Robbie shook his head and handed Joe the clipboard. “We also got to remember. Frank is not going to take the obvious route. Somehow that thought got lost in the . . . hold on Dad.” Robbie held up his hand and adjusted the headset. “Yeah Tower?”

“This is Steve. We might have a problem at the front gate.”

“The front gate?” Robbie questioned and noticed the look on Joe’s face. “Survivor?”

“Nope. Was.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, some little guy come from the woods,. He was dragging what looked like a white sack. Then he went back into the woods without it. By the time I got my binoculars I couldn’t see. I can’t see what he left.”

Robbie saw the question on Joe’s face, He covered the microphone. “Tower spotted some one dropping something off at the gate. I’m gonna take a look before I fly out.”

“Want me to?” Joe asked.

“No. I’d rather handle it. We don’t know what it is.”

“Funny, tracking didn’t tell us they picked it up.” Joe said.

“Not for a single signal. I’ll handle it.” Robbie returned to talking to Steve. “I’m gonna check it out. Did you see where the man went?”

“Like I said, into the woods. It was too thick.”

“O.K., I’m checking it out.” Robbie ended his call and walked over to the jeep. “I’ll be back Dad.”

“Be careful.”

Robbie nodded in acknowledgment and hopped in the jeep. He drove it with a look of aggravation on his face, taking the winding road to the front tunnel entrance. And so as not to alert anyone who could be standing at the gate, Robbie left the jeep in the entrance of the tunnel and began to walk.

He could see the whiteness of the object as he walked. His pace was steady as he moved. The closer he drew he could see something else mixed with the whiteness. He blinked several times, trying to focus at the object that was still a distance from him on the ground outside the gate. And then Robbie stopped walking. "Oh God." His heart pounded in his chest. "Oh God." He began to run, calling out as he did. "Down the front gate! Down the front gate now!" Robbie cried out in his race, his legs moving as fast as they could. He exhaled emotional exasperation with every step he took. He heard the buzz of the downing perimeter as he neared even closer to the front gate. Then without stopping he charged for the fence, flinging it open and barreling out. He dropped to his knees. "No." His hands hesitated before touching down and seeing what he knew it was. The dark blonde hair peeking out of the tightly wrapped sheet was what gave it away to Robbie. He pulled the sheet some and saw the wide open blue eyes. Ellen's. She was curled up in a fetal position, her hands, clenched in a fist, close to her mouth. Robbie touched upon her neck, feeling around. He closed his eyes when he felt a pulse. A weak one. "Clinic,. Clinic come in." Robbie called as he picked Ellen up. "I have an emergency." He couldn't speak, he struggled with his emotions. "Just . . . just be ready. Dad, meet me at the clinic." Robbie moved quickly through the front gate. "Front gate up! I'm going off air."

Robbie looked down at Ellen in his arms. He tightly closed his eyes, adjusted her better and ran as fast as he could, carrying her all the way toward the end of the near one mile tunnel.

^^^^

Dean grinned as he stood by where his new home would be. Two pieces of the modular home were they waiting to be moved and placed together.

"Like it?" Danny asked. "You now have the open view."

"It reminds me of a Barbie house." Dean laughed.

"Yeah, you kind of open it up and get the entire feel of it. Want me to leave it like that?"

Dean started laughing. He took a breath and held up his hand to Danny when his phone rang. Unhooking it from his belt, Dean answered. "Hello?" Any and all expression dropped from his face at the same time the phone dropped from his hand.

"Dean?"

Dean didn't even hesitate to pick up the phone, he merely spun around and raced at his top speed through town to the clinic.

Her body didn't move, except for the slight twitching. She was still curled in a ball, only this time on Robbie's lap as he drove the jeep. One hand secured her head to his chest, the other the steering wheel, occasionally having to maneuver the wheel with his leg to switch gear. But never once did his hand move from Ellen. "Dad, did you get a hold of Dean."

“Yeah. I’m guessing he’s on his way. Robbie, what’s wrong. What happened.?”

“I found her.” Robbie’s eye shifted down. “She’s alone. Oh God I’m scared. You should . . . you should . . .” Robbie swallowed. “I’m almost there. Over.”

The timing could not have been better, or worse for Dean. Reaching for the clinic doors, Robbie screeched up in the jeep. Dean spun on the steps and ran down.

Robbie stepped from the jeep, Ellen was still wrapped in the bloody sheet. Dean’s hand touched her as Robbie raced to the doors with her. Her face was still pressed to Robbie’s chest.

“Dear God.” Joe gasped as he and Henry opened the door for Robbie and Dean. “Robbie, Andrea’s in room three waiting.”

Robbie just ran passed and to that room. Dean ran quickly behind.

Henry reached for Dean. “Dean, what’s wrong with her.”

“Henry.” Dean pulled back, walking backwards. “I know as much as you.” He flew to examining room three. Robbie was laying Ellen on the table. “Get her out of that sheet. Andrea, what do you have ready.” Dean washed up.

“Fluids, IV ready to start, Anti infections. Surgical . . .”

Dean turned off the sink when he heard Andrea stop talking. He turned around and saw why. Robbie had uncovered Ellen. Her entire body was covered in blood, fresh and dried, from head to toe. Immediately, her body sprang back into a curled position. Her legs tightly to her chest.

Andrea’s eyes went from Ellen to Dean. “She’s in shock.”

“Robbie find me blankets.” Dean neared Ellen. Her face so pale, and her breaths were so shallow her face was near blue. “Oxygen. Andrea start me oxygen and get me vitals.”

Robbie pulled the sheet from under Ellen as Andrea administered the oxygen hose. Ellen’s body turned some. “We have a bullet hole Dean. Looks like it’s still in there.”

“Where?”

Robbie pointed to her arm. “And another here.” He pointed to her back, then looked at Ellen chest. “Look like it went straight out.”

Dean examined. “Up and through the shoulder. Thank God.” He grabbed his pen light and turned it on. He shined it in Ellen’s dilated pupils. They didn’t change despite the light. Her blue eyes didn’t blink, they only stared forward. Their luster was gone. “El.” Dean called her. “Ellen, can you hear me. Andrea, what’s her vitals.”

“Heart rate, 62. BP . . . BP is low Dean.”

“How low?” Dean kept shining the light in Ellen’s eyes.

“80 over 40.”

“Ellen.” Dean’s hand went to her face. “El, come on. El, it’s me Dean. Sweetheart.” He received no response. His hand trembled as he brought it over his eyes.

Andrea approached him. “I’ll deal with her. You can’t handle . . .”

“No.” Dean stated strongly. “I’ll take care her. Alone. I know what she would want. Just . . .” Dean took a breath. “Just leave us. I’m gonna do this. Robbie, find me some blankets.” Slowly Dean’s hand pointed to the back of the room. “And if you could. Run the . . . run the bath in there. Thanks. Not too hot.

Warm, only warm.”

“Got it Dean.” Robbie carried the sheet and moved it to the trash.

“Wait.” Dean stopped him. “You found only her right?”

“Yes.” Robbie said. “Why.”

“Take that sheet to my lab. There’s a lot of blood on there. Can you?”

Robbie looked down at the sheet. “Yeah. I’ll start that bath too.”

“Andrea.” Dean faced her, she was wheeling a surgical tray to him.

“Just tell Joe and Henry, I’ll let them know what’s up as soon as I finish.”

“Dean. I’m not leaving.”

“I want to do this alone.” Dean’s hand rested on Ellen’s shoulder.

“Dean, I . . .”

“I want to do this alone!” Dean shouted at her loud and emotional.

“Please!” he calmed down,. “Please.”

Andrea only nodded her head once, brushed her hand over Ellen then across Dean’s back as she silently walked out.

The room went quiet as Dean stood alone with Ellen. The only sounds in there were Ellen’s short huffing breaths. Breaths that moved her body in a twitch as she took them. Dean could feel a wave of heat sweep up his body across his neck and to his ears. They burned with emotions as he pulled the tray closer to Ellen. His hand reached for her fists which were held to her mouth. Her arms were locked there, they wouldn’t budge or move. Tightly and briefly Dean closed his eyes in pain. His hands raised from Ellen and they literally shook. He tried to stay calm, he had too. Dean knew getting a grip on his emotions was foremost if he was going to examine and help her. His head swayed in sadness and he lowered it to Ellen, laying his lips gently on her cheek. Her skin was cool and dry. “Oh my God.” He spoke with an emotionally cracking voice. “What happened to you.” He kissed her again. “What happened to you?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George's desk went flying across his office, crashing to the floor and sending everything on it scattering about the room. His face was red, and his arms flung violently. Jeremy stood back, nearly frightened at the outraged president.

"Sir." Jeremy jolted at another smashing sound. "It was a mistake on . . ."

"A mistake! They had direct orders!" George blasted. "They screwed up! How difficult could this had been?"

"But you have to look at the other side . . ."

"There is no other side!" George yelled his loudest. "They screwed it up. And I want answers why. Get them."

"Sir . . ."

"Get them!"

Jeremy backed up and moved quickly from George's office. There was no answer to search for and Jeremy knew it. At least no answer that would ever satisfy George.

^^^

Joe tried to stay in control of any of his emotions that tried to escape him. In the waiting room with Henry, Johnny and Robbie, Joe tried to be the leader. Tried to take charge of the situation.

"We'll get a full blown search in the air." Joe explained to Johnny. "All four choppers, constantly out during daylight hours. We'll find your father."

Robbie sat leaning forward in a chair, his hands buried in his face. He spoke muffled and through his hands. "It's useless."

Joe looked at his son at the same time Henry moved from the doorway to him.

Robbie looked up. His face was red. "It's useless. We're not finding Frank." He spoke calmly.

"Robbie." Henry said to him. "This is your brother. Why would you give up so easily?"

"Because I've had a good look at Ellen."

Joe looked at Robbie curiously. "What do mean?" There was some hostility to his voice.

"Exactly what I said." Robbie breathed heavily and stood up. "Take a look at Ellen Dad. And when you see her, you ask yourself something.. Ask yourself, would Frank allow her to get like that if he was able to do anything about it. I know Frank." Robbie swallowed. "He'd die for Ellen." Robbie's eyes closed. "And when you see her. It looks a hell of a lot like he did."

"No." Joe shook his head. "I refuse to believe that."

"That's because you haven't seen her." Robbie raised his voice. "You haven't looked unto the eyes that just have no life." He saw his father's expression drop. "Yeah, that's exactly what I said. And I believe the society dropped her off as a message to us. Not only did they get Frank. They got her

too. And I . . . I have to get out of here.” Robbie charged for the door but Andrea was walking in.

“Andrea.” Joe hurried to her. “What’s going on? How’s Ellen?”

With a solemn look, Andrea swayed her head as she walked into the waiting room. “They got our girl pretty good Joe. Beat her, shot her. I just spoke to Dean, that’s what his examination showed. We have her in a room now. Ellen is gonna make it, physically. But . . . she’s in shock right now. Severe traumatic shock. She has slipped into a world within herself and she is not wanting to come out.”

Joe stuttered as he spoke. “Will she come out.”

“We’re hoping. In time. In cases like this they have to be pulled out or want to come out on their own. We can’t just let her lay in that bed. We . . . all of us.” Andrea looked at the faces in the room. “We all have to do our part to make her want to come out. Talk to her, constantly. Kind, nurturing therapy, encouragement. Anything, if you must pester her, then so be it. Pester her. But we have to work together to bring her out, because the longer she stays like this, the harder it will be.”

Henry had to question. “Then we should all take turns with her. She can hear us. Is that what you’re saying.”

Andrea nodded. “She can hear you.”

Joe reached out and grabbed Andrea’s hand. “Can we see her now.”

“Yes. But . . .” Andrea spoke with some reservation. “But listen to me carefully. What you will see when you walk in that room is not our Ellen. Don’t expect it to be. She can sense our presence, hear us. And if you are not strong enough to handle what you are about to see, I ask you to immediately leave that room, because she doesn’t need that. She needs us. Her family to help her.”

Dean sat in a chair, so close to Ellen’s bedside. His hands rested on hers as he just stared at her. His eyes bloodshot, his expression screamed out lost. He turned his head only a little when he heard the door open.

Joe walked in first, looked at Ellen and took in a long breath. Henry stopped cold. In his worst case scenario in his mind, seeing Ellen like she was, never entered his thoughts. Robbie felt a trembling in him, a sickening anger and sadness that combined together to make him speechless, and be one of those people Andrea didn’t want in the room. Sniffing loudly once, Robbie walked to the bed, leaned over and kissed Ellen on the cheek. His hand ran over where his lips had just laid.

“El, I’ll uh . . .” He cleared his throat. “I’ll stop back later. O.K.? I have to um, I have to do rounds.” Again he kissed her, looked at his father and quickly walked from the room. Johnny followed.

Henry’s eyes stayed focused on Ellen. “This isn’t what I thought.”

Andrea shook her head. “It’s text book Henry. This is reality when something happens.”

“How . . . how bad?” Henry asked shaking his head. “How bad is she hurt. She has to be bad to be like this.”

“I said before physically, she took a beating, but she’ll recover from that. However . . .” Andrea looked down at Dean. “We don’t feel that what they

did to Ellen is what sent her into this state. We believe it's what Ellen saw that caused this."

Loudly Joe cleared his throat and walked to the bed. "Dean." He spoke softly. "I'm sorry to ask this, but can I spend a few moments alone with my daughter?"

"Yeah Joe." Dean slowly stood up and walked from the bedside to Henry. The both of them left, and Andrea followed shortly behind.

Joe moved the chair closer, lying one hand on Ellen's clenched fist, the other hand stroked her face. "Hey Kiddo." Joe kissed her. "What are you doing? Huh? What are you doing? This is your father speaking to you and I want you to listen to me. I know right now, you need some rest. You rest. We all need you out here. All of us. And you know what I think? I think I raised a very strong daughter. And you aren't hiding like they think. I think you're just having trouble reaching us. But don't you worry. We didn't give up searching for you and we still aren't. I won't." Joe lowered his voice to a whisper. "We'll find you in there Kiddo. And goddamn it, we'll bring you out. That's a promise." He kissed her. "That's a promise."

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Maybe getting out of the room for a second was what Dean needed. He knew until Ellen woke, he would never be far from the room at all. He walked to his lab, his head down. So many questions went through his mind. How much Ellen had gone through in her life and even recently. How much she didn't need this. Did she see something or had she finally reached her breaking point in life and her mind said, 'enough is enough. I'm not coming back.' The possibility of that was so great, it frightened Dean, because he needed her back and he, like everyone else would do all they could to get her back.

He saw them in a plastic bin on his counter. The sheet and Ellen's dress. Dean closed and locked the lab door. He shut all binds to inhibit others from seeing in. He was going to perform a test that only he could do, and he hoped that the test would at least give him some answers.

He cleared a small table and three stools making a large exposed area on the floor. Dean reached into the bin pulling out the sheet. He flapped it outward, laying it on the floor and spreading it out as much as he could. He laid Ellen's dress above it. Both were now brownish in color from the blood, Ellen's dress had grass and dirt marks as well.

Crouching down Dean stood at the far end of the sheet, his eyes focused in his concentration until he hit the first spot of blood. Bringing it in closer and seeing the corpuscles of it. Like a scanning tool, Dean with extreme mental concentration scanned inch by inch left to right of the sheet. He didn't make it too far into his scan when he stopped. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and scanned again. He became drawn and his jaw tightened up. His face surely showed the signs of an answer to a question he didn't want to have.

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He had stood in one of the six lookout towers waiting. And when Hal saw the single horseman riding into town, he raced from the tower, to the street and straight to the edge of town. His heart didn't want to see only one man return. He had sent six to the Anderson farm.

The horse stopped and Hal grabbed the reins until the exhausted rider dismounted. Gary, a small man, saluted and Hal returned it.

"I'm glad you made it back." Hal told him. "And I'm sorry to ask you right away, but I need to know what happened. Beginnings is in a frenzy and nothing certain is being said over the radio. Only that it has to do with a woman left at the front gate."

"That was me sir."

"What . . . what happened." Hal asked almost painfully. Hal signaled to another man to take the horse and walking, Hal led Gary further into town.

"We were at our post monitoring the house. Watching it. Never once Captain and I swear did we stop."

"I believe you."

"The man and the woman were sitting on a white sheet. In fact they had two sheets hanging from the window."

"A signal for their choppers. Go on."

"Out of nowhere. Nowhere sir, five or six shots were fired. And they were fired as the man stood up. He didn't even have time to react, all of the shots hit him."

Hal closed his eyes. "How many society soldiers were there?"

"Twenty, twenty-five. We didn't see them at first, the grass was high. We were on the other side."

"And the woman?"

"She started firing, but as soon as she stood up they shot her as well. Three times. None of them life threatening."

"When . . . when did you move in?" Hal asked.

"Sir we moved in as soon as we saw the man go down. We mounted and rode. But the woman tried to get away from the society and they beat her, dragging her and such. It was horrible, barbaric."

"And having just stayed put, she would have been fine." Hal said.

"Exactly. Our horse jumped over the body of the man."

"You got to the woman in time?"

"Yes. We started battling, racing the horses to avoid the gunshots. We cause a lot of confusion. Some of the society fought us, some were consumed with the man and the woman. And I was chosen because of my size to get the woman and ride out. Just leave. Take her straight to Beginnings. Which I did. She was bleeding badly and I grabbed the white sheet that the man was laying on, wrapped her and rode away. Like the men and I planned."

Hal nodded. "Leaving the battle to the others. You did not stop riding then?"

"No sir."

"You mentioned 'where the man was' wasn't he there. Did he get up?"

"No." Gary shook his head. "It was happening so fast. I was consumed with getting her out. From what I saw four men were carrying him."

"I see. And how was she?" Hal asked with concern.

She cried for the first half hour of the ride. Hysterically, crying out a name I couldn't understand. But then she drew silent. She wasn't dead. She was

in shock. She just stared out.”

Hal gave a proud squeeze to Gary’s shoulder. “You did well. You brought the woman to her people. Now, I’ll get a party out to go to the Anderson farm and see what . . .”

“I was there Sir.” Gary interrupted. “Stopped on the way home.”

“And?”

Gary swallowed in hesitation before answering. “No one was there. Not a society soldier, not one of our men, not the man, not a body. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

This struck Hal with the deepest of oddness, to the point it left him speechless. Never has the society taken bodies. Why weren’t they leaving clues? All the patterns that Hal spent time learning while forming his legion meant nothing right there. Because the society just showed Hal a new one.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The song ended and Henry turned off the cassette player. He sat at Ellen’s bedside, near her face. Ellen was still the same way. Dean, sat near the bottom. His hands were cupped upon the bed and his chin rested on his hands. He watched Henry, so upbeat, wishing he could be that way too for Ellen’s sake. But Dean couldn’t. So lost he felt, and he swore his heart and soul were breaking as he stared at Ellen.

“O.K.” Henry chuckled. “Can you believe Josephine had that song? And we were just talking about that before you left. I asked her what she was doing with it and she tsked at me El. And she says.” Henry snickered. “She says ‘what do you think I am, old’. I couldn’t resist, I said yeah.”

Dean’s head rose some, he shook it and rested in back down again.

“She hit me El. Oh here.” Henry leaned into Ellen and holding the edge of his hair he brushed it across her face. “I had a feeling you were coming home so Danny and I went to Bentley and he cut my hair. Not much a few inches. Joe said I need about six more cut off. I’d die. You’d die. You’ll probably think it’s too short. But, I didn’t have a bad hair day today. He added a few layers and it lays really nice.” Henry’s hair wasn’t that much different. Instead of reaching past his shoulders to his shoulder blades. It rested just over the shoulder, some. The layers added took a lot of the ‘long’ look from it. “O.K., so I have a notebook.” Henry lifted it and laid it down. “Since Dean kicked me out this afternoon, I’ve been keeping notes. You know on what I want to talk to you about. Can you believe he kicked me out El. That wasn’t very nice of him. But he has a point. He says you’re used to talking to me at night, so I’m to come in the evenings to sit with you. But don’t think I won’t stop in and say hi. I will.” Henry flipped a page in the notebook. “Look at all these pages. I have eight. We have a lot of catching up to do. Oh before I forget. Dean has a surprise for you . . .”

“Henry.” Dean said his name. “Don’t.”

“O.K., I won’t.” Henry smiled. “And, check this out El. Danny started the drive-in again here in Beginnings, only it’s a walk-in. And Trish is the movie

madam. And guess what ? She started porno night. I didn't go to it. Dean did. He came home early. But I heard the guys had a lot of fun. I could hear them whistling and hooting from the house." Henry saw through the corner of his eye, Dean standing up "What's wrong Dean?"

"I have to get home with the kids. It's late. You'll be here, right?"

"All night." Henry said. "I plan on sleeping here."

"Thanks Henry. I'll stop back later." Dean walked up to Ellen and bent over her. Softly he laid his lips to her face and held them there. He kissed her again. "I love you El. I love you very much." Another kiss and Dean slowly and sadly walked from the room.

Henry waited until he was gone. "So he says he loves you. Wait until you hear what I'm gonna tell you. In fact, I know you're pretty boggled down with resting and all from getting hurt. So I'll save it." Henry laid his hands on Ellen's. Hands that, due to medication were no longer ridged and kept at her face. "And wait . . . boy, if you aren't out of this thing when I open my mouth, you will come out."

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Nothing but quiet came from Dean's house when he made his approach. He knew it was late and his kids might be sleeping. Though he needed to see them, in a sense he didn't wanted to deal with anything. He was surprised when he walked in, slowing his pace down and seeing Jenny Matoose pacing the floor with Nick against her chest.

"Jenny, I'm sorry. Has he been fussy for you."

"No not at all. He was just hungry." Jenny spoke as she walked with the baby. "I guess I kind of got caught up in holding him. Look Dean." Jenny smiled. "He likes my breasts."

Dean chuckled as he ran his hand down Nick's head. Nick's little hand held in a grip onto Jenny's breast. "He probably doesn't know what they are."

"Pillows. That's what Caroline called them." Jenny let out a heavy sigh. "How's Ellen?"

"Same. The medication relaxed her body some."

"Joe said he needs us all to talk to her. May I stop and see her tomorrow?"

"Yes, and talk to her Jenny. Talk to her very normally."

"I will. And . . . I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of finishing the packing of your nicknacks. The kids were asleep early and I saw you were in the middle of it."

"I don't mind, but somehow moving into the house has lost it's excitement."

"But why?" Jenny asked. "Ellen will be so pleased with it. She really will. There will be no better place for her to recuperate both mentally and physically. Trust me."

"Maybe you're right. And . . ." Dean extended his hands to Nick. "I'll let you go. I appreciate this."

"It's not a problem. What am I gonna do, right." There was a tone of sadness in Jenny's voice. She began to hand over Nick and stopped. "Dean? Would you mind if I kept this little one. I'll gather some things. I . . . I'm not

teaching tomorrow and I'm sure right now you don't need to deal with an infant. Would you mind?"

"Not at all." Dean shook his head. And took the baby while Jenny left the room. He got lost in his thoughts holding Nick, because he didn't hear Jenny come back, nor did he realize how long she was gone.

"Here." She took Nick back, a smile crossed her face. "Goodnight Dean."

"Night Jenny." Dean walked them both to the door, opening it for her. When she had left, the house rang with quiet. He walked slowly, almost exhausted to the couch and sat down. Sadly he leaned against the arm of the couch, grabbed a pillow and held it his chest. He brought his knees close to him, and so emotional, Dean just dropped his head forward to his legs.

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Squeak. Thump. Thump-thump. Thump. In a steady rhythm the pattern continued, mixed with it heavy breaths flowing out in to the quiet just outside the garage. Jess listened first before walking in and finding Robbie. He was concerned about his new friend. With the news of what was going on Robbie made excuses to be busy all day and night. Just like he was doing in the garage. Perhaps trying to get rid of his pain.

Robbie, in a firm boxer's stance, stood before a large punching back. He hit it hard, his face red. Over and over. He wore only cloth shorts which were drenched with the sweat that poured off his bare chest. So determined. Robbie kept on hitting.

Jess knew he was heard when he walked in, yet he went unacknowledged. So he spoke up. "You know, I was a champion fighter in the service." Jess walked toward the bag keeping his voice soothing. "If you want, we can put on the gloves and you and I can go a few rounds. If you're wanting to hurt yourself, that's the way to do it." Jess stepped within inches of him. "Not this." He reached out and stopped Robbie's hand from hitting the bag again. Robbie's knuckles were raw, some bled from the lack of protection against the canvas bag. "Robbie."

Robbie let out an emotional breath, grabbing onto the bag and resting his forehead against it. His head swayed. "My brother is gone Jess. My big brother is gone. Do you even know how much I looked up him? What am I gonna do? God, I never thought it would hurt this bad."

"You loved him. Do you think because you're this big tough Slagel nothing can get to you. You're wrong."

"It's getting to me." Robbie stared at the bag. "Frank. Ellen."

"That's right. Ellen." Jess moved even closer, laying his hand on Robbie's shoulder and speaking close to him. "What are you doing? Where have you been. I thought this woman was your friend. A close friend. A lover in your life. Someone you care about."

"She is. I love her."

"Then why are you here? No one knows better than I do the bond and love between two brothers. And I'm telling you, if I had a family and something happened to me, I certainly would want to know that my brother was taking care of what was mine."

Robbie raised his eyes to Jess. "It hurts to see her like that."

"I know it does. But get over it. I know my words are harsh, but listen to me. Frank loved this woman. She is family to you. If you care half as much about her as you say you do, then why in the hell are you beating this bag instead of helping her beat the obstacle she faces?"

Robbie stood straight up. His head lifted. "You're right. You are absolutely right. And I owe her an apology." Robbie stepped back laying his hands on Jess' arms. "Thanks, Jess. I mean it. Thanks." And with no more said, Robbie took off, just the way he was, all the way to the clinic.

Robbie was out of breath when he arrived in Ellen's room. He took a few short breaths before stepping in.

Henry stopped talking and looked at Robbie. Then looked again. "Oh my God, El. Robbie just walked in all sweaty showing off that Slagel fur."

"Shut . . . shut the . . ." Robbie slowed his speech as he neared the bed. "The fuck up Henry." He grabbed a chair and pulled it closer to Ellen's head. He leaned over and kissed her keeping his mouth near her ear. "I'm sorry I wasn't around. I promise you it won't happen again." He whispered and kissed her, then sat back down.

Henry's chair squeaked as he inched it from Robbie's.

"What?"

"You're sweaty."

Robbie lifted his arm and sniffed. "I don't stink." He held his armpit to Henry. "Do I?"

Henry made a loud sound of disgust. "That's gross. It's a jungle of armpit hair. You should shave some of that."

"No I shouldn't. Don't tell me you do."

"No!" Henry snapped. "I don't grow much hair under my arms."

"Still in that prepubescent phase, huh Henry?"

Henry tsked. "El, he's bothering me. I need you to stick up for me."

Robbie cleared his throat. No matter how much he tried to joke around, there was still a sense of nervousness to him. "El looks better."

"Yeah she does." Henry smiled. "Her color is back. Andrea said it's from the blood they gave her and the oxygen."

"She's still breathing funny." Robbie said of the way Ellen still slightly twitched with her breaths.

"She'll breath that way until she comes out. And they injected her muscles with this drug. See." Henry lifted her hand. "She's not tight anymore. You can hold it." Henry grasped Ellen's hand in his.

"Then may I?" Robbie asked, waited for Henry to move his and Robbie took it.. "So uh, what are you doing Henry. Reading to her?"

"Oh no talking." Henry grabbed his notebook. "We always talk this time of night. I don't want that to change. Only it's kind of one sided. You gonna join in now?"

"Yeah, I'll join in. What are we talking about?"

Henry skimmed over his notes. "Second grade. I've made it through the first six year of my life."

"Swell." Robbie held Ellen's hand and listened as Henry rambled. He didn't add much to the conversation. In his mind he was taking it one step at a

time. His first step was over and that was getting over his fears and going to see Ellen.

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From an empty bed after one in the morning, to the smell of cigarette smoke coming from the front Porch, Andrea went. Joe sat there, his white shirt out of his pants. His feet bare. Andrea stepped out, joining him. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Nah." Joe hit his cigarette. "I went to see Ellen."

"How is she?"

"Busy."

"Busy?" Andrea asked.

"Robbie's there. Henry too. Henry's rambling on about his seventh grade dance. I don't know. Other than that, she's still the same."

"It could be days Joe, even weeks, before she comes out of it. She's made progress her health is improving. She's strong."

"I know."

Andrea rested her hand on Joe's back. "How are you? Been thinking about Frank haven't you?"

"How can I not?" Joe's head swayed.

"I'm sorry Joe."

"Don't be. Not yet." Joe looked out and tossed his cigarette. "I know everyone believes he's dead. Everyone."

"You don't."

Joe shook his head. "Nope. Until Ellen tells me for sure that my son is gone. I won't believe it. I won't." Joe looked at Andrea with a sad seriousness to his eyes. "Because I know if he was. I'd feel it. I'd feel it right here." Joe clenched his fist and brought it to his chest. "But I don't. The only thing I feel is that my son is in trouble. And I just don't know where to start to help him." He looked out again.

"Yes you do." Andrea spoke softly and waited for Joe to look at her. "Ellen."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

September 2
Beginnings, Montana

Sitting cross legged in a chair, Jenny held Ellen's hand. Ellen's fingers draped across Jenny's palm as Jenny filed the nails. She rotated between filing, buffing and blowing, removing cuticles. And the whole time Jenny's hands moved as fast as her lips.

"My goodness did you let your nails go. These will look so nice when I'm done. You'll be pleased. I know if it were me, I'd want to know I was presentable. You have to be presentable Ellen. So many people keep coming in here." Jenny had a remembrance look. "Don't you wish we had press-on nails again? What's the odds of you talking to Henry about inventing them again. I'll throw in some more pizza's. Gosh how I remember being little and loving your long nails. You always had them done, a great tan and really blonde hair. And so thin. I wanted to look like you." Jenny grew sad for a moment, then became up beat. "Actually some people say we do." She started to laugh hoping that would get a reaction out of Ellen. Nothing. "Did I tell you, Blake does wonderful manicures and . . ." She snickered a giggle. "Pedicures. Don't tell John Blake touches my toes. I promised John I wouldn't sleep with Blake. He says I do too many favors already. Yeah, I guess I do. But I get nothing out of it. O.K., here's something that might make you come out of it. I let Blake . . . I let Blake." Jenny dropped her voice to a tiny whisper. "Suck my toes." Jenny smiled. "He doesn't mind and I get all tingly." Jenny stopped talking when Patrick walked in the room. "Shh, we're invaded by a man."

Patrick gave a smile to Jenny and Jenny flung back her hair. "What Jenny?" He grunted in anger, checked Ellen's IV and moved back to the door. "Go on. I'm leaving."

"I'm a little angry with Patrick. I told him two stories the other day and he forgot I told him one. My point is, he's lucky to have a woman to talk to him and be with him. He could at least pay attention. I'll be mean until he begs. Which most men do. Speaking of men. Did you ever notice . . . I'm sure you did. Silly me. How Nick makes that Henry face. And he whines like Henry too. Really Ellen, Dean is not a whiner you're gonna have to get that kid to break it. The odds are evening up in this world for men and women of the new generation. If he acts like that. He'll never get laid." Jenny smiled and grabbed the buffer. "Of course, he could be gay. Not that that's a bad thing, mind you. We have our share of closet gays here in Beginnings. I know. I have radar when it comes to homosexuals. I know which men are gonna need women and which ones aren't." Jenny giggled and switched for the nail file. "It's so funny to me, because the age old saying holds true you can't judge a book by it's cover. Wait until you come out of this. I'll walk with you, wait better yet, we won't wait until you walk,. I'll wheel you around and point out all the man I know are gay that no one else does." Jenny kept filing. "My little present to you. And speaking of presents . . ." Jenny looked back behind her. "Dean has one for you. It's a surprise. He can't wait to give it to you. It's such a big one too. You'll love it. But I know us women hate surprises, so, just because you and I are friends . . . I'll tell you what it is."

Jenny checked out the door one more time, and got up and shut it for

security purposes. She then took her seat again, cupped her hand over Ellen's ear and whispered just incase Dean walked in. Jenny didn't want to get in trouble.

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Every time John Matoose entered Joe's office he filled with a thick nervousness. Like a specimen under a microscope. And rightfully so. John knew this. John expected it. He never talked right anymore around Joe, which made John feel even more guilty. He feared that it seemed it was hiding something. And for the first time in a long time in Beginnings, John Matoose was being honest and up-front about everything.

"Joe, you got a minute?" John stepped into Joe's office. Joe was by the filing cabinet.

"Yeah. What's up." Joe shut the drawer and while reading, he walked to his desk.

"I have something." John laid a folder on the desk in front of Joe.

"What is this?" Joe opened it.

"I've been thinking. I did a lot of it since Ellen arrived yesterday. I know you think there's someone else in Beginnings working for George. If you didn't, you wouldn't have asked me about it. I didn't think there was."

"You do now?"

"Yes." John nervously cleared his throat and pulled up a chair. He sat down. "Every single person in Beginnings, found out three days ago that Frank had Ellen beyond the wall. And every single person knew they were at Ft. Peck lake. It wasn't a secret."

"Your point."

"I know the way George's soldiers run. Eight in a pack. Sixteen at the most. What hit Frank and Ellen at the lake was a brigade. By the talk, three trucks. Come on, George had to send them after Frank and Ellen. And they had to come from the area where the search party found the massacre. That was close. Too close. And I know more than anyone, the way our communication tracking works. When George calls here, it's not easily traced. The system has to be configured to do so every time, so how often do we do it? And . . . since Quantico was discovered, how many calls do we see go to George a day? Many. Meaning his people check in. Meaning whoever worked for him in Beginnings can call him and they did. And George sent his people after Frank and Ellen. It was too planned. I know the way George works."

"That's a good theory. I've thought of that." Joe leafed through the folders. "What are these other papers?"

"Last night, I didn't sleep. I stayed awake working on that. Those are my ideas on who it could be. Some of them are far fetched and can't possibly be working with him. But some of them can. Those are the people he liked. Talked to all the time. Trusted. And . . . those are the people that in the event of his raid. These are the people to be spared."

"Spared?" Joe's eyebrows raised.

"Yes, he didn't want them harmed. There's nine there. Those are the ones that I was told. The date next to Robbie's name." John pointed. "Is when he changed his mind about Robbie. All others, he showed a fondness to. Not even

my wife is on that list. He used to tell me she had a 'buy'."

"So you went with each person and broke it down."

"Yes. I put down why, as far as I knew, that he wanted them spared. For example, Cole. He does really good with the farming. And . . . they played darts and so forth. You'll read."

Joe looked at the top sheet. "Andrea?"

"Yes. And I had a field day with her. Sorry. I know she's your wife. But did you know George really liked her? I mean, liked her as in 'relationship' liked. I don't know if anything ever became if that or transpired, but he really liked her."

"I . . . I uh didn't know that." Quickly Joe's mind went to Henry's theory on why Andrea was a suspect. How ridiculous Joe thought that was when Henry said George loved Andrea. But Joe also saw Henry's name on John's list too. It wouldn't be all that lame brain of an idea if Henry was indeed working for George. Because George's liking of Andrea would be knowledge to Henry. Joe canceled his thoughts and wandering mind, saving it all for later. He flipped through the sheets. "There's not a work up sheet on Robbie."

"That's because Robbie was switched too late in the game. I only included him on the top sheet because George wanted him. Not because he liked him, but because he wanted to make Robbie into a CME. Or to use a 'Frank' word SUT. I told you this before. But . . . it got me thinking."

Joe lowered the sheets he looked at.

"This can not go any further from this room, just on the outside chance I'm correct."

"What is it?"

"He originally wanted Frank. If George had the opportunity to get him, he would. Why else wasn't Frank shot immediately. I mean Frank's good. But he's not good enough to escape sixty, seventy men all aiming at him."

"That was my thought when it all went down. But then comes Ellen." Joe held out his hand.

"How did they get Frank the last time? They knocked him out. If he's sick and still injured he's going down a lot easier. Ellen fought, Ellen lost. The society brought her back to make us think . . . to make us believe that they killed Frank."

"So hence going on Robbie's theory that Ellen wouldn't be as bad as she was if Frank was around to protect her."

"Exactly. That's why this can't leave the room. I know George. If he even thinks we think Frank is alive. He'll make it harder on us to find him. Otherwise, he'll get cocky, he'll get lazy and he'll screw up. He always does. If you know, you play into his hands. But if we act like we don't suspect. George is like a little kid with a secret. It will gnaw at him that he knows something you don't. And he'll leave clues. I'd stake anything on that."

Joe dropped the folder and leaned back in his chair with his 'Joe' thinking look on his face. He rubbed his chin, his eyes going from John to the folder. And he realized, if John was right, even if it was a remote possibility. Then Joe had to give deep thought to what he said. Everything. If George did have Frank, then that someone who was working for him in Beginnings knows. And any inkling that Joe had of Frank's being alive, Joe would have to keep from that person. And in order to do so, Joe's whole plan of thinking and actions would possibly have to change.

Bowman. North Dakota

A cup of coffee on one hand, a cigarette in the other, Hal rocked back and forth in his chair and called out at the knock on his door. "Come in!"

Sgt. Ryder entered first with a half smile on his face, he held the door open for Gary.

Hal stood up when Gary walked in. "Please sit down.

Gary had a whining look to his face.

"What? What's wrong?" Hal asked.

Gary shook his head. "I'm really tired. I've been in meetings with you before sir."

Quickly Hal looked at Sgt. Ryder who snickered. Being firm, Hal walked up to Gary. "We need to discuss what you saw."

"I told you."

Sounding so much like his father, Hal spoke with that hint of annoyance. "Yes, I know you told me. You'll tell me again." He reached back to his desk grabbing a pen and paper.

"Oh God." Gary said.

"What now?" Hal asked.

"I was warned if you grab paper."

Again Sgt. Ryder snickered.

Hal gave a closed mouth look to Sgt. Ryder. "I'm glad you're finding so much amusement out of this. Now, Gary. Did you see the Beginnings man get shot."

"Yes."

"And you said five or six times?"

"Yes."

"Now think back. Where did the shots come from. Did they come from behind, the side, or directly in front of him."

"Um . . ." Gary paused.

"Think. Which way did the blood shoot?"

"Out."

Hal grumbled.

"I'm sorry. I'm so tired. Can I rest and then I'll answer the questions."

"No." Hal wrote down. "Which way."

"They hit him from the front."

"Good boy." Hal smiled. "See. This is easy. Next question. Where did they hit him."

"At the Anderson farm."

Hal lifted his eyes to Sgt. Ryder. Then he ran his hands down his own face. "I know this, but where on his body did they hit him?"

"All over." Gary jumped at Hal's grunt. "I don't know. Um . . . the leg."

"Thigh, knee or calf?"

"Thigh." Gary closed his eyes. "Definitely thigh."

"Where else was he hit?"

“His arm.” Gary saw Hal ready to ask and he held up his hands. “I don’t remember right or left but I do know it was in the upper portion and they hit him in both shoulders.”

“High?”

“Yes.”

“How are you remembering all this?” Hal asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m not. It did happen so fast.” Gary rubbed his eyes. “Can I go to sleep now?”

“No.” Hal leaned on his desk. “This is very important. Did the man take any head shots?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“All right did he take any shots what so ever in the torso area.” Hal indicated to his own chest. “Other than the shoulder wounds.”

“Yes. He was hit in the stomach. That was the first hit he took.”

“Good then you should remember this. Where in the stomach, Center, to the side, high low. What?”

“Uh . . .” Gary rubbed his eyes again. “Side, I think. Lower. I’m not sure.”

“Good.”

Sgt. Ryder was somewhat confused. “Sir, can I ask why all this is important?”

“Yes.” Hal nodded. “Taking the bodies, the men, both ours and theirs, is something the society hasn’t done. You Sgt. Ryder, told me this man made Mad Max look like a puppy.”

Gary raised his hand. “Who’s Mad Max?”

Hal tossed a waving hand at him and continued. “If this man is as worn as you say he is, then he can take a lot. And you said he was a big man, didn’t you?”

“About six three.”

“See, he’s about . . .” Hal looked again in shock. “He’s that big?”

“Yep and he’s not a thin man, not heavy. Military build. Seen it a million times, probably was a career man in the military.” Sgt. Ryder saw the open mouth look on Hal’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Um . . . nothing.” Hal shook his head. “O.K. my point.” Hal hesitated. “My point . . . what was my . . . oh, yes. This is a big man, twenty, twenty-five soldiers can easily shoot him down and kill him, but they didn’t. They hit him in areas of the body. Fleshy areas and non threatening ones. Enough to take him down but not out. They took him, they were concerned with him. The woman was shot in evasive areas. This tells me the society wanted them. And I think . . .” Hal placed down the notes he took. “I think they got half of what they sought.”

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Beginnings, Montana

Joe was glad when he walked into Ellen’s room, that those he requested to be there were present. He closed Ellen’s hospital room door, flashed a brief

'Joe' smile and walked in. Holding his folder, he kissed Ellen then faced Robbie, Dean and Henry. "Glad you boys could all be here. I hope you brought your suspect notebooks. I want to have a brief meeting, just to give you some things to think about. We'll get back on track with Motive in Means as soon as we get our thoughts back together."

"Dad, why are we doing this right now?" Robbie asked.

"Because we have ignored this for a few days. The problem still exist. It's here and we still have to find it, despite what is going on in our personal lives."

Henry clenched his teeth and spoke through them. "But Joe. What about . . ." He twitched his head toward Ellen.

"O.K." Joe gave a half chuckle. "I guess you can say this is my own therapy for Ellen. She'd love it and . . . never once has she been able to attend a meeting without getting her two cents in or interrupting. So let's just say, I'm hoping here." Joe noticed Dean was more occupied with Ellen than anything. "Dean? Are you gonna be able to be with us on this today?"

"Yes. Sorry. Go on." Dean's hand rested on Ellen's, his other held a pen and his notebook rested on his crossed legs.

"All right." Joe raised the folder. "I have here information given to me by John Matoose. Seems Benedict Arnold now believes someone else is working for George. He thinks whoever it was, let George know where Frank and Ellen were. Just like we had all thought. But . . . John has provided us with something today. A list of people in Beginnings George considers special. Special by meaning unmarked. Taken if there's an invasion. Wanted for his own. George was fond of these people." Joe opened the folder. "And John wrote up reports on why George liked each of these people. Or at least what John knew about it."

Dean held up his pen. "Give us the list."

Joe took a breath and waited until they were ready. "I'm not giving any details, just names right now. You guys can read this shit if you want. Ready? All right. . . . Obvious one, Dean." Joe stopped when he heard Henry tsk. "What it is Henry?"

"Why is Dean always so special? That doesn't seem fair Joe. Not that I'm jealous. But everyone likes Dean."

"Is that so?" Joe said with sarcasm. "Well don't feel bad Henry just because our brilliant scientist is on George's favorite person in Beginnings list, because . . . so are you."

"Me!" Henry nearly shrieked. "I don't know why that would be Joe. Not me. Why would George like me? Oh my God Joe."

Joe looked at Robbie as Robbie laughed. "Think it's funny?"

"Yeah." Robbie grinned.

"Good. Because you too are on that list."

Henry immediately pointed to Robbie. "Ha-Ha. See, I knew it."

Joe saw it coming. He saw the look on Robbie's face. "Boys. Don't. And now that we established the three of you are liked by George, may I get to the other six? Thank you . . . Next is Jason, Cole . . ." Joe closed his eyes. "What Henry?"

"Why is Cole on the list? He's a pervert you know Joe."

Joe winced. "Cole is on the list for agriculture and, he and George used to play darts, they drank and Cole hung out at his house a lot."

Henry looked shocked. "I didn't know anyone liked Cole enough to hang out with him that much. Is that why I'm on the list Joe? Because I played darts with him?"

"Henry I don't . . ."

"I bet it is. That seems so wrong." Henry rambled. "He probably just wants to save me because he needs someone to massacre . . ."

"Henry!" Joe shouted his name. At that instant all eyes looked at Ellen, then back to Joe. "Henry just Shh. Now back to . . ."

"Dad?" Robbie interrupted. "Why am I on the list?"

"Robert, we're only discussing names right now."

"Come on tell me. I bet it's my skills."

Henry made a loud sound of disgust. "You would think it's because if that."

Joe bobbed his head back and forth. "Well, Henry. It is."

Henry whined. "Oh that isn't fair. Robbie's on the list because of his skills. Dean because of his brains and I'm on the list because of darts."

"Henry." Joe snapped. "I never said you were on the list because of darts. You did. Now will you shut up?"

"O.K." Henry held up his hand. "Will you just . . ."

"No." Joe answered. "I'll say it when we discuss you as a suspect. Next . . . Andrea . . ." Joe saw Henry's mouth open. "And just so Henry can feel important. Andrea is on the list because." Joe hated to say it. "Henry was partially right. George had a thing for Andrea."

"Oh yes!" Henry shouted then giggled.

"Continuing . . . Johnny is on the list."

Dean raised his eyes and calmly spoke. "We all know why he's there."

Joe looked in question at Dean. "Why?"

"Easy." Dean wrote as he spoke. "Johnny is the only Slagel that George actually liked, I mean really liked. Maybe it has to do with the fact that he knew Johnny as a kid. I'm just surprised George doesn't have Denny on the list. Those two always hung out."

Henry had all answers. "You know why don't you? He probably doesn't know that Denny is alive again. I mean he wasn't in Beginnings when . . ." Henry's speech slowed he saw the weird glances. "When . . . whoops, sorry. Time machine thing. Forget I said anything and scratch it if you're taking notes."

Joe looked at Henry. "You done?" He returned to his list. "Now this one I want to know why she's one the list." Joe flipped through looking for John's notes. When he saw them, Joe laughed heartedly.

Robbie watched. Robbie waited. Then Robbie got impatient. "Dad!"

"Hey!" Joe pointed. "Don't take that tone with me. All right. Josephine is on the favorite persons list. At first I thought it was to bake. But I read . . ." Joe laughed. "Sorry. It seems, George has a fondness for Josephine because they had, well, slept together."

All three, Robbie Dean and Henry, all loudly grunted with an 'EW' Then all three went silent and looked to Ellen for a response.

Joe snapped his finger. "Shit, thought that would get her attention. And finally, the last person on the list is someone none of us even thought of. It's . . ."

"Josephine can be such the slut." Henry interrupted with his thoughts

out loud. "Can't she? I mean I heard of at least ten men in the past year that she has engaged in some sort of sexual activity with. Usually it's not it's not physical it's more or . . ."

"Do we need to hear this?" Joe asked with attitude. "No. And for crying out loud, it isn't Josephine's actions that we should be questioning, it's the men who are taking advantage of the old woman."

"True." Henry stated. "That's probably why most of them are with her only or . . ."

"Henry!" Joe yelled. "Enough. Now, before I have a stroke." Joe rubbed his forehead. "The last suspect is someone none of us guessed. Yet after reading John's notes, we should have. And I want all of us to take some time and give it our best thoughts, scenarios, motives and opportunities. Because it's there with this one." Joe raised his eyebrows. "Reverend Bob."

Dean, Robbie and Henry all looked stunned at what Joe said. That was until Joe passed around John's notes on Reverend Bob. And then the stunned looks turned to thinking ones. And Joe knew he fed their minds. But he wanted them to take more time than just another day to think about it. To Joe it needed deep thought and Reverend Bob discussion would wait for a few more days.

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Bowman, North Dakota

A restaurant at one time, probably the place where most people in Bowman went to get their breakfast after Sunday service. But now it was cleared out and was an officers' Mess Hall. But seeing that Hal was the only officer--that's the way he preferred it--Corporals and up, ate in there as well.

But Hal, he took the head of the table. And usually the bulk of the conversation. He sat down in his usual spot, Sgt. Ryder at his right. Hal made a face at his food. Every night at dinner he regretted making Craig one of the cooks in Bowman. Hal knew Craig burned the corn on purpose or at least saved it for him. And his portion of meat was always the smallest. Hal viewed everyone's plate and how much they had. He placed his fork in the small slice of meat lifting it. He turned his head and looked to Craig who manned the mess line. Craig wiggled his fingers and smiled. Hal grunted and dropped his fork.

"You let him upset you." Sgt. Ryder said. "That's why he does it."

"I can't help it." Hal tried to remain in control. "It's probably deep seeded."

Sgt. Ryder laughed. "What?"

"It goes back to my little brother. He would irritate me every chance he got." Hal began to slice his meat, little pieces, hoping he could at least trick his mind into thinking he had more.

"Perhaps it's because you are always so serious. Not that it's a bad thing."

"I'm not serious all the time. I laugh and I say funny things." Hal ate. "Some one has to be serious. I guess I deemed myself the serious one. I had one brother who was quiet and did his own thing. A little brother who never took anything serious. And a big brother who wanted to be serious but just wasn't smart enough to figure out how to do it correctly."

Sgt. Ryder laughed. "I guess you do say funny things."

"That wasn't meant to be funny." Hal took a bite of his food. "Besides, when I was younger I used to write all the time. And I wrote funny stories. I think they were funny. I'm not sure now."

"I'm sure they were."

"You're pacifying me."

"Yes I am."

Hal grunted and ate some more. "Have you prepared a team to take out the Kansas site yet. Our scout says there is only sixty-two men."

"Yes. I picked the team and have been speaking to them. Corporal Pollack will lead them."

"Excellent choice, he's always so swift and gets the job done no matter how big or small."

"My thoughts exactly." Sgt. Ryder leaned into Hal. "I've been giving some thought about what you has said earlier."

"About?" Hal asked.

"About the society wanting and taking the man."

"And?"

"And . . ." Sgt. Ryder hated when Hal did that. Made him come right out and say whatever it was on his mind. "And I think I'll help you pick the scout teams to go to look for him."

"Good. That's what I want." Hal gave a swift pat to Sgt. Ryder's arm. "Support." Hal ate one of his last three bites of meat. "We know if he's injured they didn't take him too far. We can go with that."

"That's what I was thinking. Let's sit down tonight and work on the maps."

Hal agreed.

"We could start building that connection we need to Beginnings by doing this. Thus it would make it easier when you make your approach with the agreement you want to have with them. And let me apologize for what I said after Gary had left. It won't be a waste of time sending out that many scouts to search for the Beginnings man. Even if he is dead."

"He's not."

"He was shot. Several times." Sgt. Ryder said.

"Yes, I know. But he's not dead." Hal stated with certainty.

"How can you be so sure about it?"

Hal paused to think. "I don't know. But I am. I'm very sure. My gut tells me he isn't dead. And I don't know why I feel so strongly about it. But I do."

"Odd."

"Yes it is." Hal told him. "And so is that huge bird looking in at us through the window. God it has to be the biggest bird I have ever seen."

"Bird?" Sgt. Ryder turned to look, when he did, Hal took what was left of his meat. Sgt. Ryder returned to his plate. "I didn't see any . . ." He saw his meatless platter. "Bird."

Hal just grinned and chewed.

Beginnings, Montana

Dean pulled the sheet up some over Ellen's shoulder. It felt chilly in the room and Ellen has some goose bumps on her arm. He sat back down in his chair and rested his head on the raised bed. His face next to Ellen and his fingers softly stroked her hand. "Come on El. Please come out of this. Please." He lifted his head when he heard the squeak of the boot.

Robbie had stopped when he walked in the room. "I'm sorry. You want me to come back later."

"No." Dean shook his head. "Come on in."

"You're here late." Robbie said as he took a chair and sat down.

"Jenny's with the kids again. She seems to like it."

"Jenny is lonely since Caroline died."

"Yeah she is." Dean spoke then winced.

"What?" Robbie asked then turned his head to see Henry walk in the room.

"Henry." Dean called to him. "I thought I told you to spend time with your son."

"You did Dean. But it's Henry and Ellen talk time. Which by the way you're stealing."

"I'm not stealing anything." Dean argued. "Spend time with your son."

"Jenny won't let me. She's hogging him." Henry shrugged, and holding his notebook, grabbed a chair, slid it noisily and nudged it between Dean and Robbie until they made room. "Thanks." Henry smiled and sat down. "Aw."

Robbie slightly rolled his eyes. "What?"

"Who painted Ellen's nails this color. It's all wrong for her." Henry lifted Ellen's hands.

"Trish." Dean said. "But look." Dean pointed to Ellen's face. "It matches the lipstick she put on her too."

Henry peered closer. "Oh. I see. It goes." He opened his notebook. "You guys weren't in the middle of telling Ellen anything were you?" Henry looked at Dean and Robbie, they both shook their heads. "Good. Because I left off on a really good story and I'm sure Ellen is impatient."

Robbie and Dean both moaned softly.

"O.K." Henry began. "Mr. Owens my eleventh grade algebra teacher. He hated me El. Hated me. And I can't figure out why to this day. All because I told him algebra made no sense. What does the 'x' equals have to do with anything life. Dean, you're the big scientist. Do you have an answer?"

Dean paused to think of how he could explain it to Henry. "Algebra is to help you figure out problems when there are missing pieces. Using 'X' and 'Y' and such."

"But I wasn't going to be a scientist or a mathematician."

"Yes, I know." Dean explained. "But basic problem solving. It helps you to work things out in your life as well. Shows you that if you take your time and think, everything can be worked out."

"Anything? Nah."

"It's the principal Henry."

"But it still makes no sense. If I have a problem deciding what shirt to wear, how is Algebra gonna help me?"

"Basic deductions. Algebra. Say you stand in front of your closet and

have four shirts. Red, white blue and green. You deduct you wore the blue on Monday and the green on Tuesday, that leaves red and white. The red has spot on it. You choose white. Basic deductions. Algebra.”

Robbie nodded. “Wow, how layman. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” Dean smiled.

Henry fluttered his lips. “That sucks.”

Dean shook his head. “And you wonder why your teacher hated you.”

“Yeah.” Henry said. “I do. My father used to tell me I would need ‘American Therapist’ if I kept obsessing over it. He used to say that I obsessed over everything. I guess I did. Good thing I grew out of it. Huh El.”

Robbie and Dean looked to each other.

“O.K.” Henry went on. “Back to Mr. Owens and his . . .” He stopped talking when Joe came in. “Hey El, it’s your dad. I’ll save the story for him.”

Joe kissed Ellen and he too pulled up a chair. “So gentleman what are we talking about to our girl.” Joe saw that Dean and Robbie pointed to Henry. “Henry, what are we talking about?” He sat down backwards on the chair.

“Oh. Joe, I’m telling Ellen about my eleventh grade Algebra teacher.”

“Eleventh grade.” Joe said with sarcasm. “You’ve only gotten to the eleventh grade in your stories? Christ, Henry I didn’t think you had that much happen in your life.”

“Me Joe?” Henry nodded with a smile. “I had a very fulfilling and adventurous childhood. We’re nearing my college years now.”

“Henry.” Joe said. “You never went to college.”

“Still Joe. I had college years.”

“I remember when Ellen was in college.” Joe folded his arms over the chair’s back and rested his chin on them. “I’m sorry, do you guys mind if I reminisce?”

Quickly and with relief both Robbie and Dean answered “No.”

Joe smiled. “Dean did she ever tell you, it took her four times to pass her state boards?” Joe shook his head. “I told her she had to study. She thought she knew all the answers. She still does. I remember we threw her a party and brought it to her. Remember Robbie? Pete wasn’t all that happy about it. She was married to him at the time.”

“Pete was a dick.” Robbie commented. “I hated him. He was always so mean to me.”

“Didn’t you used to have a crush on her?” Dean asked. “You think maybe that’s why he hated you?”

Joe laughed. “Used to? And Robbie wasn’t subtle about his crush either. The kid stayed at Frank’s house every summer. Yet where was he when he was done helping Kelly out for the day. At Ellen’s. Kelly said Robbie would have his chores done by eight in the morning just to go over there.”

Robbie grinned thinking back. “I used to tell El, I wanted to help her out. Then her and I would lay out while the kids were in the kiddie pool. I remember liking when she would splash herself with water and I’d watch . . .” Robbie cleared his throat. “I was a teenage boy.”

“Son, in many ways you still are.” Joe told him.

Henry was curious though he really wanted to tell his algebra story. “Joe, did you and Ellen always get along?”

“Yeah, pretty much so. No, wait, at first I scared the hell out of her. I remember when Frank called me. He was barely in school a month and he tells

me he's not living in the dorm, he got a roommate and they have this apartment. He was working at a book store then . . ." Joe saw the surprised glances he received. "Yes, Frank worked at a book store. Moving boxes. It was before Ellen did the stripper thing and he was her body guard. Anyway. He tells me the apartment is only a one bedroom and he assures me over and over that there's two single beds and nothing is happening. I got worried. Frank went on and on too much about nothing happening. And in typical Frank fashion, he failed to mention one little detail. He failed to mention that his roommate was a girl." Joe laughed with everyone else. "I panicked. I thought, this is it. Frank gay? He's reassuring me way too much. So I went there, with wife two, no fiancé three. That's it. Bambi."

With a snicker, Dean repeated the name. "Bambi?"

"Yes, like the deer. Should I tell this?" Joe waited until he got the go ahead and he proceeded. His face reflected his happiness as he told the story of his first encounter with Ellen . . .

The staircase was narrow and the neighborhood wasn't all that great. "Look at this place." Joe griped as he walked up the steps with Bambi.

Her voice was high and 'Betty-Boop' like. She wore a fake fur and high heels. "Oh Joey it's really not that bad. And Frankie's a big boy, he can handle himself." Bambi had extreme blonde hair, done up wild and big and didn't look many years over her age of twenty-five.

"Yeah well, he's not your son now is he?" They reached the stop of the steps and two doors were there. A pink flowered wreath decorated the one and Joe turned to the other. "This is it."

"No-no, Joey. Frankie said apartment 2-a, this is 2-b."

With wide eyes Joe turned back around. He cringed when he saw the pink wreath again. "Oh my God."

"Now Joey remember." Bambi grabbed his arm. "No yelling at him about being gay. O.K.?"

Grumbling, Joe knocked on the door. He heard Frank's clumsy footsteps approach. At least he hoped it was Frank.

Frank, so thin, and an inch shorter than his adult height, answered the door totally shocked. "Dad." his eyes shifted.

"Frank." Joe raised his eyebrow.

"What uh . . . what are you doing here?"

"Coming to see your new place. Should I have called?"

"No." Frank shook his head and looked back. "This is nice. You drove all the way up here. Huh?"

"It appears that way bright boy."

"Wow." Frank nodded.

"Frank!" Joe snapped. "Can we come in?"

Frank looked over his own shoulder again. "Um, yeah." He opened the door wider.

Joe stepped into the livingroom. White walls, decorated and very clean. That scared Joe. The furniture was cheap, but new. As if Frank and his roommate pitched in at a discount store. "Frank you remember Bambi my fiancé, don't you?"

"Mam." Frank shook her hand. "Can I take you coat?"

“Thanks Frankie.” Bambi spun from her jacket. “Oh I love the decor in here. So fem . . .” Bambi shut up when Joe nudged her. “Hey!”

“So uh Frank, did you eat?”

“Today?”

“No, dinner.” Joe said with some annoyance. “Did you? We’re starved from the drive and I wanna take you out to eat.”

“Now?” Frank asked. “Um . . .” His eyebrow raised. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

“How long are you in town. Maybe another day.”

Joe laughed in ridicule. “Maybe another day. No, Frank, I don’t think. You called and said stop up anytime. I stop up this weekend cause I’m off. Now your ass will go out to dinner with us.”

Bambi gave a pat to Joe’s arm. “Joey, maybe he has a date.”

“Do you have a date Frank?”

“No.” Frank scratched his head. “It’s hard to explain but . . . O.K., my roommate hates to eat alone and we were supposed to try this new pizza place.”

“Awfully dedicated to that roommate of yours. You’re not liking this roommate more than you should are you?”

“Well . . . yeah. I do.” Frank nodded.

“Oh, Jesus Christ. Ow!” Joe felt Bambi’s nails sear into him when she pinched him. “What Bambi. For crying out loud.”

“What did I tell you Joey?” She clenched her teeth as she talked.

“All right. All right. He likes his roommate more than a roommate. I can deal with this. Frank.” Joe took a breath. “Where is your roommate.”

“Getting dressed.” Frank looked behind him to the small hall.

“Go . . .” Joe cringed. “Go ask your roommate to join us. And we’re going someplace better than a pizza place. So change. Put on a nice shirt Frank.”

“O.K.” Frank smiled and moved to the hallway.

“And tell him to look presentable too.”

Frank stopped walking. “Him?”

“Yeah, your roommate.” Joe whispered in Bambi’s ear when Frank disappeared into the hall. “I shouldn’t have to tell either of them to look nice. Gay men always have this thing about clothes.”

“Joey.” Bambi spoke his name soft and with a smile.

“What?”

“Look.”

Joe raised his eyes from his whispering hunch with Bambi. He saw Ellen standing with Frank in the livingroom. “Frank?”

“Dad.” Frank cleared his throat. “This is uh . . . Ellen. My roommate.”

So shy, so timid. So unlike the Ellen that became the woman. She extended her hand to Joe. “Nice to meet you Mr. Slagel.”

“A girl?” Joe asked as he shook Ellen’s hand. He almost sounded angry. “You are living with a girl?”

“Yeah.” Frank said. “What did you think?”

Bambi giggled. “He thought you were gay.”

“You thought I was gay?” Frank snapped.

“Yes I thought you were gay. This isn’t right Frank.” Joe sounded so fatherly.

“What do you mean this isn’t right?” Frank asked.

“Its wrong to be living with her.”

“And being gay was O.K.?”

“At least you aren’t gonna knock up another man!” Joe scolded.

Bambi was shocked. “Joey, please.”

“Frank, I hope to God you aren’t sleeping with this little girl?”

“Dad.” Frank whined and he looked at Ellen who was turning white.

“And you Missy Jane.” Joe pointed at Ellen. “Are you even out of highschool yet?”

“Yes I yes.”

“Does your mother know your living in sin?”

Ellen bit her bottom lip.

“Does she!” Joe raised his voice louder. “Do your parents know that you are living with a boy?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head.

“Where’s the goddamn phone.” Joe looked around the apartment. “I want their number and I’m calling them to let them know what their daughter is doing with my son.”

“Dad!” Frank yelled as Joe searched the apartment.

“Eighteen goddamn years old Frank. Eighteen!” Joe yelled. “And your playing house! Didn’t you learn by my life. Huh? Didn’t you. You wanna be thirty-eight years old and chasing your stupid hard headed son around? No.” Joe kept looking around the apartment. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I hope to God you are taking responsibility. Do you have any idea what your getting yourself into? And where’s the goddamn phone!”

Bambi tapped Joe on the shoulder and pointed to the phone.

Joe picked up the green phone. “What’s your parent’s number?” Joe asked Ellen.

“Please Mr. Slagel. They live all the way in Michigan. We’re not doing”

“What’s the number!” Joe yelled at her and Ellen jumped back.

Quivering, Ellen answered. “410-887-6756. And Frank.” Ellen softened her voice. “I don’t think I want to go to dinner.” She burst into tears and ran down the hall slamming the bedroom door.

“Dad! You scared her now. See?” Frank tossed his hand in the air. “This isn’t fair. What are we doing wrong. We’re roommates. We aren’t sleeping together.”

Again Bambi tapped Joe so annoyingly on the shoulder.

“What?” Joe blasted.

“Joey, even if they are sleeping together. It’s none of your business.”

“They’re kids. And mind you own business.” Joe huffed then calmed himself down, running his hand over his face. “Sorry Frank. It’s just that I was expecting . . .”

“Me to be gay?”

“Don’t get smart.” Joe pointed. “I’ll go talk to her.” Joe walked to the hall. “Down here?”

“Don’t yell at her anymore.” Frank told him. “I’ll get mad.”

Joe grumbled something inaudible and walked down the small hall. He knocked on the closed door. He waited and it opened. When he walked in Ellen jumped back on the bed on her stomach burying her face in the pillow. “Christ, this is why I’m glad I have boys.” Joe shut the door. “Ellen.”

“What?” She asked muffled through her pillow and tears.

“Look at me.”

“No.”

“I wanna talk to you. Look at me.”

“No.”

“Ellen!” Joe yelled.

Immediately Ellen flipped over and sat up. She held her pillow close to her as if hit were a baby doll. She sniffled.

Joe looked around the room. Two dressers, and across the room, all the way across was another single bed. “Ellen., Maybe I was a little harsh. But look at it from a father’s point of view. You guys are kids.”

“Frank’s my friend. We’re best friends.” She hyperventilated her crying breaths.

“All right. I’m not gonna say anything else. I’m gonna take your word and Frank’s that you’re just roommates. Because I think if its anymore you’re much too young for this playing house shit. But . . . You have to call your parents and tell them the truth. If you don’t, I will. You got that?”

Ellen nodded.

“O.K., now get off that bed, wipe off that face and look presentable. I’m hungry and we’re going to dinner.”

“I’m not going.” Ellen said.

“Yes you are.”

“You scare me.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Joe told her. “Let’s go.” Ellen didn’t move. “Now.” Still Ellen didn’t budge. “Ellen, move your ass. Now.”

Sniffing and shaking, Ellen jumped from the bed. “I hope Frank never turns out like you.” Ellen stormed by Joe, out the bedroom and into the bathroom slamming the door so loud it rattled the pictures on the wall.

Joe shook his head with a grunt looking at the door. “Thank God this will never last.”

In the hospital Joe laughed quietly. “I swear I thought one month, two. My boys had very little tolerance when it came to women. And she was typically female.”

“Yeah but Dad.” Robbie added. “She was Frank’s first lay. From the second she popped his cherry Ellen had him wrapped.”

Joe winced. “Do we need to discuss this.”

As expected but not as hoped. Henry had *his* something to say. “I don’t remember being wrapped in the girl that took my virginity. Of course I was really embarrassed that I did it with her. She was kind of large.”

Dean snickered. “I would have gotten wrapped up in my first, but she never spoke to me again. I was only sixteen, she was twenty and it was . . .” Dean laughed again exaggerating his last word. “Bad. How about you Robbie?”

“Me?” Robbie shook his head and rolled his eyes. “I was too young to even realize what I did. I don’t think I was even thirteen yet.”

Joe was shocked. “What! You were twelve years old? Could you even do anything at twelve years old?”

“I think I did.” Robbie shrugged. “I know I was closer to thirteen though.”

“She had to be older.” Henry commented. “Was she older?”

“Oh yeah.” Robbie grinned. “And man I was lost. She had to tell me everything. I kind of thought it was neat just seeing her boobs. Boy did I get the bonus. I felt really guilty after because I felt like I was doing my mom. So I never did it again with her. Of course she wasn’t around much after that.”

Dean whistled. “That much older than you that you felt like you were with your mom?”

“No. She was young. But she was engaged to my Dad.”

“What?” Joe blasted, then thought back counting the years. “Lorna?”

“Yep.” Robbie nodded.

“Oh Jesus Christ. I didn’t want to hear this.” Joe stood up. “I’m leaving.” He walked to Ellen and kissed her. “And can you boys keep the conversation tame for Ellen’s sake. She’ll bitch about it when she comes out.” Joe walked to the door and stopped looking back. “Lorna?” He saw Robbie nod. “Jesus Christ.” Running his hand down his face he walked out of the room.

It was silent for a moment then Henry snickered. “I can’t believe you told Joe you slept with his fiancé.”

“Was pretty funny huh?” Robbie laughed. “And the best part is . . . none of it’s true.”

Henry and Dean both released a loud ‘Aw’ they had been had, but they thought it was funny. All three of them looked to Ellen, hoping for a reaction that she didn’t give. Robbie and Dean then sat back and listened, against their will, to more Henry stories. It was better than silence.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

September 4
Quantico Marine Headquarters

A long table and a map of the United States of Amrrerica was what was in the meeting room. George was calm as he stood before his advisors. "Look at where we took our hits gentlemen. Take a look. North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana. And now after this morning, Kansas. What does this tell you? Anyone?"

Jeremy knew he had the answer. "They're creating a border."

"Exactly." George's hand slammed down on the table. "East versus West, that's what I think gentlemen. Now we estimate that they are only five hundred strong and growing. That's O.K. There's nothing more that I would like to do than to fly over and drop a single nuclear warhead on them as soon as we find out where they are. But we aren't going to do that. I want their men. Overseas operations are going to be taking off soon and I expect difficulty. Of course, we haven't a clue what's going on overseas yet. We may get there and find nothing." George began to pace. "I rescinded the firing squad order. Right now we have four of these UWA soldiers at our Alabama site. They are the key. Beginnings knows jack shit about this UWA yet. These men were there when we went after Frank and Ellen? Why? They know of Beginnings. I think it's their intention of joining forces. But right now, we have their men. And I plan on breaking them. They'll break eventually."

One of George's advisors had to question. "Sir, you said they are approximately five hundred strong. Beginnings is one fifty. That is nothing compared to us."

"Small yes. Nothing. I doubt that." George's hand pointed to the map. "If this small group of men were nothing, then you tell me why we can't get near the western united states anymore. Our soldiers suck gentlemen, but they don't suck that bad. Someone is training them and someone is training them good."

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Beginnings Montana

Dean hurried across his clinic lab, he dropped folders down in front of Johnny. "O.K. John, here's what I need you to do. I need you to run our TB-4 batch on these sputum samples. See if we can get some sort of reaction. Because nothing I'm giving these patients is clearing their lungs."

"Tough batch of pneumonia."

"Toughest we've seen here."

"Deadly?" Johnny asked.

"All pneumonia can be."

"I mean more so than usual."

Dean thought about it. "I just think it's tougher. It's not wanting to leave the body. Just try the TB batch on it. Maybe we'll get lucky."

“I hate playing with phlegm.”

Dean grinned. “So do I. But I run the lab and you’re my assistant.”

“Hey.” Johnny shook his head. “Ellen’s your assistant and she never messes with spit.”

“See John. Ellen’s also my lover, so I have to take that into consideration when I hand out tasks.”

“Whipped.” Johnny gathered the cultures.

“Aren’t all of us men?” Dean checked through the folders one more time.

“Not me.” Johnny scoffed.

“How can you not be whipped?” Dean wondered in question to him. “There aren’t that many women, you have one. She doesn’t control you?”

“Nope.” Johnny shook his head. “I control her.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean laughed as he put everything back in order. “Sometimes you are too much like your father.”

“I’m nothing like my father.” Johnny said very serious.

Dean stopped cold in what he did. He just looked at Johnny and finished what he was doing. “All right. I’m off. I have to meet with your grandfather.” Dean moved to the door.

“Hey Doctor Dean, why you always meeting with my Pap anymore.”

“Well we’re trying to figure out who . . .” Dean halted himself when he heard his own voice in his mind, *‘Johnny is the only Slagel that George actually liked, I mean really liked.’* “Trying to . . .” He heard Johnny in his mind. *‘I’m nothing like my father’* “Trying to figure out who is gonna be the test guinea pigs for this new food growth me and Ellen have been working on. We had to put it aside because of the virus. But now that it’s done with we can go back to the food growth. But we need some people. We looking for volunteers.”

“Cool. Does this mean it could have weird side effects and cause shit to happen to them.”

“It could.” Dean cleared his throat. “I’ll let you know when we get started.” Dean left the lab and slowed down in the hall thinking to himself, *“Food Growth? I couldn’t come up with something better than that? I’m a scientist for crying out loud’*. Shaking his head and sort of laughing at his bad quick thinking, Dean moved down the hall toward Ellen’s room.

“Sorry I’m late.” Dean said as he walked into the room, shutting the door and kissing Ellen. Joe, Robbie and Henry were already there. “I had to get things situated in the lab.”

Henry watched Dean get situated and take a seat. “We wouldn’t have started without you Dean. We talked about you, but we didn’t start with out you.”

Dean huffed. “When do we discuss him as a suspect Joe.”

“Today.” Joe grinned. “Today is Henry, Josephine and Cole day. Let’s go with easily eliminated.” Joe looked at Henry when he heard Henry let out a sigh of relief. “I’m not meaning you. I’m meaning Josephine.”

Henry snickered. “That’s still so funny about her and George.”

Joe cringed. “Glad you’re still getting amusement out of that two days later.”

“Oh I am Joe. I am.”

Dean raised his hand. "I say we eliminate her on the basis of means alone. She's not agile enough to move about. And when I was under hypnosis I remember someone else being in the trailer following the Moses attack. She certainly isn't strong enough to strangle me. Unless she'd hiding it under that eighty-eight year old body."

Henry shook his head. "We don't know if it was one of Moses' men that came into the trailer that night."

Robbie disagreed. "No, if they came from outside I would have found another set of foot prints in the tunnel. I found two both Beginnings shoes. Now either it was John with Moses or our other person. Either way it wasn't someone else who came in. Their shoes just aren't that treaded."

"Good point." Joe said. "I move to scratch Josephine my . . . what Henry?"

"Do you suppose she was an attractive woman when she was younger?"

"What?" Joe yelled. "What the hell does that have to do with this."

"Nothing really." Henry said. "I was curious. You know because she thinks she's hot now. Maybe she's still stuck in the past."

"Henry." Joe tried to get him to shut up.

Henry kept going. "Do you think George actually was physical with her or do you . . ."

"Henry!" Joe yelled. "It's none of our business what George was with her. They were intimate. Leave it at that. Robbie, Josephine?"

"Take her off Dad. I don't want to waste my time when we really start investigating."

"Henry?" Joe looked to him.

"O.K." Henry shrugged. "Take her off."

"She's off. Now Cole." Joe stated.

"Aw." Henry whined. "Why can't it be me. I would like to be eliminated soon."

"Soon. Cole." Joe said. "Motive."

"Now see." Dean raised his hand some. "We are getting way too wrapped up in motive."

"What do you mean?" Joe asked. "You have to have a motive."

"Yes, yes you do." Dean explained. "But isn't dedication to George enough? We should establish why they are dedicated instead of motive. If someone has little to lose in Beginnings then their dedication to George would be enough to work on the inside and bring us down. For example, Andrea. Her dedication to George according to Henry theory is love. Cole dedication would be friendship. They hung out together."

Robbie added. "And he definitely had the means. He may not have had the medical knowledge needed, but he works in the fields. That's where the first exposure to the virus was."

Joe agreed. "And he's trusted. Almost too trusted with a lot of security secrets. I say he stays. Henry, you have anything to add?"

"He's a pervert Joe. That alone should keep him on the list."

Joe growled. "Dean Robbie, any objections to looking into Cole?" He watched them both shake their heads "Then Cole stays. Next up. The one we've been waiting for . . . Henry."

Robbie was excited. He flipped a page in his note book. "Oh yes."

“Uh oh.” Henry looked at him. “Joe, I should be off. I’m not working for George. I have no motive.”

“Dedication to George.” Joe said. “That could be motive enough. You two were always close.”

“But . . . but . . . I have something to lose. I have a son.”

Dean grinned. “Lose to what? The virus? Your son is naturally immune to the virus. Everyone in Beginnings could have died with the exception of the naturally immune. In fact as a scientist I have to say it’s remarkable that you and Ellen are the only two naturally immune.” Dean thought about it.

Joe saw the thinking look on Dean’s face. “What’s so remarkable.”

“Well what if . . . this is just a what if.” Dean spoke. “What if because Henry was going to be living here and working for George if he had to leave, which he did. What if they used Henry’s blood to create a base for the virus. Therefore he would be naturally immune.”

“Can they do that?” Joe asked.

“Most definitely.” Dean answered.

“Oh yeah?” Henry got defensive. “Explain Ellen’s immunity then.”

Dean snickered. “They spliced it. Her blood sample could have been obtained while she was in Colorado or . . . even taken here from the clinic. Which you have number one access to everything. Mr. Council Member.”

Henry was aghast, his face showed it. “No.”

Robbie lifted his hand. “May I take it now?”

Joe held out his palm. “The floor is yours.”

“Thanks.” Robbie smiled. “Means. I love what you just said Dean, it goes with what I’m going to say. Henry has the means. He has access to everything. Information, the virus. He worked with the virus. And say, he had the this thing for Ellen for a while. That would explain why they spliced her blood into the virus. Henry wanted her. He was right there during the whole virus thing, wasn’t he? And I recall. The testing, the clinic, the plague. Right there. If the blood needed switched Henry could have done it.” Robbie stood up. “I recall the night of the Moses attack. We were playing cards. You were awfully nervous that night. Acting all insightful that something was wrong.”

“That’s because Ellen didn’t check in.” Henry defended.

“Yeah but what if you just knew what was going on up there. Say you knew the attack was happening and you were nervous about it. You flew up there awfully fast didn’t you. Moses was a crack pot, you feared he’d break and hurt Ellen. He did. And when you got there, you saw that Dean was still alive and you tried to kill him. Didn’t you Henry?”

“No.”

“Always coming off as Mr. nice guy. Isn’t that the cover up you say Andrea uses? No one would suspect you. So trusted. So nice. But you aren’t, are you?”

“Oh my God.” Henry moved back as Robbie neared him.

“You’re a cold hearted Man Henry. You were at Frank’s house. Nervous. You hadn’t heard anything. You should of. So you took off in a frenzy for the trailer . . .” Robbie told his story.

“Damn it.” Henry’s hand hit against the steering wheel as he pulled up at the mobile lab. “Something went wrong.” He stepped from the jeep and walked to the mobile. He saw the body of Bill the guard and bent down to him.

“Damn it.” Henry tossed his head. “Sloppy Moses.” Pissed off, Henry walked through the open door of the trailer. He saw the blood on the carpet and didn’t see Ellen. He walked through using the trailers’ entrance to the mobile lab. And when he entered he saw Dean laying on the floor. As he turned to walk out he heard Dean moan. Grumbling and seeing Dean move, Henry walked over to him, bent down and braced Dean’s neck to finish the job that Moses should have done.

Henry laughed. “O.K. Robbie. So if I did that, why didn’t I kill Dean? I had the chance.”

“Easy.” Robbie answered. “It dawned on you. I knew you were there. Ellen was gone. You love Ellen and she took first priority. Moses had insured that no suspicion would be placed elsewhere. So you radioed for help and took off looking for Ellen. Amazing how you knew what direction to look for her too.”

“And.” Dean added. “Don’t forget that Henry knew exactly where Frank and Ellen were. Helping George’s men out with their little strategic hit. Frank doesn’t come back, but Ellen does. Dropped off at the gate as a little present to Henry.”

Joe blinked several times in amazement, looking back and forth from Dean to Robbie. “Wow, you boys gave this an awful lot of thought. I have to admit, I really didn’t put too much into it. It’s Henry. But if you feel that he could be working for George, I’ll leave him on the list. Robbie?”

“I really don’t think he’s working for George Dad. He was just so easy to do this to.”

“Dean?” Joe questioned him.

“I don’t think he’s working for George either.” Dean watched Henry slump in relief. “However, leave him on the list because it will really bother him.”

Joe nodded. “I can do that. Robbie.”

“Leave him.”

“No!” Henry shouted. “Don’t I vote. I vote no.”

“Too bad.” Joe pointed his pencil at Henry. “You’ve been out voted, you are hereby on the big suspect list with Andrea.”

“Joe that is so unfair.” Henry griped. “And it isn’t very nice. You’re kidding me right?” He didn’t get an answer. “You’re not kidding me.” Still silence. “Oh my God. I can’t believe this.” He stood up. “I can’t believe this. Me? Working for George?” Henry gasped dramatically one more time and grabbing his notebook flew out of Ellen’s room.

Joe stared at the door for a second then laughed. “O.K., I say we let him go until later then we tell him he’s not really on the list.” He got agreement and he laughed again. “Pretty damn good story we all came up with it though.”

Robbie who was laughing also, stopped and turned serious. “Dad? Something just dawned on me. We worked hard on that story, coming up with a scenario totally outrageous. But how far fetch is that scenario? Really. Think about it.”

Joe thought about it and the smile dropped suddenly from his face.

Washington, DC

George made a cringing face as he walked down the corridor of the main zoological studies building in the former Washington, DC zoo. He sniffed outward loudly and annoyingly, casting the smell of urine and animal from his nostrils.

Jeremy was more prepared, it had been a place he had been to many times. Once or twice a week since everything really got underway seven months earlier. He carried a handkerchief under his nose.

George griped. Both verbally, facially and in body noise. "Listen to this. Smell this. Uh." His hand covered his mouth. "This is why I only come here once a month. Awful animals."

The loud grunting, hooting, deep and bellowing noises carried to them.

"Sir." Jeremy held his handkerchief to George.

"I think I will . . ." Just as George grabbed the handkerchief, he was nearly pummeled over by a running man in his twenties, spinning George counter clockwise.

"Sorry sir." The young man thin and tall yelled out as he barreled into the last door in the hallway.

"What the hell was that about?" George held out his hand pointing to the young man. "What he just did is probably why he's working in the zoo."

"Probably." Jeremy said.

It was a large lab. The main one. A wall of glass windows at the far end. Windows that extended twenty feet. The young man who ran passed George, slammed the door as he raced in there. "Dr. Stevenson."

Dr. Stevenson was older. Perhaps hitting seventy. He was stout and wore a long white lab coat that buttoned too tightly over his large stomach. "Harold what's the rush?"

Harold wheezed as he caught his breath. "Pres . . . Pres . . . President Hadly is walking down the hall. I jumped right ahead of him to warn you."

Dr. Stevenson's white eyebrow raised in irritation. "What's he doing here. Can't he just stay where he belongs without coming in here wanting to know about our research. The man acts as if he knows what the hell I'm talking about. But I can . . ." During his gripe, Dr. Stevenson smiled. "President Hadly sir." He walked with a grin and an extended hand to George. "What brings you to our little world?"

"How can you take this smell?" George bitched. "Can't you bathe them or something?"

"We do." Dr. Stevenson explained. "But they have bodily functions they can't control."

"Oh bull shit." George walked to the window. "There's one of them in Beginnings and I hear he uses the toilet." He peered down to the area below. It set about fifteen feet under the window. A concrete floor, half eaten toys were spewed out everywhere. Dried blood and rabbit fur joined them. Running about on their hands and knees were at least fifteen Genetically altered children. Nick name the Ogre. They are the laborers, the army of the future. Built to withstand

the elements. The pudgy, square like boys and girls whose external sex organs could barely be distinguished ran amuck naked in the large room. They made animal noises, snorting as they played violently. Biting the leather like skin of each other causing each other to squeal loudly. Looked to be almost one year old, but at the accelerated growth rate of six times the norm, they were merely two months in age.

Dr. Stevenson joined George at the window. "As you can see, we haven't the caretakers to help them. Most of the caretakers we have, are with the second batch of fifty."

"What if I got you more caretakers?" George asked. "I have the people."

"Maybe for the next batch. But these are too far gone. These are gonna have to be released into the wild or killed. We have to place the food in the room and well, run."

George did not look pleased. "What the hell happened to them. They have brains. Couldn't they be trained? They're supposed to be able to be trained."

"Yes I know." Dr. Stevenson said. "But we discussed this. The accelerated formula used in the enhancement of their embryos was old. It could have had some effect. That's why we only did fifteen. We've recreated it with what we had now. The gene splicing and such was the easy part with them."

"But not for the mentally superior, I mean the Gems?"

"No sir." Dr. Stevenson shook his head. "In those splicings, the accelerator causes the fetus to abort or become an abomination."

"Where are those?" George asked.

"Floor 'C'" Dr. Stevenson answered. "We've only ten now. Same age and same size as these ones. But worse, in appearance and behavior." Dr. Stevenson looked out the window. He watched the one ogre toss another across the room. That ogre got up and dove his body at his attacker. A battle erupted. "This is what we can achieve down here. The Norms, we haven't tried to even accelerate those embryos. We've just let nature take its place on those."

"Any idea when they will be born?"

"All twenty should be born within two months. Mothers are doing well. We've impregnated thirty-five more two weeks ago. It looks like all have taken but two."

"And caretakers for the Norms. You have enough?" George inquired.

"Yes, cyborg-genetics has enhanced the elderly women we have to serve as those."

"But as far as the Gems, no such luck yet?" George watched Dr. Stevenson shake his head. "Damn it. And do you realize how many of the mentally superior embryos are in Beginnings? Of course they'll say they destroyed them, but I know better. I have to get my hands on those. Those beings are the minds of the futures. These things . . ." George hit his hand against the glass. "These things right now are a waste of our resources."

Dr. Stevenson nodded in agreement. "Shall I have them destroyed?"

"Yes." George began to walk away but stopped. "How long do you suppose they need until they can be sent into 'the wild' as you put it?"

"They can be put into the wild now. But another month would be best if you wanted them to survive."

George smiled. "Then hold on to them another month. We're gonna

ship them out.”

“Far I hope.” Dr. Stevenson said. “They can be dangerous.”

“Pretty far. I think we’ll leave them out by Beginnings.” George chuckled and started to the door again. “Let’s go Jeremy I want to check on the hibernators.”

Jeremy stayed calm, the way he always did. He walked with George.

“Sir.” Dr. Stevenson called out. “They move close to fifty miles per hour. We haven’t tried to catch them before. It could pose a problem.”

George shrugged. “I guess you should use this month to workout then.” He walked out.

When the door closed Dr. Stevenson look to Harold who just sat in the corner. “And people wonder why I hate him. One of these days I’m going to Beginnings and help them create an army to kick *his* ass.”

In a totally different building on the zoo property George and Jeremy went. They rode the elevator down to the sub basement floor. It took them down and opened into a silent hall way. Long, clinical. It was lit by blue lights. A calming effect was the explanation for the lights. The long corridor was lined with glass windows as far as the hall extended. It was eerily quiet with the only noises being the clicking of computer keyboard and shuffling of papers by the four observer workers who worked in the hall.

George and Jeremy walked down, stopping at the first window and looking in.

Jeremy leaned to George whispering. “They are rotating them more now. They found it helps the circulation.”

George nodded. “It’s good to see one phase of the work is going smoothly.”

“Very much so sir.”

George smiled and placed his hands behind his back and watched through the window into a whole other room.

At the same time, shifted by the metal rods that suspended them, they all tilted forward. Inside the room were twenty five women. They were naked and their stomachs were round from the growing embryos implanted in them. Wires monitoring their vitals sign were attached not only to their chests, but their shaved heads. Some had their eyes open, some did not. But they all held the same emotionless expression, lifeless, and blank. The only movements that they made were the occasional twitching of their fingers and toes and what ever shifting of their bodies that the society scientists deemed necessary.

Pleased at the hibernators, or what those who worked closely with them called, farmers, George and Jeremy moved down the hall to the next window to observe the next group of women.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Beginnings, Montana

The carpet that spread from throughout the living room, dining room, hallway and bedrooms was a sliver-gray. New and perfect. The walls, a shade off white with a blue print wallpaper border that trailed around the livingroom-diningroom combo. It looked smaller on the outside than it did when Dean stepped inside his new home with Danny. Stepped into the livingroom complete with the model home furnishings that were there when the home was on display.

“Dean?” Danny snapped his finger in front of Dean’s face.

Dean jolted. “Sorry, this is . . . this is beautiful.”

“We beat the furniture, but still . . .” Danny hit the sofa a puff of dust came up. “You’ll have to vacuum it.”

“Not a problem.” Across the large livingroom Dean walked. A long diningroom table, six chairs was to the left. A small three foot wall separated the rooms. And a breakfast counter was the separation to the kitchen.

“Check out this kitchen.” Danny walked by him. “Look at all these cabinets. And accessories. Man when they were selling these things, they decked them out.”

Dean walked in the kitchen.

“Laundry room.” Danny pointed to the set of double white wooden doors at the one end. “And . . .” Danny pointed to the small other door. “Office maybe. Tiny room.” Danny opened the door. “There’s a desk in here. The furniture might be a little scratched. It got shuffled around in the move.”

“So what.” Dean spoke in awe. “This is great. Are the bedrooms just as nice?”

“Yeah, but they need furnishings. We had to leave some things behind. But . . . you have that stuff.” Danny moved from the kitchen. “Nothing is hooked up. We’ve been busy today bringing in the other two homes. But I promise Dean, I know I said tomorrow, but Saturday at the latest O.K. Electric and plumbing. We had to dig under the foundation to run the pipes that were pre laid out. It took some adjusting for the new house.”

“I understand. I can bring some boxes over though?”

“Absolutely.” Danny nodded.

“Ellen’s going to love this. She is absolutely going to love this.” Dean kept looking around. “She has this box with nicknacks in it that she ever put up because there wasn’t any room. I have to open it and put them in that cabinet.” Dean indicated to the cabinet in the corner of the dining area.

Danny snickered. “That used to have a door with glass. We broke it, so I took off the door.”

“I can’t figure out what part of this Ellen is going to love the most.”

“The bathroom.” Danny stated.

“Why the bathroom.”

“I’m sorry. The powder room. There’s a half bathroom in the master bedroom. A sink, toilet and shower. But I think because she’s a woman and, from what I’ve seen at containment, she’s a last minute Nelly, she’ll love that closeness.”

Dean laughed. “O.K. So, what’s the favor. What do you want.”

“Um . . . I don’t know yet. I’ll get back to you because I now you’re

good for it.”

“You do that.” Dean looked at his watch. “And I’d better be going. I have a check up with Marcus.”

“Since when did he became the doctor?”

“What?” Dean was confused.

“Humor Dean. Ha-ha-ha. Get it?”

“Yes.” Dean shook his head with a smile. “I have to go.” He walked to the door and stopped as he opened it. “Danny, Thank you. Thank you very much.”

“Don’t thank me yet Dean. I didn’t state my favor.”

The smile fell from Dean. “Uh-oh.”

“Kidding.” Danny waved his hand at Dean.

“Good.” Dean walked out.

“Maybe.” Danny placed his hands in his pockets and looked around the house. “Man, I have to figure out how I can persuade Joe into letting me get one of these for myself.”

^^^

Joe and Reverend Bob walked across center town together heading toward the chapel.

“Joe I figured it would be perfect timing.” Rev. Bob said. “The warm weather’s breaking. Fix the air conditioner when it’s not needed. Easy job. So when I see what’s taking Henry so long, I go back into my office and my old radio is in a million pieces, scattered around Henry on the floor.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“He needs it. He looks down. Perhaps it’s Ellen.”

“It might be.” Joe neared the chapel.

“While I have you. On a very serious note. I need to speak to you about something.”

“Sure.” Joe said as they walked.

“I want to have a memorial service for Frank.”

“For Frank?” Joe asked. It was something he didn’t want to hear or plan.

“Yes. I was very sorry to hear that the society had shot and killed him and I thought . . .”

Joe stopped walking.

“Something wrong?”

“No.” Joe spoke slow. “Go on. You were saying?”

“I was just saying that we as a community should offer a service to him. And seeing how you’re a church going man, I figured it’s something you’d want.”

Joe hesitated in his answering. “I . . . I’m not ready for it.”

Rev. Bob laid his hand on Joe’s shoulder. “I understand. I know it may be too soon. But no matter what he needs our prayers.”

Joe reached for the door of the chapel. “You’re right Reverend. He needs our prayers. When Ellen gets up. We’ll have it. Not until then.”

Reverend Bob nodded. “I understand.”

“And I better go see Henry.” Joe walked into the silent chapel, walking

up the small aisle and to the back where a door led to Reverend Bob's office. As described to him, there Henry was. Sitting on the floor every piece of the radio surrounded him. "Henry."

"Hey Joe." Henry kept his eyes on the shell of the radio.

"What are you doing?"

"Fixing this."

"Was it broke?"

"I don't think."

"So why are you fixing it?"

"I needed to do something intricate. It helps ease my mind."

"There are other things in Beginnings that need fixed."

"Yeah I know." Henry placed a piece of the radio back. "But this was just here. And well . . . I started."

Joe grunted as he sat with Henry on the floor. "What's on your mind?"

"I think you know."

"Is it about our little suspect meting?"

For the first time, Henry raised his eyes to Joe.

"All right." Joe stayed firm. "Get over it."

"I can't. It's not fair Joe. I love Beginnings. I'd die for Beginnings. I would never betray my home. And this means more to me than a place to live. I helped start this place. I was here from day one."

"I know this."

Henry dropped his screwdriver. "So then how can you even entertain the thought that I am working with George?"

"I don't."

"But I'm a suspect."

"No you aren't Henry. About keeping you on the list. We aren't. All right?"

"Really?" Henry asked as if he were nine.

"Really."

"Oh!" Henry gasped outward. "Oh." He grabbed his chest. "Thanks Joe." He leaned over and kissed Joe on the cheek. "Thanks."

Joe laughed at him. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure Joe."

"We love you Henry and we trust you. We know you well, that's why you aren't a suspect. But son, had this been the old world and I was working with the CIA on this. You'd probably be the number one suspect."

"Yeah I know. That's what bothering me Joe. If I didn't trust myself or know myself, after what Robbie said. I'd be my number one suspect too."

Joe snickered and rubbed Henry's hair. "Why don't you walk over and see my daughter. Maybe bitch to her so she can get out of this thing and yell at you."

"O.K." Henry said excitedly and stood up. "See ya."

"Henry." Joe grunted as he stood. "What about the radio."

"Oh." Henry hurried over scooped up all the parts quickly, shoved them inside of the shelled out object, placed on the back and secured it with a screw. "Done." He put the radio on Reverend Bob's desk again.

"I guess that will work." Joe waited for Henry and together they walked out.

As if it wasn't her normal look, Bev appeared as if she were up to something as she walked slowly down the corridor of the clinic. She waved and smiled flirtatious at Patrick as he sat at the nurses desk. And then Bev peeked into Ellen's room, saw no one was there and she entered. She pulled up a chair close to Ellen's head and sat down. "So Ellen." Bev spoke shipper. "Need a visitor?"

Jenny swished and swayed as she neared the front doors of the clinic carrying flowers in one hand a huge book in the other. She smiled at everyone she passed on her way in and those who were in the hall. She stopped at the lab and saw Johnny. "Hey Johnny, where's Dean?"

"In exam room three with Marcus. Why?"

"I want to ask him something. Can I bother him?"

"I don't know." Johnny turned around. "What do you want to ask him?"

"It's about Ellen. A girl thing."

Johnny nodded. "I'm sure it be O.K., just knock."

"O.K., thanks." Jenny moved down the hall, she could hear growling the closer she got to the examining rooms. She snickered as she determined it came from room three. She knocked once and opened the door. "Dean?"

Dean looked up, a syringe clenched between his teeth. A thrashing and growling Marcus was on the table. Melissa and Dean tried to hold him down.

"You busy?" Jenny asked.

"Yes!" Dean said through the syringe, trying to control Marcus.

"This will only take a second," Jenny walked into the room. "Hi Marcus. Dean do you think . . ."

"Jenny." Dean bounced around as Marcus thrashed more.

Jenny ignored the scene. "Dean, do you think I can lock Ellen's door. I'm reading *Gone with the Wind* to her and I want privacy because I've been acting it out."

Dean grumbled.

"I know you think it's petty, but yesterday Henry came in and made fun of me. Can I lock the door?"

"You can lock the door if you help us settle him down." Dean said through his struggle.

"All right." Jenny stepped closer. "Marcus?"

Dean's face turned red. "Jenny are you gonna help?"

"I am Dean." Jenny looked down at the thrashing boy. "Marcus? Ready?" Jenny cleared her throat and began to sing. "Sunrise, Sunset. Sunrise, Sunset . . ." As she sang Marcus immediately stopped thrashing. He opened his mouth wide exposing his fanged teeth and his head swayed back and forth. He tried to sing but all he made was a loud squealing sound. His attempt at carrying a tune.

Dean stepped back amazed. "Oh shit."

Jenny stopped singing for a moment, but Marcus didn't. "He loves show tunes. That's how I get him calm at school. Go on Dean do your thing."

Jenny continued to sing.

“And . . .” Bev spoke in a taunting manner to Ellen. “This little thing you have going is the best thing that could have happened to you. They say you can hear everything. That’s good. Because it’s my intention Ellen to keep you in there. Dean and I really don’t want you to come out. Yes, you heard me, Dean and I. Seems he was a little mad at you when you left with Frank. And well, I showed up and things happened. He was lonely, sad and yes . . . we fucked.” Bev giggled. “I can seduce him in here if you’d like. That way you can listen to his every moan.” Another giggled came from Bev. “There’s talk that you shut yourself in your world because you saw Frank die. Pity isn’t it? Did you see him die Ellen? Did you? How did they do it? Did they shoot him. I bet it was painful to watch the love of your life. A man you have known nearly as long as I’ve been alive . . . Die. Brutally, violently, bloody and . . .”

WHAM!

Bev’s words were never finished. Her face was greeted harshly with the fifth edition hardback version of *Gone with the Wind*. Her body flew back off the chair at the same time blood shot from her now broken nose. The moment she hit the floor was the moment, Jenny dove on her, straddled her body over Bev’s and began to pulverize her with punch after punch.

Joe was walking with Henry and Dean when they heard the screams coming from Ellen’s room. All three of them took off running only to see Bev trying to defend herself against an outraged Jenny.

“Christ.” Joe flew to the two women, grabbing on to Jenny who braced Bev’s throat. “Dean.”

Dean raced to help Joe but the more they pulled Jenny, the more Jenny pulled Bev’s neck. “Joe.” Dean spoke fast. “Hold tight, I’ll be right back.” He raced from the room.

Henry smiled and walked over to Ellen’s bed. “El.” He shook her. “El wake up. You’re missing this. Please. Get up. You’re missing this. Jenny’s beating the hell out of Bev.”

“Henry!” Joe yelled. “Do something here.” Joe took an elbow shot from Jenny in her attempt to get him off of her. He went flying back. “Do something.”

“I am Joe. I’m trying to wake up Ellen. I can’t believe this didn’t bring her out. El.” Henry shook her again. “Come on.”

Dean came flying back into the room. He actually paused to snicker as he saw Jenny over Bev. Uncapping a syringe with his teeth, Dean aimed at Jenny’s rear-end which was high in the air. He jabbed the needle into the flesh, plunged in the sedative and stepped back. “Five, four, three, two . . .”

Jenny fell over.

“One.” Dean smiled.

Bowman, North Dakota

The feeling of utter annoyance upset Hal's breathing and caused the vein in his left temple to protrude. But he tried to ignore Craig who followed him as he inspected how the food preparations were going in the kitchen. "Gentlemen this is looking great. I want a celebration because I feel all went well in Kansas." He lifted a pot lid and stopped. His head turned sharply to his left. "What!" He blasted at Craig.

"You do that on purpose don't you?"

"Do what?" Hal asked.

"Flex your muscle when you do things."

"I do not."

"Yes you do. You try to make it look real big, don't you?"

"Go away." Hal put down the pot lid.

"There it is again." Craig pointed. "Can I touch it?"

"No." Hal walked across the kitchen.

"I bet when you were younger you were into professional wrestling." Craig followed him. "Weren't you?"

Hal growled at him.

"Did you pose in front of your mirror?"

"Craig! The next time I need a sparing partner. You're it."

"O.K." Craig raised his fists and danced. "I'm ready for you. I must warn you. I'm tough."

"Sure you are." Hal moved to the door and stopped when Sgt. Ryder walked in.

"They're approaching town." Sgt. Ryder said.

"And? Did you count the men?"

Sgt. Ryder smiled and held up a clenched fist. It was the signal for 'zero' losses.

"Oh yes!" Hal said with excitement and ran from the kitchen.

Sgt. Ryder chased after him, catching up with Hal at the edge of town. The men drew closer on their horseback. "No losses. Must've been an easy victory."

"You know." Hal looked proud. "Now that the Kansas site is out of the way. You know what is next."

"Yes I do."

"Good. Then tonight, you and I will sit down and work it out. In a day or two we go out and search for the Beginnings man along with our own. They're together. I feel it. But for now . . ." Hal took off again this time to greet his men before they even made it to town.

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Beginnings, Montana

Even though Bev's nose was bandaged, her eyes blackened and her neck red, she still held attitude as she sat in Andrea's office. Andrea sat in a chair humming softly and swinging her crossed legs. She seemed as if she could

care less being there. Henry paced, and Joe sat behind Andrea's desk.

"Leader or Father?" Bev said snidely.

Joe heard Henry groan and he held up his hand to him. "Listen to me Bev. You're are this close to being ousted."

"On what grounds? I know the rules." Bev asked. "What did I do? I got beat up."

"Community disruption." Joe told her.

"Who am I disrupting?" Bev asked. "I was visiting your daughter. Jenny was the one disrupting. Since when was it against Beginnings rules to visit a sick patient in the clinic."

"Since when do you care about Ellen?"

"I care." Bev said. "I care about all my sisters here. And there aren't that many of us and you know it. Want the population to grow Joe? Is throwing out one of the few women the way to do it."

Henry who had paced himself into a corner, turned around. He had enough. "I want her out Joe. Kick her out of this community."

Bev laughed arrogantly. "Listen to you the jilted lover. Don't want one of your women with the other? Oh, I forgot, it's your precious Ellen we're talking about. Joe's precious Ellen, she does no wrong. You alone can't throw me out Henry. You're only a council member."

Henry saw red and an anger swept on him never shown before. He raged to Bev, slamming his hands hard on Andrea's desk as he placed his face close to hers. "Well then you listen to me you little bitch. When the day comes that I take over this community, rules or no rules, if you're still around I will see you gone. Gone. And go near Ellen again and I swear by my soul I will personally find away to get you out of here. Don't test me. Don't."

Andrea just calmly looked up from her hands that she stared at.

Joe choked. "Henry?" He placed his hands on Henry's chest moving him back. "Calm down."

Using his grip on the desk, Henry pushed himself back and turned away. He ran his hand down his face and tried to get his anger under control.

Joe looked at Bev. He spoke calm. "I want you to just hear what I'm saying. O.K.? This is the leader of this community talking. Not Ellen's father. Rules can be seen in many different ways as you are aware of. Just like the criminal can test the law, the lawmaker can conform it. Got that. My suggestion to you little girl is watch your step around here." Joe leaned back in the chair. "Because you are close to reaching the point where I don't think a single person in Beginnings would miss you if they woke up one morning to find out you decided on your own to leave in the middle of the night." Joe reached into his pocket and grabbed a cigarette. "That's all. Now wait in the hall until someone comes to take you to cool down. Rules are rules." Joe smiled.

Slowly Bev stood from the chair, she looked at Joe, at Andrea who said nothing, then to an angry Henry who had his back to her. She said no more words as she left.

Joe slowly let out the breath he held. "Henry, bring Jenny in here." When Henry moved to the door, Joe turned to Andrea. "And why in God's name are you so quiet."

Andrea just looked up. "I'm not wasting my breath on her. Why? Let it go. Let her stay. Say no more. Because sooner or later someone is just going to kill her."

Joe's mouth dropped open at the same time Henry came back with Jenny and John Matoose. "John. What the hell are you doing here."

John had one arm around a sobbing Jenny, he led her in then shut the door. "I'm not leaving my wife's side."

"We need to talk to her." Joe said.

"No Joe." John argued as he helped Jenny to sit down. "This is wrong. Jenny was defending your daughter. She shouldn't get into any trouble at all over . . ."

"John!" Joe raised his voice. "Pipe down and calm down or I'll make you leave." Joe looked to Jenny. Her face was red and blotched. She hyperventilated through the tears that streamed down her face. "Now Jenny . . ."

Jenny interrupted with a loud burst of sobs. "Oh Joe." She shivered her breath. "I . . . I went in there. She was saying terrible things to Ellen. Terrible. I . . . I couldn't help myself. I don't know why I did it. I'm sorry Joe. I was out of control. I was premenstrual. Check my schedule."

Joe winced and held up his hand. "Jenny calm down."

"I . . . I . . . I . . . can't."

Joe tried not to laugh. He looked at Andrea who had stood up and placed a comforting arm around Jenny. "Andrea, could you?" Joe pointed to her seat. Andrea sat down. "Thank you. Now Jenny. We have fighting rules here. And you know they say three hours in holding to cool down." Joe held up his hand to John before John could say anything. "As community leader you have to go to holding, But . . . I'm letting the protective instincts of a father kick in here. You'll say you went to holding, no one will be the wiser. Go . . . go up the stables or something. Cole won't spill his guts. Spend some time up there. You like the horses. O.K.?"

Jenny nodded.

"For the record. I can not condone what you did. Off the record. Thank you for defending my daughter. Now . . . there is a price to pay for this lack of holding thing I'm doing here." Joe looked at Henry, Andrea and John. "Could I just have a moment with Jenny alone please. Thanks." he waited until they all left the office, leaving him alone with Jenny. "I have a favor to ask."

"What's that?" Jenny almost looked frightened.

Joe stood up and walked around the desk. He sat on the edge of it in front of Jenny. "I want Bev out of this community. And especially as a woman, she's protected by rules I made. And I have a feeling she's gonna lay low for a while. So . . ." Joe clapped his hands together then rubbed them. "If she's going to stay, she'll stay. But you Jenny are in a position to help me. Silently, but help me. Staying in the realms of Beginnings rules. While Bev is in Beginnings, I would like you Jenny to make her life a miserable living hell."

First Jenny was silent, then she smiled. "With pleasure Joe."

"Good girl." Joe patted her cheek, reached out his hand, grabbed Jenny's and helped her to her feet. He walked her to the door and opened it. They waited in the hall "Henry." Joe called him and winked. "Take our Jenny to holding."

Henry nodded, and walked up to Jenny.

Jenny stopped before leaving, kissed Joe on the cheek, then John. She moved down the hall with Henry, flipping off Bev who was still there and happily kept on walking.

Birmingham Alabama

The room was dark. A little of the fading day cast a small amount of light into the mid size room. No blankets, no beds, no food. A toilet. The floor was concrete, dirty and hard. Four UWA soldiers sat against the wall. They too were dirty, bloodied and beaten. Yet not one of them looked to show the signs of wearing down. Kyle, Link, Ted and Jeff were determined to remain that way.

“Fuck with them.” Link said. A black man, who’s always shaven clean head was starting to grow hair. “Fuck with them.” He touched his lip that bled.

“How?” Kyle asked then saw Ted snickering. “What’s up with you.”

“Nothing.” Ted smiled and shook his head. “Can you imagine if one of us broke . . .” He paused to laugh. “Just one of us see. And we spilled our guts.”

Jeff pointed to his own temple and twirled his finger looking at Ted.

Link huffed heavily. “Man, what is up with you. Oh really fuckin funny, one of us breaking and spilling our guts about where we are.”

“It is if they get all their men together and head off to Tijuana.” Ted laughed and rubbed his nose. It trickled blood. “Can you see it.” He began to act dramatic holding his hands up. “No, no. I can’t take it anymore. Please. Please. I’ll tell you where our base camp is.”

Kyle quickly looked to Link. “We’re all dead anyhow.”

Link nodded. “Yes we are. So why not go out with a laugh. Besides the minute they move across Kansas, our border scouts will spot them and . . . chances are the captain will head them off and take them out. Their so weak.”

Jeff shook his head. “They got us now, didn’t they.”

Kyle nodded. “True. O.K., I say we go with Ted’s crazy idea. Three of us will continue to give the pledge and name and rank. And one of us will break. But before we decide which one of us will do that. Let’s decide where we’re sending them.”

The four of them gathered closer and began to discuss the goose chase they were going to send the Society on. To them it was thinking. And thinking helped them keep their wits. And anything at that moment that could do that, was better then sitting in silence waiting for the next wave of interrogation.

Beginnings, Montana

With her knitting draped across her lap, Andrea sat, with her bible on Ellen’s bed. She’d knit and read to Ellen, then stare into Ellen’s blankly open eyes. Andrea spoke sweet and motherly. Trying her hardest to be comforting. Knowing within her soul that Ellen needed to be pulled out, more so then come out on her own. And to Andrea, the love of her family and the love of God were the only things that would help. “Didn’t like that one?” Andrea shook her head. “You know, I remember when my father was ill. He wasn’t scared of dying, he was scared of living. He kept on telling me my mother was holding out her hand to him.” Andrea shook her head with a remembering tsk. “The Good Lord took

him fast. Brought him home. But see Ellen, the Good Lord did not take you. He spared you. You have to keep asking yourself. Would Frank want me like this? Would he? You can not be afraid to face life.” Andrea’s hands dropped to her lap, she stopped knitting. “I have a little song. Would you mind if I sang it for you?” Subtly, Andrea cleared her throat and hummed first. Slow, soft and gospel-like, the way that Andrea always sang. *“You can cross the barren desert. But you shall not die of thirst. You shall wander far in safety. Though you do not know the way. You can speak to men in foreign lands and all will understand. You will see the face of God and live . . . Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me. And I will give you . . .”* Andrea’s singing slowed down more as she looked at Ellen. *“You . . . Oh Sweet Jesus.”* The knitting fell from her lap and onto the ground. She sprang up and raced out of the room to get Dean when she saw--from Ellen’s open lifeless eyes--a single tear fall.

Dean barreled in the room. He was so full of hope at that second, he could barely catch his breath. He dropped to his knees at Ellen’s bedside.

Robbie and Henry raced in, followed by Joe. They were all around the clinic since the recent Jenny episode.

Joe shifted his eyes. “Andrea, what’s . . .”

Andrea held up her hand to silence the three and stop any questions they could ask. She just watched a quiet Dean.

On his knees, Dean folded his hand over Ellen’s hands. He placed his face close to hers. He looked into the eyes that didn’t blink. Then to the tear that had rolled down and welled on the side of her nose. “What are you trying to tell us?” He asked softly. “El, please.” Dean closed his eyes and lowered his lips to Ellen. Gently he touched them down to her and kissed where her tear had fallen. Pulling away, he brought his lips into his mouth and tasted the saltiness of Ellen’s tear. Dean clenched Ellen’s hands tighter then dropped his head forward to the bed almost in a defeat. And it was at that moment, everyone else left the room.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

“What do you mean she may be coming out of it.” George paced around his house as he spoke on the phone. He breathed hard. “All right. Look, don’t take a chance. O.K.? Let her come out of it. We weren’t expecting her to slip into that thing anyhow? Of course we were expecting her with us.” George was silent and listening. “We don’t need her. I have another plan. They know I have someone working for me. Or at least we think they do. If they don’t, someone will. No . . . no. I won’t take that chance with you. I promise. I’m going to use the fact that I have you in there as leverage. I need to call upon you again. Can I?” George nodded with a smile. “Good.” He heard a knock at his front door. He walked to it and opened it. “Look, I have to go. My assistant just walked in. I’ll call you when I get situated. Be careful. I mean it. Take care.”

George disconnected the call and turned to Jeremy. "Yes. It's late. What's up."

"Sir, the men are here to load your bags."

"Bags?" George asked. Seemingly clueless.

"Yes, for your trip."

"You mean bag. One and it's not packed yet."

"But sir." Jeremy said. "The train is due and they'd like to load it."

"Tell them to load it for crying out loud. When I go tomorrow, my bag will go with me."

"Just trying to help your trip go smoother."

"There are other things that could have made this trip go smoother. But . . . I appreciate the thought."

Jeremy paused in walking out. "Really?"

"No." George said. "Being polite."

Jeremy said nothing further, he just walked out. He wouldn't let George bother him because he knew that the days to come would be peaceful ones--not to mention less stressful ones--while George was away on Society business.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal snapped his chair forward from the hind legs he teetered it on and leaned, extending out a notebook to Sgt. Ryder who sat on the floor of the front porch with him. "Do you suppose I've worded this too formal?"

"Probably." Sgt. Ryder didn't even look at what Hal wrote. "You do everything so formal."

"I do not. Listen to this." Hal sat back. "On this date . . . I left it blank . . . an agreement was reached between the leader, Chief . . . I left blank . . . of Beginnings Montana and Captain Hal Slagel of The United Western Alliance. The following terms were agreed upon by both parties and this agreement shall remain in effect for two years from the date of this agreement with an option to renew at either parties request."

"Formal." Sgt. Ryder said. "What are the terms?"

"O.K., here's what I'm offering." Hal cleared his throat. "The United Western Alliance, in exchange for food shall provide Beginnings with workers for the maintaining and working of the fields. Plus workers which Beginnings deems comparable for a price of food. Meaning . . ."

"Meaning." Sgt. Ryder rolled his eyes. "We help them work the fields but they need it to compensate for the extra food they have to grow. So what is Beginnings getting? More workers. Fair exchange, we know they run a minimal staff for the industry they are building there."

"Shall I continue?" Hal asked and didn't get an answer, but continued anyhow. "UWA workers can be exchanged for other workers at any time at the UWA discretion." He didn't get a response from Sgt. Ryder. "In exchange for medical care over and above necessary treatment, the UWA shall provide Beginnings with added protection to their security walls. Pretty good huh?"

"Health care."

"A must. Perhaps Blue can get some experience there."

"You should put that down." Sgt. Ryder said with sarcasm.

“I will. Thanks.” Hal made a notation. “This isn’t final yet.”

“I completely understand. Anything else?”

“I thought this would be a bonus. Beginnings can request of the UWA, ‘X’ amount of men, if need be in their battle against the society.” Hal flipped a page in his notes. “Elliott? Do you think we should as a bonus offer some assistance in training their men. They may need it.”

“They may. I’d put it in.”

“I will.” Hal wrote down. “And the last thing I have so far is . . . Any UWA worker who does not abide by Beginnings rules can not be shot.”

Sgt Ryder quickly looked back at Hal. “Shot? Where is that coming from?”

“I’m betting they shoot people who break rules. For example if they steal and such.”

“Why would you say that?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Well, think about it. You had a Beginnings man shooting dead men in the head.” Hal held out his hand as if to say, ‘see my point’.

“You’ve worked hard on that.”

“I needed something to help take my mind off our men leaving for the search tomorrow.”

Sgt. Ryder gave a confident look. “I have good feelings about that. A few days, a week tops, we’ll hear something. And then you’ll have leverage to approach Beginnings with. Until then . . .”

“I know, I know. We’ll come off as crack pots. They won’t take us serious. They’re so official in Beginnings. I think that’s why I’m working on an official agreement. They’re so organized. They make their own gas, they supply their own energy. Medical help is always there. Ample food. No violence, that we can hear. They have a good time. And you even have the society with their high tech scientists. They started the steam engines trains again. Which by the way, I want to highjack one or what ever you would call it. You think we could?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“How would we train for something like that though.” Hal shrugged. “I think it would be fun. We’d have to wait until they run the lines closer to us.”

“Won’t be for a while. Our scouts say they only extend the lines as far as Alabama.”

“Anyway, you’ve got me off the subject.”

Wanting to say ‘me?’ Sgt. Ryder refrained. “Sorry. Go on.”

“Thanks. I guess . . . I guess with Beginnings and the Society so like they are, I don’t want Beginnings to think I’m unorganized or not together.”

Sgt. Ryder laughed. “You? A little eccentric at times, yes. Unorganized no. If I may, I’d like to compliment you. But I don’t want to hear any typical arrogant comments.”

“From me? Never. O.K., I won’t. Go on..”

Sgt. Ryder shook his head with a smile. “The UWA may not be as high tech as they are. And we may be more old world than when the plague hit, but we are every bit as organized as they are. You got us all together. You have men who trust you. Listen to you. Follow you. Because you have a leadership quality like I have never seen before in my life.”

“I do, don’t I?”

“See!”

Hal started to laugh and he gave a swift pat to Sgt. Ryder's back. "Joking. Thank you. I guess I owe that to my father. He taught all of us boys to stand on our own and take charge. Because that's the kind of man I remember him being. A leader."

"Then that's a fond memory. And you should keep it that way, because that's all we have left of our families, isn't it?"

"Yes." Hel leaned back in his chair and picked up his notes again. "Sadly enough. Yes it is."

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Beginnings Montana

It was late, and Dean looked as tired and drawn as the day had been long for him. He hadn't left Ellen's side since she had shed her tear. Perhaps hope kept him there. That and the fact that he didn't want to miss a single reaction she had. Not one. Even if it was a tear. Dean wanted to be there.

He sat in a chair, holding her hand, stroking her face. A position he held and never left no matter who walked in the room. He begged her in his mind and through his words, to just come out of it. He had spoke so steadily and so much to Ellen, his voice was raspy.

"O.K." Dean tried to clear his dry throat to make it more clearer. But no matter what he did, his words were sad. Whether he smiled when he said them, so many emotions came through in his words. "I'm pulling out all stops here Ellen. I wanted to wait until you woke up, but . . . I have to now. I have a surprise for you. They got new housing for us. Yeah. No more town houses for you El. No more. I got a house. A modular one, but big. It's perfect for you El. You can decorate it, show it off. The house thing, it may seem so trivial or materialistic, but I wanted to give you something. Something that would make you happy. And it's all for you. I hope . . . I hope you still want to live with me." Dean kissed her hand. "I know you were staying with Henry for a while for reasons I don't think we should talk about. But when you leave there, I'd like you to come back with me. We were uh . . . getting it down pat pretty good. Even though you bitched at me about the bubbles on the soap. And for coming home late for dinner. El . . ." Dean dropped his voice to a whisper. "The bitching may get to me. But don't let me kid you. I acted . . . I acted like it didn't matter to me when you moved back home. It did. Oh God did it matter. I don't think you realize how much it means to wake up and see you there. My sun rises and sets around you. I don't know why you won't come back to this world with me. Maybe you don't think I'd understand. I do. I would. And if you'd just come out, El, I swear to you I will help you though this every step of the way. I love you." Dean brushed his cheek against her hand. "I love you so much. I know I may never be the love of your life. But know that you're mine." He raised his eyes to her. "You're mine. You're that reason that I even feel. We all need you out here El. The kids need you. I . . . I need you. Did you ever hear the saying, 'the half that makes me whole'? You're it for me. And until you come out of this, I just . . . I just won't be whole." Dean kissed her softly. "Come out for me El. Please, come out for me."

Dean said nothing, he stared at Ellen. He hoped and he prayed that his

words reached her. They didn't. He didn't get any reaction at all and his heart sunk. Slowly he released her hand and stood up. He stretched and walked to the door, closing it. Walking over to her bed, Dean reached for the dim light, turning it on. Dean moved to the other side of the bed, hesitated, then laid down next to Ellen. He scooted into her and draped his arm around her waist, laying his lips so lightly on her neck.

Upon his touch and hold. And upon his body meeting hers, it was like every bit of tension in Ellen's body disappeared. She gasped outward and her body backed more into Dean's.

Dean shook when he felt her touch him, her arm clenched to his, pulling his hold more around her. "El?" Dean's voice quivered. "Ellen." He held her tighter following the lead of what she wanted. And when he did, loud, long and emotionally, Ellen cried out a heart breaking sob. It shot through Dean painfully and he closed his eyes. His lips planted firm to her cheek and if Dean was able to pull her inside of him, he would.

Ellen just kept crying. Sobbing and crying. And in a gentle, rocking, comforting manner, Dean clung to her. On the bed, they were intertwined, both physically and emotionally. Joined in a moment that could never be taken from them. A gift to Dean. A release for Ellen. A breakthrough for both of them. Dean was there, he reached out his hand. Ellen saw it, she took it, and she came back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

September 5
Beginnings, Montana

One ring. Two. Joe grumbled and Andrea sat up at the phone's ringing. "Joe want me to get that?" She asked then noticed the time of four a.m. "No." Coughing once, Joe reached for the phone which sat charging next to his bed. He cleared his throat. "Hello."
Softly Dean spoke. "Joe I need you to come down to the clinic. O.K.?"
"What's wrong."
"Just get here."
Joe looked at the receiver when Dean disconnected the call. "Shit." Joe sat up and flung the covers off of him.
"What's wrong?"
"I don't know. Dean said to get to the clinic."
"You think it's Ellen."
"I hope not." Joe stepped into his trousers.
"Sweet Jesus." Andrea closed her eyes. "I'll say a prayer."
"Please do." Joe searched for his shirt. He just wanted to get dressed as fast as he could and get down to the clinic.

Jess had knocked on Robbie's bedroom door at least five times and didn't get an answer. Half asleep himself, Jess walked in. "Robbie." he called out. "Robbie."

"Huh?"

Jess knew he had to wake Robbie, so he turned on the light.

Robbie grunted loudly, sitting up some and rubbing his eyes. "What's up?" he squinted.

"Glen from the clinic just called here. He said you might want to get down there right away. He didn't say why. I asked if it had to do with Ellen and he said . . . he said yes."

Robbie immediately sprang from the bed. "Shit. Thanks Jess." In his boxer shorts only and his hair tossed about, Robbie, like Joe scurried about his room for clothes.

Jenny showed up at Dean's house still wearing her long pink nightgown with the ribbon on the front. Her fuzzy bunny slippers poked through the bottoms. Her red hair pulled in a wild ponytail on top of her head. And her nose still sported the sinus strip that helped keep her nostrils open while she slept.

Henry jolted in fright when he saw her then, before commenting, remembered he summoned her for a favor. "Thanks Jenny for hurrying over." He exchanged places with her at the doorway.

"Not a problem. I'll just crash on the couch."

"Thanks. I'll let you know what's going on." Henry flew out pulling the door closed.

Jenny just plopped on the couch, shut of the light, fell sideways and was sleeping again before she hit the cushion.

Wearing an unbuttoned white shirt over his tee shirt, Joe walked down the dimly lit corridor of the clinic. He moved fast, but not too fast, because a part of him was still afraid of what Dean was going to tell him.

“Dad!” Robbie’s voice echoed in the empty hall.

Joe stopped walking and turned. Robbie was racing down and behind him, Henry had entered the clinic. Joe waited for them.

“Dad, what’s going on?” Robbie asked.

“I don’t know.” Joe lifted his hands. “Did Dean call you?”

“No. Jess said Glen did.”

Henry joined them, out of breath. “Glen called me too. He didn’t say anything. Just that it had to do with Ellen.”

Joe shook his head. “Well that’s more than I got from Dean. Let’s go. It’s time to find out.”

Together, the three of them walked down toward Ellen’s room. When they got there, Dean was coming out and he pulled the door closed. He wasn’t expecting to see Joe and them in the hall so soon and it showed on Dean’s face, along with something else.

Joe took a step to him. “Dean?” Joe spoke soft looking at Dean’s face. His eyes red, his face drawn. “My God. Were you crying? Oh my God.” Joe lost his breath.

Robbie and Henry started talking fast and panicked at the same time. So much so, that Dean didn’t understand them.

Dean held up his hand. “No. Listen.” He took a second in thought. “I was crying. Yes. But not why you think. Ellen . . . El’s come out of it.” As he thought would happen, a rush from the three of them as they headed to her door. Dean stopped them. “Wait. Please. Just wait.” he waited until they stopped. “The reason I was so vague is because I don’t want this out of control. Ellen has come out, yes. But for the next few hours her situation is delicate. She’s upset, cries easily. I’ve given her a mild sedative to help.”

Henry didn’t understand this. “A sedative. Why? She just came back to us.”

“She’s not sleeping by no means. She hasn’t said much.” Dean said. “And that’s what I want to speak to you about. No questions. Absolutely no questions to her about what happened to her or to Frank. Nothing. In this time frame right now, if by chance she’s not remembering anything I don’t want her to recall it and slip away from us again. When I see she’s more stable we can ask her. Until then, nothing. Let her be the one to talk. Just be a sense of support.” Dean moved back to the door and opened it.

Joe walked in first. He wasn’t supposed to show emotions but he couldn’t help it. Seeing Ellen laying on her back propped up. And seeing her raise her eyes to him made Joe rush to her side, sit on the bed and take her into his arms. “Oh God.” Joe held her tight and Ellen clung back.

“Joe.” She only said his name and then she stared to cry. “Oh Joe.” She cried harder.

“It’s all right.” Joe spoke soothing, his hand cupped her head, holding

Ellen's face tight to his. "It's all right. I'm right here. Look who's come to see you."

Robbie and Henry both moved apprehensively to the scene and closer to the bed.

Ellen pulled some from Joe and saw Henry first.

"Hey El." Henry smiled. "I missed you." He reached out his hand to her and Ellen clenched it and she pulled Henry to her. Joe moved from the way to let Henry embrace Ellen. Henry held her trying not to release the feelings that simmered inside. And so as not to upset Ellen anymore, he pulled back. "I don't want to hog this moment either." He kissed her on the cheek then stood up.

Ellen saw Robbie. It was obvious how hard she swallowed and her eyes welled up again. Her breath shivered when Robbie sat near her on the bed.

Robbie didn't understand her reaction. She wasn't reaching to him like Joe or Henry. Did she remember how he was scared when he found her? How he avoided the room. At that moment, Robbie was afraid to say anything.. With a trembling hand he laid it on Ellen's face. "Welcome home."

Ellen's body began to shake and her breath quivered as she breathed. With a slight gasp her hand shot up fast laying over Robbie's and pressing his hand firmer to her face. "You carried me. You carried me." She tilted her head, and a tear ran down her face, it slipped between her cheek and Robbie's palm. She looked up to him and saw the redness building in his eyes, a gloss. "You held me . . . you held me in your arms and you ran with me." She cried as she spoke moving closer to him. "I couldn't talk. But when . . . when I heard you. When I felt you." Ellen's words were emotionally choppy. "I kept say-saying to myself. I'm home. I'm safe. Robbie's got me. Robbie's got me."

Robbie's eyes closed tight and his head dropped. He felt Ellen fall forward to his chest and he wrapped his arms around her. Unlike Joe and Henry who didn't want to get too emotional at the moment in front of Ellen, Robbie did. And for himself, for Frank, and for what had happened with Ellen, Robbie held on for a very long time.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

With the dawn's light behind them, forty UWA soldiers stood in a long straight line. Side by side. Set by their right foot was a bag, Behind the each of them their horse.

Hal walked slow in front of them. He'd stop to adjust a bandana, a sword, rifle. He inspected each man. When he was finished with the line he paced back and stood beside Sgt. Ryder. "All ten teams are given a map. You know which directions you are to go. This is not a sneak attack Gentleman. Remember that. It is a scouting and search mission. Should you find anything, you ride back home and tell us. You should be no more than a three day ride from us." Hal's voice dropped in seriousness, but not in firmness. "Listen . . . you are not out to be heros. Don't put yourself in any danger. I want all of you back safe and alive. Got that." Hal cleared his throat. "May we find what we do seek."

Sgt. Ryder snapped to attention calling it out as he did and saluting.

“Attention!”

All forty at the same time saluted.

Hal returned the salute. “Gentlemen. Mount up!”

There was a simultaneous clicking of boots and all forty men bent down at the same time, tossed their bags over their horses and mounted.

When their horse were lined up and the men were ready, Hal faced them. “May you who represent the UWA, be successful. Most of all, may you all return home. Good luck and God speed to all of you.” He nodded to the leader of the group and with that, all forty men began to ride off.

In the dust of the horses feet Hal stood with Sgt. Ryder. Watching the fading of his men. And he watched with hope, with wishes for their safe return. But most of all he watched with pride.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry’s hair was as wet as Ellen’s. She sat staring out the window, wearing a white robe while Henry combed her hair. He stood behind her, speaking to her, trying to get more than a simple one word answer or the partial smile she would give when he told her something funny. He probably combed her hair more than he needed to. But he wanted an excuse to stare out that window and spend time with Ellen.

“Did you like the picture Alex drew for you?” Henry asked.

“Yes.” Ellen answered.

“The kids were so happy to see you. I’m sorry they asked about Frank.”

Ellen just closed her eyes.

“Do you remember when I told you about the walk-ins in Beginnings?”

“No.”

“Well they are every Friday night. Trish promised a comedy tonight. She finally clarified it to the men what she meant by adult. They thought she was showing pornos.”

Ellen chuckled once and it was soft.

“Did you want me to pull your hair back for you when it’s dry?”

“No.”

“Is there anything El. Anything I can do for you.” Henry stopped combing and walked to in front of her. He knelt down. “Anything.”

“No Henry.” She shivered. “Um . . .” Her eyes stayed glued on the window. “Thanks for shaving my legs for me.” She pulled the robe open some. Her knees had healing brush burns on them and where she had been grazed by the bullet she was stitched. “You did good.”

Henry smiled, his hand laid on her shin. “Smooth huh?”

“They were a mess.”

“Nah.” Henry shook his head. “Very European.” Henry looked up quickly when Ellen’s door opened and Dean walked in. “Hey, look who’s here?”

Ellen looked over her shoulder and smiled. She turned back to the window.

Dean walked in quickly. “Henry we have that meeting. And I want to

check on Ellen.”

“Aw Dean you always check on Ellen.” Henry looked back to Ellen. “He’s in here all the time.”

“I don’t mind.” Ellen reached her hand up and Dean grabbed it.

Dean kissed her, kept his face close to hers and kissed her again. He ran his hand down the back of her hair. “I see you got a shower. You look good.” Dean winked. “Now, I want to check your responses and reflexes, it’s been eight hours. I bet they . . . Henry?” Dean peered at him. “Why is your hair wet?”

“I helped Ellen take a shower. I shaved her legs and underarms Dean.”

“Yeah but why are you wet?” Dean reiterated.

“I just said. I helped Ellen take a shower.”

“You took one with her. Didn’t you?”

“Dean.” Henry chuckled. “Would be a little difficult shaving her legs if I had to reach in the stall.”

“You could have shaved them before her shower Henry.”

Henry cringed. “Oh no, then she gets that razor rash. Always happens when Ellen shaves outside of the shower. Right El?”

Ellen smiled.

“Dean.” Henry spoke serious. “It wasn’t sexual and . . . you are just so possessive with her anymore. El, he’s so possessive with you. Boy he really is gonna think he owns you once he gets you in the new . . .” Dean’s hand quickly covered Henry’s mouth.

“Leave Henry.” Dean motioned his head to the door. “Please.”

Henry pulled Dean’s hand away. “But I thought you told her.”

“Leave. And thank you for helping her take a shower.”

“O.K.” Henry said disappointed and kissed Ellen. “I’ll be back later after our meeting. A meeting I plan on driving Dean crazy during.” Henry moved to the door. “Bye El.”

“Bye Henry.” Ellen spoke with a small smile. “Thank you.”

Henry stepped out, pulling the door closed. In the hall he paused. He had wished by his staying upbeat it would maybe help Ellen. It didn’t. But Henry wasn’t giving up. He’d try later. And if that didn’t work, he try again.

Dean turned Ellen’s chair away from the window. “It’s not good for your eyes. All right? You can’t keep staring out.”

“I know.”

“O.K.” Dean rested his hands on Ellen’s knees. “I know your legs are weak and they’re hurt. But the injuries aren’t bad. So I need you to try to walk around for a little while. Can you?”

“I want to.”

“Good.” Dean stood up and held out his hand. “I’ll walk with you. Down the hall and back?”

“Dean. No.” Ellen held his hand tight. “For right now, can we walk around the room? I’m just a little afraid to step outside.”

“We’re not going outside hon. Just in the hall.”

Ellen stood up but didn’t walk. “Please. Just the room. Please.”

“O.K.” Dean locked his fingers with hers. “Just the room.”

As they moved slowly around the room, Dean could feel Ellen tremble some. He knew it wasn’t pain that caused it. It was something else. A rare thing

for Ellen. It was fright.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

UWA soldier, Ted, took a hard hit to his face. One that vibrated his cheeks and caused blood to shoot from his mouth as his head violently jolted left and he fell to the floor. Two society soldiers reached for him, lifting him up harshly.

“Enough!” Ted began to cry. “All right. All right. I’ll tell you anything.” He sobbed harder. “Anything you need to know. Just stop. Just . . . stop.”

Before another hit was delivered, a Lt. Merrick held up his hand stopping his society soldier. “If you lie to us you die.”

Ted shook his head holding his hands on his eyes.

“All right. How many men are in your camp at this moment.”

“Over five hundred.” Ted spoke muffled.

“Is your leader there.”

“Yes.”

“Is it secured.”

“It’s in a valley. A small town.”

“Where?” Lt. Merrick asked.

Ted didn’t answer.

“Where!” Lt. Merrick shouted.

Ted hesitated and lifted his head. “In a town called . . . Kingman Arizona.”

Lt. Merrick snapped his finger to the society soldiers. “Let’s take him back with the others.”

^^^

Beginnings Montana

Joe had his elbow on his desk and his head tilted into the palm of his hand. The only expression on his face as he sat there listening to Henry, was the squashed appearance his cheek gave as he pressed his face harder and harder into his hand the more Henry talked. Occasionally, Joe would look to Robbie who was in deep thought, not paying any attention to Henry at all.

“You have to do something Joe.” Henry said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Really, he’s hogging her. Acting like she’s all his. I can’t be in there five minutes with her without him coming in and checking on her.”

“Henry.” Joe’s hand slid down his face. “He’s her doctor. And he’s concerned. Now can we drop this?”

“I’d really prefer you speak to him.”

“Henry, I don’t want to . . .” Joe raised his head when Dean walked in. “Thank God.”

Henry turned back, rolled his eyes and huffed. "Swell, now you're praising him."

Joe's hand slammed hard on the desk. "Henry! Knock it off."

"Tell him Joe. Tell him now."

"Tell me what?" Dean asked as he sat down.

Henry looked smug. "To quit hogging Ellen. Others would like to spend time with her."

"Henry." Dean said his name calm.

"What?"

"Shut up." Dean looked back to Joe. "I'm ready."

"A little hostile Dean?" Joe asked.

"Toward Henry right now? Yes." Dean nodded.

"Me?" Henry pointed to his own chest. "What did I do?"

"Dad." Robbie called out. "Can we do this?"

"Yes." Joe answered. "First, how's Ellen doing. Did she say if she remembers anything while she was in shock?"

"Yes." Dean shook his head. "And not much. The last thing she remembers fully is Robbie running with her. And the only thing she remembers of the past few days is . . ." Dean shifted his eyes to Robbie "Hearing Robbie's voice talking and singing to her." Dean looked upset over that. He took a long breath and raised his eyebrows. "But . . . when she was coming out, she did remember me talking to her. She doesn't know what all I said but she told me it made her cry and that's what brought her out. She wanted to cry."

"Any recollection what so ever of the society dropping her off here?" Joe asked.

"If she does have any, she's not saying it." Dean answered. "It may be too painful to recall what she suffered at their hands. And I'm not pushing it. Not yet."

"Neither will I." Joe pulled his notes to in front of him. "All right. Today's lucky contestants in the Beginnings game of suspects are . . . Johnny and Reverend Bob." Joe noticed how excited Henry was, that Henry actually smiled brightly and shuffled in his seat. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Henry held up his hand. "Go on."

"You have something to share."

"Oh I'd rather wait thank you." Henry nodded.

Joe grumbled. "All right, let's start with Johnny." Joe heard a Henry whine. "Henry!"

"Sorry. I just want to do Reverend Bob." Henry looked sharply to Robbie when Robbie snickered.. "Oh my God are you sick." Henry scolded. "That's not what I meant. Joe your son is sick minded."

"Yes I know, and he has room to talk."

Robbie quickly looked at Joe. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll find out." Joe cleared his throat and switched back to the subject of suspects. "Johnny. All right. I feel he has the means. The definite means to do this. Dean?"

"Medically yes." Dean said. "He has the knowledge to switch the bloods, mess with batch formulas in the computer and intentionally distribute the virus to Jenny without suspicion. Meaning, he can find another way to medically do it without leaving evidence."

Henry shook his head. "I'm confused Dean." Henry ignored Robbie's

'always'. "You mentioned mess up batch formulas. What does that have to do with what's at hand?"

"Could mean a lot." Dean shuffled in his chair. "This is just theory Joe. O.K.? But, a while back, before I lost my sight we were working on agent seventeen. I was up there mixing a test batch and I followed the formula off the computer exactly. It was wrong. It was transposed wrong."

"Ellen could have done that." Joe stated. "You two were the only ones working on that. Remember? Her mouth starts going or her mind wandering and she could have screwed up the translation."

"And I blamed her for it. But, I'm only giving theories. That set me back and I wasted a lot of ingredients that day. And as far as being the only ones working on it. No, we weren't. All of us did. That was before we knew it could be a potential cure and it was our best shot. That was before Robbie came back with the virus."

Henry drew up a thinking look. "So going on your theory that someone deliberately set you back., That also gives a means to Jason. Because if I'm remembering correctly, you and Ellen were at each others throat right before Robbie came back. You were being mean to Ellen. Down right nasty. Unfair. You asked Jason to work with you instead. So childish."

Robbie gasped in a joking manner. "Dean, you dick."

"Are we done bashing me?" Dean asked. "Thanks. I thought of that and I plan on bringing up the same thing when we discuss Jason. It's just a theory and a point."

"Good point." Joe commented. "All right, motive. This is where I'm stuck. What is Johnny's motive?"

Through the silence of Henry and Robbie, Dean spoke up. He spoke as if he was saying something everyone knew. "Johnny hates Frank."

Robbie jolted to Dean. "What? He does not."

Dean's eyes raised above his notes. "You're kidding me right?" He checked out their faces.. "You're not. None of you think Johnny hates Frank? Am I the only one who thinks this? I am." Dean laughed. "It's gotten steadily worse through the years, He's hostile, resentful, jealous. And his father is dead. Where's his remorse?"

Joe was curious and he looked it. "Did Johnny tell you any of this?"

"No. I've thought it for a while." Dean answered. "Maybe it's not real hatred, but there's something negative there. I've always felt it. More so the older he got."

Robbie shook his head. "I strongly disagree Dean. Johnny loves Frank."

"Maybe you're right. It's just that . . . It's . . ." Dean hesitated in debate to speak. "O.K., when my father died. Afterwards for a while, and even now if Ellen says it. If anyone says to me, 'wow, you are just like your father'." Dean paused to smile. "I love it. It's a compliment because I idolized my father."

Joe nodded in agreement. "I know what you're saying. When my father died I was thirty. And anyone who said that to me, I took as a compliment also. But what does that have to do with it?"

"I told Johnny the other day, and this is after Ellen came back. I told him he was like Frank and he snapped at me. He said he was nothing like his father."

So quiet you could hear a pin drop. But Robbie wasn't letting it lay.

“No. He may be hostile yes, but it might just be because his father died. He may not even realize he said that. But even if you are right. Say Johnny hates Frank. He loves my Dad. Loves him, always has. And his kid was sick. Denice was sick. He worked day and night fighting for a cure with you guys. Despite all the plague stuff. George put my father under the Salicain. I remember what Johnny was like when that happened. He was distraught. Had he worked for George, he wouldn't have after the Salicain episode.”

Dean rubbed his eyes. “You're right. You Slagels have this family thing. You fight, but you stick together.”

“Dad, Johnny is less plausible than Henry. I vote we take him off.”

Joe thought for a second. “I'll go with the majority. Henry? You've been quiet.”

“Oh, I'm thinking Joe.”

“About Johnny?”

“No. About Reverend Bob.”

“Henry.” Joe was perturbed. “We're discussing Johnny.”

Henry fluttered his lips. “Why? He isn't working for George. And if you're going by John's list, John is not a big Johnny fan. How do we know he didn't put him on the list to mess around. Take him off.”

“Dean?” Joe questioned.

Dean hesitated with a breath. “Take him off.”

“Johnny's off. But . . .” Joe held up his pencil. “I'm gonna keep him, like I am Josephine. Off the list but minimal said to them. Next up, Reverend Bob. Means?”

“No medical knowledge.” Dean said. “None. Forget the blood, he was sick. But then again, that could have been human error.”

Joe swayed his head. “He's so trusted in this community though. So trusted. We give him access to every single building. He's so unlikely, my gut wants to look into him further.”

“And . . .” Robbie interjected. “Using Henry's nice and wacko theory. He's another one of those split personalities. How about how much he hated Frank?”

Joe agreed. “Couldn't stand him, could he? Frank irritated the reverend every time they were in the same room. But what about Motive?” Noticing Henry's antsy behavior and high waving hand, Joe called upon him. “I'm guessing you have theory?”

“Oh yes Joe. Yes. May I, I love this part.”

“You always do.” Joe commented. “The floor is yours.”

“Really? Cool.” Henry stood up.

“Not literally!” Joe yelled.

“Yes Joe. This is good. I have to stand. Reverend Bob's motive is . . . dedication.”

Robbie laughed. “Oh real bright. That's like everyone who is not an original's theory.”

“Shut up Robbie.” Henry snapped.

“Fuck you Henry.”

“Joe!” Henry told.

“Boys.” Joe held up his hand. “All right Henry, dedication is being used a lot. Give me more on it.”

“With pleasure.” Henry held up his hand. “The scene. It's evening. A

dark chapel lit only by candles. Reverend Bob is praying, saying those things to God he always does. The slow, steady footsteps draw Rev. Bob's attention away from his heaven chat. He turns around and sees a solemn George . . ."

*"Reverend." George's voice was soft as he walked up to him.
"What is it my child, you seem troubled?" Reverend Bob stood up.
"I am. I have sinned. I have to confess."
"Step this way." Reverend Bob pointed to the confessionals . . .*

Robbie's loud laughter interrupted Henry's story. "Henry, we don't have confessionals in the chapel."

"Oh." Henry took on a thinking look.

"And Reverend Bob is non denominational." Robbie said.

"But George can still confess. O.K., that one's out." Henry shrugged. "But . . ." He held up his finger. "Try this." Henry nodded. "The scene. The tunnels. Say, three years ago. Reverend Bob is walking, taking a stroll. He sees George standing there in the tunnel. Holding a map and a flash light. Staring at the wall that the cryo . . ."

"Stop!" Joe hollered out. "This is ridiculous Henry. No one went in those tunnels back then except maintenance and security. No one still does with the exception of medical people. They hate them. So give me some dedication or sit down."

"I'm trying to Joe."

"But you're not making any sense, you're reaching."

"That's because I'm trying to get to the good part of my story and the middle part is missing."

Joe halted Dean and Robbie's moaning. "Henry, the good part?"

"Yes. The part where Rev. Bob is in his living room and George has a gun to his head."

"What!" Joe, Robbie and Dean shout it at the same time.

Joe lifted some from his seat. "Where the hell is that coming from?"

"My story." Henry watched Joe sit down, looking so frustrated. "No, Joe listen. Picture it. A frightened Reverend Bob. An Angry George. A gun pressed tight to the temple of the God fearing man." Henry rambled on with his story . . .

"George." Rev. Bob spoke shaking. "No. Please. It's not right."

"I don't care."

"They'll know you did this. Who else will they blame?"

"I have my out. And I will not chance you opening your mouth."

"I merely said . . ."

"You merely said I should leave if I'm going to keep this up." George spoke so angry. "I really think you may talk. You can't talk. I can't take that chance. I've worked too hard."

"I promised you years ago. I've kept it." Rev. Bob swallowed harshly.

"Yeah, but since the scientist left and Ellen and Frank told of what happened. You've been nervous."

"It's your imagination."

"Imagination or not. It's a chance I won't take."

Rev. Bob heard the clicking of the hammer. "No wait!" He shouted.

"You can't! I'll do anything. I won't say anything. I haven't. Please, we go back a long way you and . . ."

"Stop!" Joe held up his hand to Henry. "Very dramatic. Nice flare and facial expressions. But . . . they go back a long way?" Joe chuckled. "That's reaching. Rev. Bob goes back as far as any other survivor would go. As far as the moment they walked in the gates."

"No Joe." Henry shook his head. "Not at all. I can prove it."

"How?" Joe asked.

"Remember yesterday when I took Reverend Bob's radio apart? I went back this morning to put it all together again. Guilt maybe. he is a man of the cloth. And I overheard a conversation coming from the chapel. I guess Rev Bob didn't know I was there. The other voice I didn't quite make out. But Reverend Bob said, *'With all that's going on now, I can't take a chance. Please do not say anything about it.'* So . . ." Henry smiled and walked toward the back of Joe's office. "I was curious. So I snuck around the back of the chapel to see who was coming out. I found this person and when I saw who it was, something clicked in me. That happens Joe, I'm that type of guy."

Joe waved his hand to Henry to hurry him along. "Move it on Henry."

"O.K." Henry walked to the waiting room door in Joe's office. "Now Joe, I promised him what he's going to tell you guys won't get beyond this room" Henry dropped his voice to a whisper. "I had to blackmail him and . . . Robbie, he has two of your dirty magazines in exchange."

"No!" Robbie stood up. "I only have ten."

"Eight now." Henry opened the door. And peeked his head in. "Come on out. Sorry it took so long but they were giving me a hard time."

Forrest Caceres walked from the back room. "That es ah rut An-ray. Quit ah rut." Forrest cleared his throat in nervousness.

Dean snickered. "You hid Forrest in the back?"

Joe looked over. "Henry what is going on? No one is to know what . . ."

"He doesn't." Henry stated. "He's only going to tell you one thing and then he will leave. Go on Forrest tell them what you told me. And I will keep my word."

Forrest looked at Joe and the others. "I woos telling An-ray dat I remember de rev-run. He woos de officiating rev-run at de lust conference for de so-sigh-et-tee. De sum one dat senator Had-ly woos ut."

Total shock and silence took over. Henry smiled. He walked Forrest to the office door. "Thank you Forrest. That will be all."

"Un you woo nut tell hum uh tud you."

"No." Henry shook his head. "Thank you." After Forrest had left Henry faced the room. "Dedication maybe. Connection definitely. Oh yes!" Henry clenched his fist and drew it into him with excitement. "George knew Rev. Bob, Rev Bob knew George. Rev Bob also knew that George was involved in the society. Ha!"

Joe looked pleased and then he looked to Dean and Robbie. "I say Rev. Bob stays. Any objections." Joe received no answer. "I didn't think so."

^^^

For some reason, she didn't know why, Ellen hummed an unfamiliar tune to her. She didn't know where she had heard it before or even if she made it up. But it was peaceful and it slipped from her, soft, barely heard as she sat in her chair staring out the window, just staring. She didn't put much thought into why she hummed the song, she wouldn't remember Andrea singing it to her just the day before. Ellen's concentration was on the small grade that sat in the distance behind center town. A grade that could be seen on the east side of the clinic. A familiar site to Ellen, one she watched many times from the lab.

The somber look changed from her face and her mouth opened. She could see the white tee shirt and green military pants head over the small hill. The brown color of the shoulder harness. The straight walk he had with his arms swaying. Ellen stood up. She moved to the window quickly, laying her hands on the glass. It was cool and her nose pressed near it, watching him walk closer and closer. She smiled. "Frank." She gasped his name. "Frank." And then she saw it was Robbie. He must have spotted her in the window because he waved. Ellen smiled, but it wasn't genuine, more like disappointed. She returned the wave to him. She stepped back, slowly sat down, her face returned to being lost and Ellen resumed her window watching while she hummed the song again.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Kyle, Link and Jeff, awaited their interrogations as they sat in the holding room the society had placed them in. The door opened and harshly, Ted was tossed in to the floor. They gathered around him to help their injured fellow UWA soldier. Lt. Merrick then stepped in.

He looked at the men on the floor surrounding Ted. "Two words. Kingman Arizona." Suddenly he watched the three of them look in horror to Ted and back away. Lt. Merrick smiled arrogantly. "That's what I thought. Thank you gentlemen." Lt. Merrick stepped from the room.

When they saw the lieutenant was gone. Link, Kyle and Jeff returned to Ted.

Link helped him up. "Good job. But man, your face is messed up."

"Thanks." Ted grabbed his face. He could barely speak through his swollen lips. "So you think he fell for it?"

Link smiled. "Hook, line and sinker and . . . don't look like none of us are getting beat for at least a day or two. Thanks, man." Link gave a pat to Ted's back causing a moan and Link laughed.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Do you remember Ellen?" Jenny asked as she sat next to Ellen by the

window.

“No.”

“Dean says the fresh air will do you good. I have the wheelchair outside. It’s a beautiful fall day. Perfect.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head.

“But I thought you would love to see all the men in the community that I know are gay but never tell.”

“I would. Just not today.” Ellen said sadly staring. “Not yet. Can I do it another day?”

“Sure.” Jenny laid her hand on Ellen’s. “Can I watch the window with you.”

“I’d like that.”

Joe stood shaking his head as he watched into Ellen’s room. He stepped back away from the door, and turned to Dean. “She’s in the same place since early this morning.”

“Yep.” Dean told him. “Only got up to take a shower and a short walk around the room. Then she seemed restless and wanted to sit down again.”

“Has she eaten?” Joe asked.

“Nothing.”

“I can’t believe she’s passing up a chance to see all the closet gay men in this community. That is such an Ellen thing to do.”

“I know. Henry tried to get her to go out. If she wasn’t sitting by that window, I would push it. But she keeps staring out and . . . and she says she’s afraid to leave the room.”

“Well I’m not gonna push her.” Joe stated. “She’ll know when she’s ready and something is telling her she’s not ready.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I am.” Joe nodded. “And I think I’ll go in there and talk to her. See what she says to me.”

Dean stopped Joe as he moved to the door. “Don’t ask her too much Joe.”

“I won’t.” Joe shook his head. “I’m gonna talk to her that’s all.” He walked into Ellen’s room. Stopping by the bed just behind the chairs. “Jenny. Can I uh, see Ellen alone?”

“Sure Joe.” Jenny stood up. “Ellen, I’ll be by tomorrow. Maybe you’ll feel up to it then.”

“Maybe.” Ellen only shifted her eyes to Jenny briefly.

“O.K.” Jenny stayed chipper and walked by Joe.

Joe grabbed her arm and whispered. “Shut the door.”

Jenny nodded and left, closing the door like Joe requested.

With his breaths prelude his approach, Joe walked up to Ellen. He moved the chair right next to her and sat down. He watched as she kept her stare on the window. “Sweetheart. We have to talk.”

“Did you know. This is almost the same view as from the lab? Did you?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yeah.”

“Ellen . . .”

"I used to . . . I used watch out that window too. When Frank was done making his rounds and he would head into town, I could see him coming over that grade. See?"

"Yes." Joe got up and shut the blind.

"Joe!" Ellen shrieked. "No." She sprang from her chair reaching for the blind. Joe stopped her. "No Joe."

"Ellen." Joe grabbed her hand.

"No Joe I have to see or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I'll miss seeing him coming over the grade. Let me open the blind."

"Ellen." Joe grabbed her shoulders and turned her from the window. "Frank is not coming over that grade."

"He is. He will. He'll be back over that grade. In time." Ellen spoke emotionally. "Because nothing stops Frank. Nothing."

"Ellen, did the society stop my son?" Joe asked in a low voice. Ellen's eyes moved to him. "What happened to Frank out there?"

Ellen didn't answer, her lip quivered.

"Ellen, I shouldn't ask you. But I need to know and you're the only one who has any answers. What happened to my son?" Joe asked with passion.

Ellen's mouth opened no words came out. "He'll get away."

"Do you think they have him?"

"They have to Joe. And he'll get away from them."

"So you saw them take him?" Joe questioned.

Ellen just stepped back and sat down.

"Ellen. You saw them take him, right? This is why you know he's coming back."

"When they had captured us both." Ellen spoke sadly. "He tried every means to get us away. He was." Ellen smiled. "He was such a Frank."

Joe sat down next to her.

"But I held him back." Ellen said. "I think I did. He thinks so quickly and I move slow. And now that he's alone. I'm sure he'll get away. I'm sure of it."

"How did they take him? You didn't see. Was he gone maybe when you woke up?"

Ellen shook her head.

Joe watched her eyes water up. "There's something you aren't telling me, but I have to tell you something. I know he was hurt. I know it."

Ellen quickly looked at him.

"Did you know that?"

Ellen looked back at the window even though the blind was down.

"You do."

"How . . . how do you know?" Ellen asked.

"The clothes you were wearing. The sheet you came back in were covered in Frank's blood. Dean told . . ." Joe stopped because at that moment Ellen broke down and cried. "What happened to my son Ellen? Please?"

With her face streaked with the tears that fell so fast, Ellen sniffled and looked at Joe. "He was sick Joe. I've never seen Frank so sick. So we couldn't move any further. We were sitting outside hoping you guys would spot us. And when he stood up . . . it happened so fast. When he stood up." Ellen's eyes

closed. "They shot him." Her words transformed into emotional ones. "And they kept on shooting him. Until he went down."

Joe's hand slid down his face slowly, his eyes raised above his fingers. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too Joe."

"I thought. I thought for sure he was alive. I felt like he was alive. Maybe it was just wishful thinking." Joe's breath left him, his mouth dropped open, his eyes closed. "Dear God, Frank is dead."

"No!" Ellen said so strong. "No, he's not."

"Ellen, you just said. Sweetheart you said he was shot. You said you didn't see them take him."

"Yes I know what I said. But I also know Frank. I know how much he can take and he can take more than they gave him."

"You said they gunned him down."

"But I know Frank." Ellen murmured. "I know him. I know him. I feel him." She quickly looked at Joe. "And you'd feel it too if he were gone. He's alive."

"Ellen, maybe we just . . ."

"No Joe!" Ellen shouted. "If there's a person on the face of this earth that Frank shares his soul with, that person is me. If he were dead, I'd be dead. We are not meant to live on this earth without each other. Like closely connected twins. Like the old people that die within days of each other. Like the Andersons. That is me and Frank. The moment he dies, I will die. There is no doubt in my mind over that. I'm still alive. So is he." Ellen spoke calm. "He just might need our help and we are sitting here. But he won't wait forever for us. You know Frank." Ellen stood up and opened the blind. "He'll say fuck us and find his own way home. And for that I am waiting." She sat back down. "Everyone is so damn certain Frank is dead. And if everyone wants me to believe that. Then someone better bring me his body, because until they do, I will never be convinced and I will spent the rest of my life . . ."

"Looking out the window for him?"

"Yes."

"Oh that's ridiculous." Joe snapped. "Do you hear how ridiculous you sound?"

Ellen's eyes widened. She looked insulted that Joe took that tone with her. "Joe, I . . ."

"You were hurt. For that I am sorry. You saw the love of your life get shot down. I'm sorry for that. You, Ellen, hid from the pain until you were able to come out. Until you started to heal. If you were depressed over what happened to you, or distraught over Frank's death, or still sick, I would give you all the compassion in the world. You have my compassion for what you've gone through. My heart breaks for you. But I will not let you sit here staring out a goddamn window looking for my son." Joe's tone raised as he paced in front of her. "It's stupid and it sounds like something from a bad plotted chick flick."

Ellen gasped. "Joe . . ."

"Here I was thinking you only were staring out the window in thought over what had happened. Mental patients get drawn to the light."

"Mental patients?"

"Yes, so I thought you couldn't help yourself. But you can." Joe was near yelling. "You're waiting for Frank. Did it ever occur to you Ellen that he

wouldn't come over that stupid grade anyhow? When my son comes back, it's gonna be because I brought him back or he came to the gate. Either way you are gonna know about it long before he comes over that hill and you'll be waiting."

"You just said. 'When'."

"Damn right I said when. Not if. I thought from the moment you came back that he was taken. I guess . . ." Joe calmed down and sat next to her. "I guess I had to get a confirmation through your adamancy That's all. We'll find him. We just don't know where to look. And who in the hell are the Andersons?"

"They were this old couple who both survived the plague. From what I could see through the pictures. They were married a lot of years. They died close to each other."

Joe blinked. "O.K. What brought them up?"

"We stayed at their farm so Frank could get some rest. It was so beautiful Joe. A big front porch that . . ."

"Ellen." Joe held up his hand. "If they were dead when you got there, how do you know this stuff?"

"The calvary told us."

"The calvary." Joe blew out. "Oh boy."

"No Joe. They saved us. They rode in on their horses and saved Frank from being shot by firing squad. They told us about the farm. They told us you guys were looking for us. That's why we were waiting outside. How do you think I got home?"

"We thought the society dropped you off."

"The society was dragging my ass across the field. This soldier had me by my hair and the next thing I know his head is bouncing on my chest. Decapitated by sword."

"The calvary?"

"Yes. They look like the calvary too. Except they wear bandanas like bikers do instead of hats."

"The calvary."

"You don't believe me."

"Ellen." Joe stood up again. "The calvary? Sweetheart, I believe someone in that camp came to your rescue but not the calvary. And . . ." Joe drew up a thinking look.

"What?"

"The third and fourth blood." Joe stated in thought.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dean found a third and fourth unidentifiable blood on your clothes. That must be where it came from."

"Joe!" Ellen's voice perked up. "I killed at least three. The calvary killed more. There, there would be bodies right? Who's gonna take them? And . . . if we go to the farm we'll know for sure, without a doubt about Frank. Because if he is dead, he'll be there too. And Joe we can prove to everyone that Frank isn't gone and we can get everyone . . ."

"Stop." Joe sat down again. "If we look for Frank, we look for him without the community knowing. It stays in a small circle of people. Because I don't want the society finding out we're looking for him. Got that?"

Ellen nodded. "The other person working on the inside. They may let George know."

“Ellen? How do you know about the other person?”

“You had a suspect meeting in here.”

“You remember?”

“No. Henry told me.”

“God damn that boy.” Joe shook his head. “What else did he tell you.”

“Nothing.” Ellen’s voice dropped. “I’d love to be part of the meetings.”

“Well you can’t be they get out of hand enough. I have Henry who rambles on and on. Robbie who instigates and Dean who’s been nothing but miserable. Which . . .” Joe laid his hand on Ellen’s. “Should change, now that your back safe and sound. He was worried about you.”

“I know he was.”

“He went out looking for you.”

Ellen looked surprised. “He did?”

“Yes he did.” Joe told her. “And when they brought you in here, he wouldn’t let a soul touch you. No one. He worked on you alone.”

“Thank you for telling me that.” Ellen said. “Joe in your suspect meetings, did you at all bring up Henry or Andrea?”

“Why would you say those two names. Henry especially. Tell me why?”

Ellen shrugged. “I guess . . . I guess because he’s so non-suspect. If I was watching it on T.V., I’d pick him because he’s less obvious. Not that I think he’s working with George. And Andrea, well.” Ellen hesitated. “I love her, don’t get me wrong. But I was sitting here thinking when I found out about the meetings. You know, just incase I was allowed to come. And I thought of her.”

“Why?”

“Something she did a while back that’s always bothered me.”

This caught Joe’s attention. “Which was?”

“You can’t yell at me.”

“Why would I yell at you?”

Ellen just looked at him.

“Go on.”

“In the history I remember, see because it’s different than you remember, because I went back with Henry to bring Dean back.”

Joe slid his hand down his face. “A ripple in time.”

“Yes.”

“They don’t count Ellen. I’ve told Henry the same thing.”

“Yeah but Joe, just listen. O.K.. When Frank pulled me from the explosion. I was on a one track mind. Get to the clinic, get the vial to save you and pull you out to get George. Well I raced into the lab, Jason was there and Andrea was there too. I rambled and rambled about saving you when I was getting the vial. Jason stayed. Andrea left.”

Joe sat back from his lean in the chair. “Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. The next time I saw her, was when I was holding Dean’s body.”

“Ellen, you have to realize, this holds little stock with me. Because it really never happened.”

“I know.” Ellen’s head dropped.

“You do know, since I think I’ve convinced you not to watch for Frank, you can leave this room. Why don’t you get some air. Dean wants you to do that. Move around. Let Jenny take you out to see all the closet homosexuals,

you'd like that."

Ellen shook her head with a smile. "No. I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"I'm just a little scared right now."

"Christ Ellen, I take that as an insult. I run this place. Robbie would be insulted if he heard you say that you . . ."

"No. Don't tell Robbie. O.K.? He's the last person I want thinking that I don't feel safe. He's working so hard for Frank."

"And speaking of Frank. Do you think you can recall where this farm was. I think I'll send Robbie that way on his reconnaissance this afternoon."

Ellen agreed and looked to the window. "You said something Joe. You said *you* would bring Frank back. Was that figuratively speaking? Because you always use the word 'we'."

"Let me let you in on a little father-daughter secret." Joe leaned to her. "The moment we get hint of where Frank's at. I'm going myself to get him."

"But you don't want the society to know. You're the leader. You can't up and leave."

"I've been thinking about retirement a lot lately. Get into distribution and start making some of those runs with the men."

Ellen looked horrified. "No, Joe, you have to lead this community. You can never retire. We'll never make it."

"Yes you will." Joe patted her hand. "I have a plan. And . . ." He looked at his watch. "I have to go." He kissed her as he laid his hand on her cheek. "We'll talk more later,. I'll be back for those directions."

"O.K."

Joe stood up and saw Ellen looking out. "Ellen. You're staring again."

"I know. But Joe, if I promise not to get neurotic about it, can I? It makes me think of him and it give me hope. I need that. I miss him so much." She spoke saddened. "I miss him so much."

Joe laid his hand on her shoulder. "Watch away."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Washington DC

George held one ear closed as the train whistle blew loudly. He looked in irritation to Jeremy. “Must the conductor do that?”

Jeremy shrugged as he held the phone. “An answer. They need an answer.”

George huffed. “Are they absolutely sure this is where the camp is?”

“Lt. Merrick said the one man broke during interrogation and the other men confirmed it by their reaction.”

“All right.” George spoke with edge. “Tell them load up sixty men. Find the place. Hit the shit out of it with mortar and weaken them, then storm in. Hit them at dawn like they hit us. And . . . I want as many of those men as I can get. One of those well trained men is worth four of ours.”

“I’ll tell him.” Jeremy stepped back and began to speak on the phone.

The train whistle blew and George cringed again.

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Beginnings, Montana

Joe knew the moment Robbie stepped into his office that, his flight to look for the farm did not turn out well. Robbie walked in, looking frazzled, hot and he tossed the clipboard down in front of Joe.

“Nothing.”

Joe removed the sheet of paper from the clipboard. “Nothing at all?”

“I couldn’t spot anything that remotely looked like a well kept farm.”

“Maybe we’re relying too much on her memory. After all she did say the calvary rescued her.”

Robbie shook his head. “What does Dean say? Does he think she’s remembering things wrong?”

“Not wrong. Possibly distorted because she was half out of it when everything was going on. The shock of seeing Frank. This group of men or whoever came to the rescue and she just exaggerated. But . . .” Joe looked at the flight sheet. “She was here before all of that went down. Let’s give her a map this time instead of relying on where she said ‘the calvary’ told her it was at. Start her out from the camp she left.”

“Good idea.” Robbie took the sheet as Joe handed it to him. “Want me to file this for you?”

“Could you? Thanks.”

Robbie stood up. “I’m not giving up Dad.”

“I didn’t think you would.” He watched Robbie move to the file cabinet and then Joe looked to his door. There was a knock. “Come in.” He returned to his paperwork.

Jess walked in. “Hi Joe.” He looked at Robbie. “Hey you’re back. Just the guy I wanted to see. How you doing?”

Joe raised his eyes to Jess and saw Jess hand Robbie a sheet of paper. Joe went back to his own paperwork.

Jess indicated to the sheet. "I found some foot prints outside of these perimeters. Now tracking doesn't pick up single beings. But maybe you might want to take a look?"

Robbie checked out what Jess showed him. "Yeah I will. Thanks."

"Need me to go with you? I will. I'm done for today."

"Uh . . ." Robbie shut the file cabinet. "Yeah. I want to stop and see Ellen first. Just to promise I'll make time this evening."

"Oh." Jess said.

Joe raised his eyes. "Um Robbie. When you stop by, any chance I can get you to convince her to go outside and walk or get air. Dean wants her to do that."

"She won't?" Robbie asked. "That's not like Ellen."

"No it's not." Joe started to laugh. "Jenny even offered to take her in a wheel chair and point out all the men who . . . who . . . the men who . . . um." Joe cleared his throat. "The men who work the fields."

Robbie snickered. "I wouldn't go either. Why doesn't she want to go out."

"I'm not supposed to tell you. But . . . she's afraid."

Robbie's expression dropped. "Afraid to walk in the community? Oh Dad, that's bullshit. That make me feel bad, I'm doing . . ."

Joe held up his hand. "I know. That's why I think you probably can get her to go. Besides you and her are close. And . . . from what I've heard and seen from her, I think you may be the only one who she feels safe with. She's been subtly glorifying you."

Jess interjected. "It may be a connection to Frank. So keep that in mind Robbie. I know how you feel about her."

Joe grumbled. "Whatever the reason. Can you?"

"Most definitely." Robbie said. "I want to help her. I'll think of something."

Joe smiled. "Good. Trish says it's a comedy tonight at the walk in. Ellen loves comedies. Why don't you ask Dean if you can steal her from the clinic for that. But keep in mind, he may give you a list of do's and don'ts."

"That's just Dean." Robbie said. "And I'll talk to him. I'd like her to go. She always loved the drive in. Besides, I know he wants to get the house ready for her. So that can be his excuse for why he's not seeing her."

Jess walked closer to the two. "I'm heading out. How about I meet you up at perimeter ten."

"Sounds good." Robbie handed Joe the sheet that Jess gave him.

"By Joe. Robbie." Jess moved to the door and left.

Robbie saw Joe staring. "What's wrong."

"Nothing." Joe shook his head.

"You act weird with him. Don't you like him?" Robbie asked. "He's a really nice guy Dad."

"You don't say. Hmm. I'm sorry. I don't mean to act weird. I'm just . . . I guess weirded out."

"I understand." Robbie started to stand up. "I'd better run so I can get cleaned up in time for the movie. I want to check those perimeters with Jess."

Joe leaned back in his chair, grabbed a cigarette and snickered.

Robbie paused in his walk out. "What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

“Gee thanks.” Robbie shook his head and walked out.

Joe lit his cigarette. He took a long hit then looked at it and watched the smoke for a moment. He smiled a little with a swaying head, leaned forward to his desk, and went back to finishing his work.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Craig’s singing of the song, *Home on the Range*, Carried through the cool night air of Bowman. “*Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam. Where the deer and the antelope play-a-a-a . . .*”

Hal stopped walking down the street with Sgt. Ryder.

“Ignore it.” Sgt. Ryder told him. “Let’s go listen to Beginnings.”

Hal walked again. And again He heard the singing, loud, bad and . . . close.

“*Where seldom is heard, a discouraging word. Because our captain is sensitive and gay.*”

Hal stopped cold.

“Captain.” Sgt. Ryder tried to warn but it was too late.

Hal had marched back and looked for Craig. “Sing some more.” Hal shouted out. “Go on so I can find you.”

Only Craig’s hyena style laughing was heard. Craig thought he was in the clear, safe between the bookstore and the old hardware store. Safe until he felt the snatching of his shirt and himself being pulled out of his hiding place. He smiled. “Hey Captain. What’s up?”

Hal grunted long and soft. He released Craig. “Please, stop the singing. If you must, do something else.”

“But I’m singing patriotic songs, like you said. You said if I must sing. And you used the word ‘must’. You said I must sing patriotic songs.”

“That’s because I didn’t think you knew any. And since when did that song mention anything about a captain being gay.”

“The revised rap version.” Craig nodded with a smile and saw Hal did not. “O.K., patriotic songs.”

“Fine.” Hal held his hand up stepping away from Craig. “And try to sing in key. You’re terrible.” shaking his head he joined Sgt. Ryder who waited outside the police station. “Sorry.”

“I feel no remorse for your irritation. You bring it on yourself.”

Hal opened the police door. “I can’t help it. Like I said it was bred in me. You don’t know the type of house hold I grew up in.” Hal walked in, patting the monitor on the back. “You can take a break. Sgt. Ryder and I are going to listen for a while. Anything happening?”

“Nope.” He shook his head and stood up. “I’m just bidding my time through the check ins. There is a woman on the radio oddly enough.”

“A woman?” Hal sat down. “What channel?”

“Seven.” The monitor pointed. “She was talking about some moon event that is happening tonight. It got boring. She said she’ll be right back.”

Hal quickly turned up channel seven. “The moon event could be

important.”

“Uh . . . I don’t think so.” The monitor said. “It didn’t sound it.”

Sgt. Ryder shook his head. “You never know. The Chief seems like a bright man. He may be sending coded messages through the woman in case someone is listening. We’ll take it from here and see what we can come up with.”

“O.K.” The monitor shrugged. “I’m off on a break. I’ll check back.”

Hal quickly grabbed the pen and paper and drew it near him. “Good thinking on the codes. The chief may be on to someone listening to their transmissions and to be on the safe side, he’s probably doing that. I would.”

“So would I. And we still don’t know the condition of the woman we returned. She could have said something about us monitoring them.”

Hal nodded. “Yes, but Blue said from what Gary described, she could be in shock for weeks. Shh . . . here comes the woman.” Hal listened.

“O-Key. Dough-key. I’m back.” The woman said.

“Kind of annoying her voice sounds.” Hal commented.

Sgt. Ryder agreed. “Probably because she doesn’t speak much.”

“Probably.” Hal got ready to take notes as he listened to the Beginnings’ transmission and to the woman speaking.

“Whew!” The woman let out a long breath of relief. “Boy did I have to pee.”

Sgt. Ryder looked at Hal.

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Beginnings, Montana

Dean leaned with his one hand on his lab counter, the other hand on his hip holding back his lab jacket. He kept peering up to Robbie through the tops of his eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Com on Dean. We don’t even know if she’ll do it. If she does, why not.” Robbie wanted to know.

“It’s going to be cold.”

“What is she your child?”

“Robbie, she just came out of a deep shock. Not even twenty-four hours ago. All right?”

“You said she needs air. This could help. And it’s probably a short movie.”

Dean ran his fingers through his hair. He thought about it.

“Besides, I know you want to get the house ready. Don’t you?” Robbie said. “If you are there, how are you going to be here? Ellen is going to want to know where you’re at.”

Dean took a deep breath. “I do want to get it ready. All right, listen to me. If she gets tired., You bring her back.”

“Got it.”

“Keep her warm.”

“Got it.” Robbie nodded.

“No alcohol.” Dean told him. “I know you guys got blasted last weekend.”

“I won’t get her drunk.” Robbie held up his hand in promise.

“You still have to convince her to go. This all might be in vain this whole conversation.”

“I’ll get her to go. Thanks Dean.” Robbie moved to the lab door. “Oh, hey Dean? You might want to get her some clothes. I don’t think she wants to go in her robe.”

“I’ll um.” Dean smiled. “Run home and get some as soon as you tell me she said yes.”

Robbie gave a thumbs up and headed out.

He walked down the hall, Ellen’s door was open. She sat in the chair by the window still. “Hey El.”

“Robbie.” Ellen said his name with a smile. “Hi.” She actually stood up and moved from the window.

“Wow, you seem like you’re glad to see me.”

“I am.” Ellen grabbed his hand. “You’re back sooner than you said. By the way you talked earlier I thought you wouldn’t be back until tonight.”

“I’m coming back tonight.”

“Good.” Ellen sat on the bed and patted a spot in front of her.

Robbie sat down on the bed facing her. “So.”

“So.” Ellen looked at him. “You didn’t tell me. So I’m taking it you didn’t spot anything.”

“Nothing.” He saw the disappointed look on her face. “But, tomorrow I’m giving you a map, you’re gonna try again. O.K.? I’m not giving up.”

“I know.”

“El, Dean says you should get some air. Walk around.” Robbie grabbed her hand. “I want to ask a favor of you.”

“What’s that?”

“O.K., well.” Robbie played with her fingers. “We have these walk-ins now. And I remember how much you loved the drive in. I did too. When I was a kid. A teenager and you used to take me with you. Remember?”

“Yes. Pete hated the drive in and we had to go so far too. And you know me, I always had to get there so early for a good spot. You hated it because I used to make you take Josh to the bathroom.”

“I never hated it. In my demented warped teenage mind, we were on a date.”

Ellen blushed a little.

“Yeah. I used to imagine on the drive home that one of those times you were gonna thank me and kiss me. You know, a date.” Robbie smiled. “I always wanted to go on a date to the drive in with you. So, my favor is, go with me to the walk in tonight.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Why? It’s really not a date El.” Robbie placed his face close to hers. “I won’t expect a kiss. I won’t even look at it as a date. Just go with me. Get out of this room, come back to Beginnings.”

“No. I just feel . . . I just feel safe right now in here. Not out side.”

Robbie swallowed. “I’m security for Frank El. I’m trying my hardest. What can I do to make you feel safer. Tell me. Because I’ll be damned if I’ll let anything happen to you. Especially in our own home. A home that Frank redesigned the security. El, saying you don’t feel safe in Beginnings is like

saying you don't believe in all the work that Frank did. And I'm telling him as soon as I see him."

"Are you laying a guilt trip on me?"

"Is it working?"

"Yes." Ellen looked at their hands that were joined. "You won't leave my side?"

"Not for a second." Robbie told her.

"Maybe, maybe that's what I need."

"It is." Robbie moved his hand from hers. "I'd better finish my checks. I'll be back. I just wanted to ask you that." He kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks."

"Robbie." Ellen grabbed his hand. "If this works and I feel better after walking outside. I have a favor to ask you."

"Anything."

"Good." Ellen slid from the bed and stood up. "I want to go with you to the farm. I can help you find it."

"No, you can't do that."

"I need to do that. I need to see for myself?"

"Dean won't allow it." Robbie told her. "He won't. It can't be good for you."

"If I feel like I can do it. I'll be fine. I'll talk to Dean. I promise I won't go if I'm even a little scared or nervous. But Robbie . . ." Ellen stepped closer to him. "If nothing else, I need to go to that farm to put closure to this. Because my mind took me from there before my body even left."

Robbie looked up at the ceiling then back down to Ellen. "I'd have to clear it with my Dad."

"I understand."

"O.K., let's just see how tonight goes. And then we'll take the next step. All right?"

"Thank you." Ellen squeezed his hand.

"I have to go. I'll be back." Robbie moved to the door. "And El?" He waited until Ellen looked at him. "Look good."

Ellen smiled, almost chuckling when Robbie left and as she did, she felt the pain of her brush burned cheek. Her fingers reached up to her injury. So big it felt and the smile fell. "Look good. Yeah, right." Ellen shook her head slowly then she went back to her chair by the window and sat down. She wanted to watch while there was still some day light left.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Sgt. Ryder and Hal perked with interest when they heard the woman suddenly talk about something else. Besides new ideas for finger food.

Hal smiled. "I knew there was a reason for this."

"Denny." The woman said. "Do you have plan one 'A' ready for me."

"Roger that red head wonder woman. Like, can I start?"

"No you have to wait until the time is right. Do you have enough?"

“Been collecting the agents since this morning. Got like, a million. Messengers of death to be delivered.”

The woman giggled. “Wait until nine o’clock then everyone will see.”

“Check.” Denny laughed. “O.K., big hand on the nine and the little hand where?”

Hal tossed his pencil. “I give up. Do they use their radios for anything of importance?”

Sgt. Ryder looked disappointed when he heard ‘the chief’ get on the radio and tell the woman to clear the air. “I have to say I find it entertaining.”

“I do too. Maybe it was just the woman who irritated me.”

“You have that problem with them anymore.”

“Do you blame me?” Hal stood up and ran his hand down the back of his neck. “It’s hot. I think I’m going to grab a shower and a late bite to eat. I’ll send the monitor back.”

“No, let him take his time. I’m curious to see what the comedy is they are having at their drive in or walk in.”

“Let me know. O.K.?” Hal moved to the door and walked. Usually he stayed and listened to Beginnings for a long time. But on this night, the more he listened the more he felt let down. As if something else was supposed to be said, and he didn’t know what that was. He just had that feeling and that was bothering him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry raced down the street and directly into Dean’s house. Denny stood there in the semi empty living room, boxes surrounding him and Denny held a large old coffee can.

“Denny, the coast is clear. She’s there.”

“Thanks Henry.” Denny said excited. “She didn’t see you right?”

“It doesn’t matter Denny, you know the plan.”

Denny winked and ran to the door cradling that can safe in his arms. “Don’t tell my mom.”

Henry gave a thumbs up as Denny ran out. He closed the door and turned back into the livingroom looking at the disorganization of the move, at the boxes open, half packed, so in needed of being finished and laying everywhere. Figuring he’d help Dean out, he moved the boxes from the center of the room so no one would trip on them and Henry sat down on the couch and enjoyed his babysitting detail while Nick was sleeping.

^^^

Denny’s steps were short and quick, dashing about the building as some sort of secret agent. He could hear the voices coming from distribution, waiting for the movie and he went the long way around, coming in from behind

the projection unit.

Trish heard the shuffling and looked down. She saw Denny with a can, on his belly crawling toward the crowd. “Denny, you’re gonna get dirty. Andrea will get mad.”

“Shh.” Denny held his finger up. “You don’t see me.”

Trish closed her eyes. “O.K.”

He continued in his mission, his crawl, squirming through the snickering men who watched him, not realizing that they saw him. And then Denny spotted her. Bev. She sat on a blanket her legs stretched out and crossed, a bottle of wine next to her and a plate of some food. Slowly, quietly and sneaky Denny snuck up behind her. When he was right there, he poked his head around and tilted it up at her.

“Hey.”

Bev jumped. “Denny. You frightened me.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t know you were there.”

“You weren’t supposed to. I did good.”

“Yes, now go away.”

“O.K.” Denny snickered shifting his eyes down and seeing how close her poking breasts were to him. Denny grinned. “Those are really big.”

“Yes.” Bev rolled her eyes.

“Do they hurt at all?”

“No!”

“Never?” Denny asked.

“Denny!”

“I would think that they would if they’re like stretching out your skin that much.” Denny pulled at his tee shirt. “See, my skin doesn’t stretch.”

“You’re a boy, your skin won’t stretch. And why are you so dumb.”

“Hey, I’m telling Robbie. He’s my big brother you know.”

“I know. Go away.”

“I’m telling.” Denny looked smug. “And he’ll beat you up. And . . . he says I’m not dumb. I’m just sick-n-shaped. So there.” Denny stuck out his tongue then held his finger out and poked it into her breast.

“Hey!”

“Ha! Swelled. I knew it hurt.” Back on his stomach, he crawled away.

Bev looked so irritated. She reached down and scratched her leg, shaking her head. “Sick-n-shaped.” She scratched her back. “Sick-n-shaped? What the hell does that mean.” She was antsy as she scratched her arm. “Sick . . . oh.” She grumbled. “Ill-informed.” She let out an aggravated sigh and felt the awful itch grow into painful little stings. In horror she looked down as her hand reached to her leg where the itch was worse and saw crawling about her, multitudes of red ants. She jumped up with a shriek and tripped over a large open can. Denny’s can. As she hit the ground she saw the ants crawling from there. Screaming and scratching and swiping the ants from her, Bev left the walk in and ran all the way home.

Bowman, North Dakota

Photographs, many of them spread across Hal's table in this apartment. He pulled his still wet long hair into a ponytail as he sat down to look. Family pictures. The small wood box he kept them in was open and empty by them. His hand shuffled through a picture of him and his brothers. Hal smiled. From biggest to smallest they leaned against the long blue car of Joe's. Frank so tall and skinny, towering over Jimmy and Hal. And Robbie so dirty, slumping and looking his ornery self at ten. Holding the picture, Hal looked up when he heard the knock at his door. "Come on in."

Blue, the town doctor came in. "Captain. I need to speak to you. It's important."

"Come in." Hal had a remembrance smile on his face. "What's up?"

"One of the men injured in the North Dakota raid with Sgt. Ryder. Minor injury. He's taken a turn for the worse."

"But you just said it was a minor injury."

"The slice on his hand was infected when he came in. It's worse now. Much. If we don't do something about it he could die. His temperature is very high and his arm is swollen beyond belief."

Hal dropped the picture. "That's not good. All right . . ." He took a thinking breath. "Tell Sgt. Ryder to prepare an escort. One, to take the man to Beginnings' gate. He must be dropped off in the morning before security checks in at seven fifteen. So have the man ready in a few hours."

"Thank you. Shall I include my notes so they know what has happened?"

"That would be wise. Give their doctors a head start."

"I'll do that. Thank you." Before Blue left he noticed the pictures. "Are they yours?"

"Yes." Hal held the one of him and his brothers by the car. "I've had these with me since I was stationed in Hawaii. A few I found when I went to my dad's house."

Blue glanced at the picture. "Your brothers?"

"Yes. I was thirteen. My brother Frank, seventeen, Jimmy. He's the one who looks like a nerd." Hal chuckled. "Fifteen. And Robbie . . . Robbie was ten."

"You were the rebel then too I see." Blue pointed. "The only one who didn't have a shaved head."

Hal snickered. "I had to be different. Of course, my father would have Frank sneak into my room after three hair cut warnings, and Frank would shave my head."

"That's terrible."

"That's the Slagels."

"Well I must go prepare the man. Thank you again."

"Not a problem." Hal was deep in thought, he kept looking at the pictures again. At himself with the backwards baseball cap, his hair blonder and hitting to the bottom of his neck. He remembered when that picture was taken, two days before he woke up completely bald the next day. He remembered the car, and as he stared at the large vehicle, Hal's mind flashed back to those days of being young and being with his brothers . . .

Frank, seventeen, looked so annoyed as he pulled the car up in the Big Giant Super Market parking lot. Jimmy sat quiet in the front seat, fiddling with his glasses that Hal kept reaching up from the back seat and knocking off of him.

“Robbie!” Frank blasted. “Knock off the spit balls.” Frank reached his hand to the windshield and cleared the paper wads stuck there. “All right.” He turned the car off. “Everyone has their list.”

Jimmy looked at his. “Frank, wouldn’t it have been easier to assign us aisles instead of tearing the list in four.”

“No. Shut up.” Frank snapped and looked in the mirror. “Hal, shut up too.”

“I didn’t say anything. Hey Frank, you’re like the coolest taking us for a ride in Dad’s car. Can we go looking for girls later?”

Robbie laughed. “If Frank’s with you, you’ll never find a girl.”

“Robbie.” Frank said his name irritated. “Keep it up and you’ll shop with me *and* I’ll hold your hand in the store.”

“People think your my Dad anyhow.” Robbie said. “You look old.”

Hal gasped. “How can he look like your dad asshole. He has pimples.”

“Hey!” Frank opened his door. “Let’s go. And don’t get in trouble. I’ll kick your asses when we get home.”

At that point the others shivered dramatically and verbally faked their fright.

Frank rolled his eyes at them and stepped from the car.

Hal had ten items to get. He figured he could carry them all, he didn’t want to look as weird as Frank did carrying that basket around. So, with the soap smashing the bread in his arms, Hal moved to the cookie aisle. He stopped. By the cookies were the little cheap toys, and by those toys was Robbie. No groceries, Robbie stood there. Hal knew he was up to something, so Hal stepped back and watched. Sure enough after Robbie peeked around the bend, he slid a packaged racing car into his shirt and zipped up his jacket. Hal smiled and walked away. He found Customer Service at the front of the store and tapped his hand on the counter until the old woman behind the counter acknowledged him.

“Can I help you?” She said.

“Yes, I’m a concerned shopper. May I speak to a manager please.”

His name was printed bold on the name tag. Conrad. His hair was slick and his glasses as thick as Jimmy’s. He heard this. “Young man, what can I do for you.”

“Seeing how I was raised properly. And how I am conscious of how theft effects prices. I wanted to make you aware of a shoplifter.”

Conrad shook his head. “I haven’t time for games.”

“I’m not playing.” Hal said. “Really. I’ll show you. A little boy. Alone in the store. Man, where are his parents.”

“If you make me chase around nothing. I will call your parents.”

“O.K.” Hal agreed. “But if I’m right. Can I have a free Hershey bar.”

“If you’re right.” Conrad walked from behind the counter.

Hal led him around the store until he spotted Robbie. “There. See, you can see it sticking out of his coat.”

“I’ll check this out.” Conrad said.

Hal, wanting to watch, stayed from view and watched the manager approach Robbie. He saw Conrad pat Robbie's chest and grab the toy. Just as Conrad took Robbie's arm, Frank came around the bend. Hal laughed.

"Hey!" Frank yelled at the manager and saw Robbie crying. "Get your hands off my brother!" Frank grabbed Conrad's hand removed it from Robbie and then took Robbie's hand.

"He's a thief."

"Oh Bullshit." Frank started to walk with Robbie. He wasn't a few steps down the aisle when the manager came after him, physically stopping Frank.

"Sir." He yanked Frank around holding tight to Frank's arm.

Frank didn't mean to, but when he pulled away, he pulled Conrad with him. The manager jerked and fell into the shelf, knocking boxes to the floor. Not ten seconds into Frank's second attempt at getting away, two security guards showed up, grabbing onto Frank.

"Hey!" Hal shouted when he watched them give Frank a hard time, "That's my brother!" Hal raced down the aisle leaping onto the back of one of the guards. "Get off!" Hal fought.

"Hey!" Jimmy's voice was heard.

Before Hal knew it, Jimmy had joined the battle, the manager screamed being caught underneath. Frank still stood on his feet. One guard on his back with Hal. The other pulling at his arm with Jimmy on his back. And Robbie after placing the toy back in his jacket proceeded to continuously kick any leg that didn't belong to his brothers.

"Dad is gonna kill us." Jimmy said as he and his brothers sat in the manager's office.

Robbie looked up to Frank. "Sorry."

"What the hell were you doing stealing?" Frank snapped. "And Hal! Why did you turn him in?"

"It was wrong." Hal stated.

"You should have told me. Fuck, Dad is gonna be so mad."

Conrad entered into the office. "I have news for you boys. Bad news."

Jimmy lifted a book from the manager's desk. "Is this yours? I was wanting to read this. Is it any good?"

Frank and Hal shouted. "Jimmy!"

Jimmy put the book down. "Sorry. Go on."

Conrad huffed. "Your mother was here. And your mother left. She said she washed her hands of you."

Frank looked oddly. "Our mother? Do we have a mother?"

Hal rolled his eyes. "Ruth."

"Did Dad marry her?" Frank asked.

Jimmy spoke irritated. "Yes, three weeks ago remember. They went to Vegas."

"No." Frank argued. "They didn't get married. I don't think they did."

"Yes they did asshole." Hal yelled. "You went to that Junior ROTC shit and didn't even ask when you got back who she was."

"I knew who she was." Frank said. "But I didn't think Dad would marry her. Shit." Frank tossed his hands up. "Did we like her?"

Jimmy shrugged. "If we did, it doesn't matter now. I think we scared

another one away.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “She wasn’t around that long anyhow. Was she?”

“Frank!” Hal shouted. “She’s been around three months. God are you dumb!”

Having had enough of his head going from Slagel boy to Slagel boy like some sort of tennis match., Conrad shouted to silence them. “Boys! Are you not concerned. This woman refused to get you out of trouble. I have to call the authorities. Unless, you give me your father’s number. Are you ready to tell me his work number yet?”

There was silence, Robbie spoke up. “Tell him Frank. I wanna go home. Speed Racer is on.”

“Yeah.” Hal said. “Speed Racer is coming on.”

“The library closes soon.” Jimmy added.

Frank thought about it. “Is there any other way?” he asked. “Please? How about I come in here and work for free this weekend. Just don’t call our dad.”

Conrad looked at the boys. “You’ll work for free?”

“Yes. Just don’t call him. All right. And . . . Jimmy will work too.” Frank told him.

“Please mister.” Hal stated. “He’ll kill us. He really will. There was a fifth brother at one time and we still don’t know what happened to him.”

The manager stared at the boys long and hard, while running his hand over his slicked hair over and over . . .

Hal dropped the picture. He still didn’t know how they got out of that mess. Frank only had to work one day collecting carts. They also never did tell their father that they knew the reason that Ruth suddenly disappeared. But they stuck together back then, fought a lot, but stuck together. There were a lot of messes like that, but those messes were memories Hal never wanted to lose. And what Hal wouldn’t give at that moment, to live through one of those messes all over again.

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Beginnings, Montana

Dean pulled Ellen’s hair from the collar of her sweatshirt. He smiled with a closed mouth at her as they stood in her room. Dean saw Ellen ready to say something. “No, don’t. Stay warm. O.K.?”

“Is it cold out?”

“Nope, but you’re sitting outside, and I need you warm. Promise me if you get tired or cold you’ll come in.”

“I promise you.”

Dean grabbed her hand and led her back to the bed. “Try to finish eating before you leave.” He placed his hand on her shoulder and pushed gently down for her to sit. “I cooked this for you.”

Ellen smiled as she looked at the pizza. “Jenny’s recipe. Good job.”

“Yeah I did do good.” Dean grinned and sat down with her. “I have to

tell you El. I'm a little, I'm a little jealous."

"Why?" Ellen picked at the pizza.

"Because Robbie was able to convince you to go outside and I couldn't even convince you to walk in the hall."

"Dean, Robbie has this Slagel thing going for him. He plays on that control button that they all can push."

"Like Frank?"

Ellen suddenly looked at Dean.

"Forget I said that."

"He also . . . I made a deal with him. I said if I felt O.K., I wanted to fly to the farm with him."

"You what?" Dean was shocked to hear her say this. "Ellen as your doctor, I'm not sure I can allow that. I don't know how good going back there will be for you."

"Sitting here wondering if they got Frank or if his body is laying in the field isn't good for me either. Besides, I know he's not there, so there isn't going to be anything there that will effect me."

"What about just going there. The sight of it could trigger something in you."

"I hope it does. Because I don't remember much about what happened in the field. Especially after Frank was shot. Everything is blurry."

"You want to remember?" Dean asked.

"I'm strong enough to. I know I showed a weakness by slipping into . . ."

"El." Dean stopped her. "That wasn't a weakness. That was your body shutting down and saying enough. If you were weak you wouldn't have come out."

"And I won't go back either. If Joe says Robbie can take me, will you as my doctor let me go?"

Dean didn't say anything.

"Please?"

"Let's see how tonight goes. O.K.?" Dean leaned forward to her then pulled back. "How are you feeling?"

"Why did you do that and I'm fine. Sore but fine."

"Do what?"

"You looked like you were going to kiss me and you stopped."

"Yeah. I did." Dean answered solemnly. "I'm sorry. I'm just afraid I'm crossing a line with you."

"Crossing a line?" Ellen leaned to him. "Kiss me. I need you to. O.K.?"

Dean slipped his hand behind her neck and pulled Ellen to him. Slowly he separated her lips with his and kissed hers softly. "I missed you."

"I missed you." Ellen kissed him again. "When can I go home? I want to go home."

Dean blinked several times. "Um . . . I didn't think about it. Maybe a few days?"

"Why?"

"You're still hurt El."

"I'm a nurse. I can handle the warning signs. I want to go home."

"O.K." Dean laid his hand on her bent knee. "How about I talk to Henry tomorrow and . . ."

“What does Henry have to do with it?”

“You were living there when you left.”

“I was living there for a reason. My home is with you and the kids. I want to come home. To my home. And . . .” Her voice softened. “When I left, I left in the middle of us dealing with a very tragic time in our lives.” She watched Dean’s head drop. “How are you? How have you been with it?”

“I’m there. That’s all I can say.” Dean shrugged. “I miss Brian El. I miss him so much.”

Ellen shivered “I do too.”

“It’s lonely at times because he was the one who would always get up in the middle of the night.”

“Interrupting when he shouldn’t be?”

“Or when he should.” Dean smiled. “Like when I knew you weren’t in the mood.”

“When have I ever not been in the mood?”

Dean gave a subtle smile. “How about when I would leave the bubbles on the soap?”

Ellen laughed then turned serious. “We need to deal with this Dean. We need to talk about him, laugh about him, miss him together. I want to do that with you.”

“I’d love do that with you. We will, when you come home. Every night we’ll set aside time O.K.?”

“When will that be? Why can’t I come home tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Um.” Dean was stumbling. More than anything he wanted Ellen home. But he wanted her to step into her new home. The old one was a mess. And the new one wasn’t ready enough to surprise her. And since she didn’t remember about the house, Dean wanted it to be a surprise. “El . . .”

“You don’t want me home?”

“Yeah. I mean no, I mean yeah I do. You just aren’t well enough.”

“You’re a doctor Dean. You don’t think I’m in capable hands with you.”

“Well.”

“What did I do?”

“Huh?” Dean scratched his head wondering where that came from.

“You’re stalling. Why can’t I come home?”

“Truth?”

“When do you deliver less?”

“All right.” Dean took a breath. “I want you home. I’d love to have you home. But . . . I have a surprise that has to do with the house and it isn’t ready yet.”

“You’re keeping me in the clinic because of your surprise?”

“No, you aren’t well enough yet.”

“I hate the clinic Dean.” Ellen folded her arms. “I hate it here. And what can go so wrong with me that help from you is that far away?”

“Nothing. And you’re right. I just wasn’t expecting you to be well enough to leave before the surprise was done. Or at least ask to leave.” Dean took a moment. “If you’re doing well tomorrow I’ll give the O.K. to leave tomorrow afternoon. This is the doctor talking and it has nothing to do with my

surprise. I just want thirty-six hours observation and I want to see how you physically handle being out tonight. Deal?"

"Deal. Then I come home?"

"No, then you stay with Henry. He's close enough to me and Andrea. Henry until Sunday. Do this for me because I've been wanting to do this for you."

"All right. And only because it's a surprise for me. Will I like it Dean?"

"I hope so."

"Tell me what it is."

"No, two days you'll know."

"All right." Ellen's eyes shifted, her face lit up and she smiled.

Dean, with oddity, noticed the look on her face. He turned his head to see where she was staring. Robbie had walked in. "Robbie."

"Hey Dean. El." Robbie moved further in. He winked at Ellen. "Ready? I've got everything all prepared."

"Prepared?" Ellen asked.

"It's a surprise." Robbie told her.

"Another one. Boy I should get kidnaped and beat up more often."

Robbie looked in question. "Who else is surprising you?"

"Dean."

Robbie rolled his eyes. "Oh, well you'd better find out about mine first, because it won't mean shit after Dean's."

Quickly Ellen looked at Dean. "Really?"

Dean smiled and raised his eyebrows. He took a breath. "You'd better be going."

"Yes." Ellen stood up slowly. She took Robbie's hand as he held it out to her. "Robbie, can I have a hint?"

"*Think back* is your hint."

"Think back." Ellen moved slow across the room, she stopped. "Dean, will I see you later?"

Thinking, Dean stood up and walked to her. "I'm gonna try. I want to. But, Henry is babysitting and you know how that can get. And I have a lot of work to finish here and for the surprise." Dean saw her expression turn to a disappointed one. "I'll try. Besides, Robbie is gonna make you forget about everything tonight." Dean smiled as he tried to joke with her. "Including me." Dean kissed her. "Try to think of nothing but the movie. Just relax. O.K.?"

Ellen nodded, gave a scared looked to Dean and squeezed Robbie's hand more as she walked from her room with him.

Dean watched. He knew Ellen's apprehension about leaving her sanctity of the room. But he also knew the determination Ellen had and how aware Ellen was of the fact that if she wanted to do more, to leave the clinic, she had to take that first step. And Dean watched her take that first step, but not with him as he wanted. She took it with Robbie. And though Dean joked, or tried to when he said Robbie would make her forget about him. There may have been some truth to that statement. Because with Frank not around, Robbie was an easy substitute. Too easy. And with Ellen as emotionally fragile as she was, she could easily, in a search for Frank, discover Robbie. And the prospect of that frightened Dean more than he cared to admit.

Even though it was called a 'walk-in' Robbie drove Ellen to it. Not even that far from the clinic, he wanted to capture, the true effect. Of course, he had to park the jeep behind the back of the projection unit.

Ellen stepped from the jeep looking at all those who gathered in the grass. "Must be the whole community."

"Just about. But . . ." Robbie said. "Our spot is reserved."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. The guys in the band claimed it last week." Robbie grabbed her hand and started to walk with her down closer to the wall and to the same spot Robbie and the band took over the week before.

"Where's the music coming from?" Ellen asked.

"Danny set up huge PA speakers." Robbie felt Ellen slow down. "What's wrong?"

Ellen saw the two lounge lawn chairs set by Paul, Denny and James. There was a small cooler. And a blanket laying on the bottom of the one chair. "Think back."

"What was that?" Robbie asked.

"You told me my hint was think back. You obviously did."

Robbie smiled and they moved closer to the set up. He and Ellen said their hellos to the guys, and they both laughed at Denny who sat so excited waiting for the movie to start.

"I can't believe you remembered." Ellen looked at the chairs. "We used to line them up in front of the car. How did you get all this stuff ready. I thought you were busy today."

"I was. I have to give credit where credit is due. Even though I'd like to give myself credit. Danny got the things for me. He is the resourceful guy. Everyone calls him that now. Especially after he got the . . ." Robbie hesitated. He didn't want the word 'houses' to come out. "He got the uh . . . the flu."

"Danny's called the resourceful guys ever since he had the flu? He got sick again?"

"Yep. And speaking of resourceful guys." Robbie nodded his head to Danny who walked apprehensively to them.

Ellen grinned at him. "Danny!"

"Hey El." He let out a 'whew' breath and embraced her. "I didn't want to intrude. But I wanted to say I missed you."

"Thanks. I thought I would have seen you today."

"I'm sorry." Danny said. "I was so busy with the . . ." He saw Robbie shake his head. "With the uh . . ."

Robbie cleared his throat. "Flu."

"Yeah, flu." Danny shook his head and coughed. "Anyhow, with the . . . flu keeping me busy and then Robbie asking me to be the resourceful guy. They call me Mr. Resourceful now El. I figured I'd see you here. And I am. And I'll leave you alone."

"Why?" Ellen asked. "Join us. Paul and them are here. Sit with us. There's nothing like going to the drive in with a group of people."

"Thanks." Danny looked at Robbie. "Is it O.K.?"

"Knock yourself out." Robbie pointed to the grass.

"Thanks. I'll be right back" Danny darted off.

"Ready to sit El?" Robbie motioned his hand to the chair. "Trish is kind

of anal about starting it on time.”

“Can we sit together?” Ellen asked. “I would just like that.”

“So would I.” Robbie sat on the lounge chair first, grabbing the blanket and setting it on the ground by him so he could grab it easily. Ellen sat between his legs, resting her back against his chest. “El.” He spoke near her ear. “I have to tell you.” He had a bit of a laugh to his voice. “When I was a kid, I used to want to sit like this with you. But I knew that would never happen. One, I was a kid. Two because I would never do it. I’d embarrass myself. Man, did I get erections all the time back then.”

Ellen started to laugh. “Back then?”

“Hey.” Robbie nudged her.

“Robbie please. You’re a Slagel. I wouldn’t have noticed.”

“Hey.” He felt Ellen’s body shake in her laughing. “Thanks for making a joke. I need you to smile because I need you to know everything is gonna be fine. Especially about Frank. Trust me. I feel it.”

“I do to.”

“If you get cold . . .”

“I’ll let you know.”

Robbie laid his arm across her shoulder pulling Ellen back and feeling her relax some into him. Then he felt her tense up and sit up more. “What’s wrong. El, I swear I’m in control here.”

“No. Look at Johnny.” Ellen pointed with her head to Johnny who waved and walked toward them. “Oh God does he look like his father.”

“Yeah he does. El, do you think he’s like Frank?”

“In a lot of ways, yes. But he hasn’t developed Frank’s strength yet. That Slagel thing. Of course, if I remember right, you didn’t have the Slagel strength yet at his age.”

“No, I didn’t. Neither did Jimmy.” Robbie snickered. “It didn’t take me long.”

Johnny arrived and plopped down in the empty lounge chair. “Hey El. Uncle Robbie.” He got comfortable. “Thanks for the chair.” He reached over and rubbed Denny’s hair. “Do you guys mind?”

Ellen shook her head. She noticed Danny rushing back over, a huge bowl of popcorn in his arms. He sat at the feet of her and Robbie.

Trish took her Master Of Ceremony stand. “If everyone’s ready. Tonight’s adult movie is a fine comedy.” She cleared her throat for the description. “In a post apocalyptic world, ravaged by plague . . .” She didn’t get a chance to finished. Danny hooted, and Paul cheered.

Paul reached over Johnny and extended a ‘high five’ to Robbie. “Yes. The Stand.”

Robbie grew excited. “I laughed my ass off.”

Trish was perturbed. “It’s not The Stand.” She tsked. “It’s a comedy classic. Called The Omega Man. It stars Charlton Heston as the Hero Robert Neville. The last man on earth battling Mathias’ plague ravaged people who walk around like Zombies. Enjoy.” She clapped her hands together and in a perky skip, hurried back to the projection unit.

Denny looked at Johnny. “What’s a zombie?”

“Walking dead.” Johnny answered.

“Whoa.” Denny scratched his head. “Dead plague people battle this

hero guy?”

Robbie heard this. “They aren’t dead. I’ve seen this movie. They just look dead. It’s what the plague did to them.”

“So they aren’t dead?” Denny asked.

“No.” Johnny answered.

“So why did Trish say they were walking dead?”

“I think she was using it as a reference.” Johnny tried to explain.

“Do they feel dead?” Denny asked.

“No.” Johnny was a bit irritated. “They just . . . they look that way. It’s what the plague did to them. Right Uncle Robbie.”

“Yes. The plague killed most people. The Neville guy is immune, like us. But some people didn’t die they just got all disgusting looking.” Robbie buried his lips to the back of Ellen’s head to hide his snicker.

Denny looked horrified. “What if I’m not immune and what if I get disgusting looking.”

Johnny ran his hand across his goatee in such a Frank manner. “Denny. Watch the movie.”

There was nothing for the people of Beginnings quite like watching an end of a world movie. They always found so much pleasure in it no matter how serious the movie was in its time. The moment The Omega Man video started and its 1970’s grainy, long picture appearance came on, the cheers began. And they only grew louder and stronger when in the opening scene, Neville stopped his convertible, and fired his machine gun aimlessly--in a Hollywood induced high speed--at the zombies.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

The moon was so bright that evening and the weather so perfect, it seemed all the men of Bowman took advantage of it. Hal walked near the small park just east of town. A place where a lot of the men went to for relaxation in the evening. A single generator, using gasoline they scavenged, powered the spot lights for evening playing of basketball.

Hal stopped and sat down on the bench by the courts, watching the two teams of four play. The bouncing of the ball and laughter was so old world, Hal loved it. But he had been in a reminiscing stage and he didn’t know why. It was evident to him, because with each bounce of the ball against the concrete, Hal’s heart beat and it brought back strong feelings of many years before.

Watching them play, he could see his big brother Frank shooting in the driveway of their house. So tall, so much bigger. There was something about having a big brother that Hal hated and loved. He guessed that was the feeling of every kid. But Frank was a tough big brother. He always tried to act cool when he couldn’t be. Mean when he wasn’t. But he did do something Hal envied. Everything Frank did, he did well. Unless it had to do with actual school work, then every other Slagel had the advantage over him, no matter how young they were.

Bounce-bounce. The bang of the hoops’ back board. The metal clank of the rim, and the swish of the net.

"Come on Frank. Let me and Robbie play." Hal heard his twelve year old voice.

"Nope. You're too little."

"So, let us play with you."

Then he heard Robbie's voice in his mind. So young. *"We don't want to play with him. He sucks at it."*

Hal remembered how they'd pester Frank. Jimmy never did. Anything physical Jimmy did, was strictly under protest.

"We'll tell Dad." Hal wouldn't let it lay.

"Tell Dad."

"We'll get you in trouble."

"For what?" Frank's tone was so sarcastic.

CRASH!

Hal laughed as he thought about it. Maybe it wasn't the best idea he and Robbie had, throwing that rock, breaking the garage door window and saying Frank did it with the ball. They did have to run from him for four blocks. Frank never did catch them. Their father was on his way home from work and picked them up. Frank didn't get in the car, his mistake. Hal and Robbie proceeded to tell Joe they were running from Frank because they threatened to tell on him for breaking the window. Frank got in trouble. And Frank ended up being a better big brother than they gave him credit for. He never argued the punishment. He took it. Working off the price of the window with extra chores. Hal always thought Frank would pay him back for that. He didn't.

But somehow in that moment, the memory suddenly left him. Pummeled away. Smacked out of his head. The loud 'heads up Captain' somehow wasn't quick enough for him to pull him from that flashback in enough time to react to the basketball sailing his way.

Thump!

Hal's head jolted to the left from the mighty smack of the ball. He watched the basketball bounce and roll away. He then saw the shoes of the person chasing it. Hal looked up in irritation as he rubbed his stinging head.

Craig grabbed the ball. Snickering. "Sorry. We yelled."

Hal grumbled in such a Slagel way, deciding at that moment, if Craig was playing basketball, he would certainly be a target. So Hal got up and moved on taking his memories along with him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana.

It took longer than Dean expected to clean the dust from new couch. And that Bed-in-a-Bag that Danny grabbed him from K-mart was nearly impossible to figure out. It baffled him how something so simple as a comforter, sheet and bed skirt could be so difficult for a man of science. But Dean finished a lot that night, even in the dark modular home. He used candles because he wanted to get it ready. He had too. He wanted Ellen home. And even though it was later than he told Henry he would be, Dean made a special trip to the 'walk-in' to check on Ellen. He could hear the laughter as he neared. The loud

comments about bad shirts and wasted shots.

Dean didn't make it too far into the 'walk-in'. He stopped when saw Ellen so comfortable with Robbie. It bothered him seeing her like that. And with Ellen going through all that she was, Dean, knowing it would be hard for him to hide his feelings, decided she didn't need his insecurities on her mind as well. So, Dean simply turned around, put his hands in his pockets and feeling lost, walked back home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

September 6
Beginnings, Montana

Henry's head swayed slowly back to look out the window at the rain that blasted against the pane. "Damn." He returned to the diningroom table, leaning over it with Danny. A laptop computer sat on Dean's diningroom table. Wires protruded from it. The first floor was dimly lit in those early morning hours. And thunder and lightening added a science fiction feel as they worked.

The thunder roared.

Danny hooked up to the laptop what looked like a voltage detector. "This weather makes me feel like doctor Frankenstein." He handed it to Henry. "Point away."

"It isn't going to work."

"Trust me." Danny clicked on the keyboard. "Point away."

"Danny, your power supply isn't channeled right. You of all people know this. Too much juice is headed to the laptop."

"Henry, I of all people do know. Get ready."

"They aren't meant to take that much power. Didn't you learn?"

"Yeah." Danny nodded. "I adjusted. I think I have it this time."

"All right." Henry shrugged and grabbed the 'on' switch. "But as soon as I do this . . ." He flicked it on, and when he did a loud buzzing occurred followed by a crack. Henry dropped what he held. "That will happen." He waved the smoke that came from the laptop.

"Shit."

"Told you."

"I stand corrected." Danny placed on gloves and disconnected everything from the laptop. He grabbed the small fire extinguisher, lifted the laptop, tossed the computer in a huge box with five or six others and blasted it with the extinguisher. "We have one more." He pulled another laptop over. "After this we have to go to storage."

"How many did you swipe?" Henry asked.

"Enough. They're all over the place out there. O.K.." Danny flipped the lid to the laptop. "Let's try this again."

Dean smelled smoke when he reached the first floor of his house. He saw the reason for the hazy appearance in his house when he looked at Danny and Henry at his diningroom table. "Are you two still working on the same thing or did Danny come back?"

Henry looked up. "Hey Dean. I don't know. What time is it?"

"Look at your watch Henry." Dean told him.

"I can't." Henry tapped the face of his watch. "It got zapped. I have one a.m."

Dean held up his own wrist. "I have five-forty-five a.m."

Danny's eyes widened. "Shit. Wow. O.K., we'd might as well keep going."

"Might as well." Henry agreed. "I'm here till ten anyhow. Is that how long you'll be Dean. Ten? I have things I have to do."

“So do I Henry. And until Ellen is on her feet, you’re the babysitter on Saturday’s. After all, one of the five living here is yours.”

“There’s always a price to pay.” Henry said. “Oh hey Dean?” Henry called out to him stopping Dean as he left. “Are you letting El come home with me tonight?”

“Let’s see how she’s doing today after her little outing.” Dean opened his front door. “And Henry, don’t forget to feed the kids this morning.”

“O.K.” Henry answered as he held a wire for Danny. He looked up when he heard the closing of the door. “What did he just say?”

“Haven’t a clue.” Danny answered as he reached for a tool. “Let’s just finish this.”

“Damn it.” Dean cringed as the rain fell harder on him. He ran as fast as he could from the edge of the living section through town and to the clinic. His tennis shoes squeaked as he walked into the quiet halls. Dean shook his head flinging his growing hair like a dog to shuck the massive amount of water the adhered to his head. He walk down the hall, flinging the wetness from his arms and shaking a forming chill.

Running his fingers through his hair to straighten it, he turned into Ellen’s room and stopped cold with a loud squeal of his shoes. The bed was made, no IV. No Ellen. He stepped backwards to make sure in his mindless walk he didn’t wander into the wrong room He didn’t. Shocked, he turned around and saw Patrick crossing the corridor at the other end. Dean raced up to him.

“Patrick.”

“Oh hi Dean.” Patrick carried a chart and walked to the nurses station. “We had a break in temperature in four of the pneumonia cases.”

“Good. Patrick, where is Ellen.”

Patrick looked up from his chart. “I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?” Dean asked.

“She didn’t return last night.”

“Where the hell is she?” Dean asked almost panicked.

“She um . . .” Patrick grabbed another chart. “She stayed with Robbie.”

Dean’s heart sunk and a twinge of anger hit him. Rain or not, Dean began to leave the clinic. He knew where he had to go.

^^^

Joe had the maps folded as much as he could so as not to take up most of the space on Robbie’s diningroom table. He smoked a cigarette and occasionally picked up his coffee. He held a pen in his hand and he jotted down figures on a piece of paper. “How long again Ellen?”

Ellen sat caddy corner to Joe, a cup of coffee before her. “A couple hours maybe, no it was longer than that. We rode at a slow steady pace.”

Joe wrote down some more numbers. “It’s not making any sense.” He looked up when he heard the setting down of a plate and smelled eggs. He watched Robbie place breakfast in front of Ellen. “Being awfully nice aren’t you?” He asked Robbie.

“Yep.” Robbie took another hit of the cigarette he smoked, then put it

out. "You want some Dad."

"Nah, coffee's fine." Joe stared at the maps.

Robbie returned with a plate of eggs and sat down. "I'm starved this morning. I hate doing rounds hungry."

Joe took a sip of his coffee. "I need you to think for a second Ellen. Do you even remember when you traveled, about what time of day it was, and where the sun was?"

"When we headed to the farm it was morning. Maybe late morning. And I do remember about the sun."

"You do?" Joe seemed surprised.

"Yes, because it seemed to follow us." Ellen said. "It was hot."

"So you came from the east."

"That's what the Calvary said." Ellen took a bite of her eggs and actually moaned as she chewed. "Oh my God are these good. Look at the chopped up vegetables. So tiny." She took another bite. "Oh Joe, you should have some."

Joe looked at her plate. "They do look good." He reached over and grabbed the fork from her hand, took a fork-full of eggs and ate them. "They are good. Really good." He gave Ellen back her fork and returned to his maps. "Robbie, I'm impressed."

"Thanks. But I didn't make them." Robbie said. "Jess did. He knew Ellen stayed here last night and he made them when he came home from his shift this morning. He said just heat them up."

Ellen ran her fork through the food. "Look at the work. He did this after walking a beat before he went to bed."

"No." Robbie shook his head. "He has all kinds of things chopped up in the fridge. El . . . he cooks all the time. I never have to cook. He cooks good too. And cleans."

Joe peered up from his map over his glasses. After briefly looking at Robbie he went back to his maps.

"I feel bad." Robbie spoke. "Andrea isn't feeding me as much."

"I don't." Joe grumbled through his mapping.

Ellen smiled. "Joe's happy someone else is taking care of you."

Again, Joe looked up, snickered and returned to his maps.

"Was Jess married Robbie?" Ellen asked. "I bet he was. Someone trained him well." She ate some more. "These are so good. And the house is so neat."

"It is." Robbie replied "He wasn't married but he told me he lived with someone for eight years. But he's a neat freak."

"Wow." Ellen commented. "You guys are like Felix and Oscar of the Odd couple."

Robbie chuckled. "Yeah we are. Only we actually get along great."

Joe laughed and stood up. "I think I'll have some of those eggs."

"What's so funny Joe?" Ellen asked.

"Oh nothing, ignore me." Joe walked to the kitchen. "The Odd Couple comment made me think back to the show, that's all. Good show."

Ellen watched Joe in the kitchen dishing up eggs. "Your Dad can be so . . ." She stopped speaking. When she turned to look back at Robbie, Ellen saw Dean, soaking wet, walking into the house. "Oh boy."

Robbie didn't see what the problem was. "El, it's Dean. Please." He

stood up. “Hey Dean. Want some . . .”

“El.” Dean walked closer. “What . . . what are you doing, huh?”

“Eating.” Ellen plunged her fork into her eggs.

“No, you know exactly what I am talking about. This here. Why . . .”

“Morning Dean.” Joe came from the kitchen. “Eggs. Jess made them.”

Dean shook his head. He controlled himself because he felt his thoughts slipping out. Thoughts of being out numbered. Thoughts of Frank or no Frank, the Slagels had Ellen and always would. But he didn’t want that part of his anger to come out. “El, you promised me thirty-six hours of observation. You can’t be running around. You just came out of the shock twenty-four hours ago.”

Joe really didn’t think anything of it. “Dean, it’s all right. I wouldn’t have let her stay here if my wife didn’t give the O.K., and Andrea came over three times last night to make sure she was fine.”

“Andrea O.K.’d it?” Dean asked.

“Yes,” Joe began to eat. “Ellen refused to go back. I tried to get her to go. Robbie tried and Andrea handled it.”

“I see.” Dean nodded. “O.K.” Dean held up his hand. “As long as you’re fine El.” He turned around and moved back to the door. “I have to get to the clinic.”

Ellen stood up slowly. “Dean. Wait. Please.” she moved with caution from the table, limping slightly as she moved to him. She looked back to Robbie and Joe and pulled Dean further to the door whispering. ”Don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad. I was concerned. Obviously you don’t care about your health.”

“I care about my health and my mental health. Being at that clinic bothers me.”

Dean scoffed facially to her. “Right.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

“I know you are. I can feel it.”

Dean checked out Joe and Robbie who tried to act like they weren’t watching. He kept his voice low. “All right. I am mad. But I’m not worrying about it. You’re fine. You obviously know what you need medically and emotionally and you have it. That’s what counts. You getting through this. I have to go. I only have four hours at the clinic.” He grabbed the door. “Bye Joe. Robbie.”

Ellen stood by the door as Dean left. She went back to her eggs and to Robbie and Joe, acting as if nothing bothered her and as if everything were fine. But the truth was, it did bother her and her gut told, all was not fine.

^^^

Nashville , Tennessee

Eight Society soldiers stepped from the train into the station ahead of George. George hated the train ride, it was slow. They had to stop several times because the conductor got confused on everything except blowing the whistle. George looked irritated when he was approached by one of his men’s leaders in Tennessee, Captain Anvers.

“Captain.”

“President Hadly.” Captain Anvers saluted, he brought forward a man, in his fifties wearing a blue workman’s outfit. “Sir I would like you to meet Owen Wells. He is the man responsible for getting the underground phone lines up and running in this region.”

George shook his hand. “Owen, excellent Job. I’m not understanding why we aren’t getting picked up by the tracking in Beginnings.”

“Simple sir.” Owen explained. “We’re using the old underground lines. Nothing is bouncing off the satellite and that’s where tracking is picking it up from, the satellite. The old lines are safe from the tacking. Where cell phones and radios are not.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.” George began to walk with Captain Anvers and Owen. “Tell me did Captain Anvers here speak to you about running the lines through other cities.”

“I’m still working on that, but I don’t see why we can’t get the lines up in running at least in the cities The Society operates. I would need the man power. Then I would have to train them and reprogram the phone lines. Could be months or longer.”

“I understand. I’m in town for a day. After I’ve rested I expect to see you with a full break down and report.”

“Yes Sir.”

George let Captain Anvers lead the way to the awaiting jeep that would take him to the main set up. George needed his communications back, communications that could not be detected by Beginnings. The only problem George had was that his means of communications to overseas would be detected. And with his overseas expedition scheduled to start soon, it looked as if he were going to have to go into that blindly and with little communications with the outgoing ship. But to George going blindly was better than not going at all.

^ ^ ^ ^

Beginnings, Montana

Into the tracking room Henry raced in from the rain. He shook the water from him as he set down his tool bag. He looked to Mark who monitored the SUT tracking system. “What’s up Mark? I’m supposed to be babysitting.”

“We lost the front gate tracking.”

“We what?” Henry flung the rain off of him and moved closer to the dead screen. “How long ago?”

“Just when I called you.” Mark said. “Ten minutes maybe.”

“Could be the rain, that wind is pretty bad out there. All right. Let me check in here to make sure it’s not the power or anything internal. We drain a lot of power here and the storm may have an effect on it. Do me a favor and call Danny.” Henry opened his tool bag. “This is more his baby than mine. I could waste a lot of time.”

“Danny’s working on the houses.”

Henry pulled out the table the monitors set on. “I think this is a little more important.”

“I’ll call Danny.” Mark picked up the phone.

^^^

Bright and chipper, Andrea walked into Dean's lab. She held a small note Dean left her and she knocked once on the archway. "Morning Dean. You wanted to see me."

Dean turned from his work. "Yeah, close the door."

"Must be important." Andrea reached back and closed the door. "What's going on?"

"I need to know where you get off." Dean walked to her.

"Excuse me." Andrea blinked. She was taken aback by his hostile tone.

"Where do you get off. Ellen is my patient. Not yours."

"What did . . ."

"You have no right. No right what-so-ever to release her from the clinic without my knowledge." Dean's hand slammed on the counter.

"First off!" Andrea raised her voice. "Do not dare take that tone with me!"

"Don't you dare take control of my patients."

"It was Ellen!"

"Yes it was!" Dean shouted back. "And you just assumed it was fine for her to not return."

"I checked on her all night." Andrea spoke loud and defensive. "And she was in capable hands. She wasn't alone. She was with . . ." Andrea cleared her throat. "I see."

"You see what?"

"This has nothing to do with the fact I gave the O.K. for her not to return, does it?"

"Yes it does."

"Oh horse shit." Andrea moved to the door and opened it. "When you calm your little ass down then we will talk. If you want to discuss this on a professional level. We will. But I will not be victim to your petty jealousy because she stayed with Robbie Slagel." Andrea pointed with her bobbing head. "And that is where your anger lies. That is why you are blasting my judgement. Get over it Dean. Get over it now or you'll be in for a miserable time ahead." Andrea stormed out.

As the door slammed loudly so did Dean's hand again on the counter, this time sending a rack of tubes crashing over and breaking. "Shit." Reaching for them, Dean stopped and ran his hand down his face, desperately trying to get his anger back in control.

^^^

The rain had stopped. Robbie laughed as he spoke in his headset, walking the pathway back to his jeep. "No way. The chief can not be involved in the Neville nominations. He's too old."

"Right." Steve the tower guard came back sarcastically. "How old do you think Charlton Heston was?"

"Not that old." Robbie laughed, "Besides, I'm Neville."

Steve's joking tone changed. "Whoa . . . hold up. Which way you headed?"

"Why?" Robbie asked. "To my jeep."

"There's someone at the back gate."

"One of Mathias' men? Cause with tracking down we can't be . . ."

"No." Steve said. "This is one, no, two men and the one just dropped the other off at the front gate."

"I'm there." Robbie took off running to his jeep. He jumped in and lowered the microphone to his headset. He screeched the jeep to the way of the front gate. "Frank."

^^^

Danny huffed and shook his head when he heard Henry laughing through the headset radio. "It's not funny." Danny clenched his hands as he climbed a rope up a tree. "Why aren't you doing this? It's internal."

"External."

"Internal."

"Danny, you secured it badly. Admit it."

"Never. I can't believe a storm knocked this down. Hell, I secured this thing so tight Fuckin' God himself couldn't knock it off."

It wasn't the intrusion voice they expected. Reverend Bob interrupted. "Must we speak the Lord's name like that."

Henry laughed. "Listen to you eavesdropping. That is so wrong."

"I eavesdrop so I know who to pray for."

Danny grunted as he climbed. "No offense Reverend. But that doesn't work for me. Henry, almost there."

"Down the front gate!" Robbie could see the man, wrapped in a blanket on his side. His dark hair protruding through it. "Shit, Please." Robbie beckoned in his mind, racing over to the body and dropping to his knees. He turned him over in complete disappointment. It wasn't Frank. Placing his revolver in his shoulder harness, Robbie saw the note attached to the man. It was addressed to the doctors in Beginnings. "O.K., let's get you in." Robbie reached down to the man and pulled him to the front gate.

Finally Danny made it to the top of the tree, lifting himself to the high branch where the tracker was. "Oh shit. Henry."

"Yeah."

"It wasn't any storm that did this."

"What was it?"

Danny looked at the spear that stuck from the tracker. "It was a spear." He heard the rustling of grass below him. "Oh shit. Not again."

"What. What's wrong?" Henry came back.

"Gets security out here now! We have savages." Danny's eyes shifted and he saw Robbie by the front gate. "Damn it. Henry get help!" Grabbing the

spear and tugging it with all he had, Danny tucked it under his arms and grateful he was wearing gloves, slid most the rope length down the tree.

Robbie stood quickly to his feet dropping the man a few feet from the gate when he heard the single war cry chants. "Shit." He grabbed his gun and moved up his microphone. "Get me a team out front. But put up that perimeter now until they get here. We have savages. Sounds like a lot."

Steve was on the other line. "Already spotted them, they're on their way."

"Fuck." Robbie said disgusted and knew he didn't have time to get the man from the way. He held up his revolver trying to zoom in on the direction. But they seemed to come from all directions. Robbie just prepared to fire. Louder and louder they got. Then suddenly from the trees they emerged like the wild animals that they were. There were more than Robbie could count and they came almost as fast as he shot. He was taking them down, but they plowed to him. One man. One gun and then Robbie felt the sear of an arrow into his leg. "Fuck." He shouted out and felt a savage leap to his back. He flung him over his shoulder and snapped his neck, dropping him and swinging out his gun in a punch to one that dove at him. As he swung forth at another, Robbie saw Danny run from the trees.

Danny made as much noise as the savages trying to divert attention from some that went after Robbie. And it worked. Holding the spear in both hands, the savages flew his way. Danny spun the spear in a martial arts style, using the ends of the stick in alternation to nail each savage that came his way. He danced on his feet in a fighter's stance, giving the savages his best shot.

Twenty. Or thirty were there. Out numbered.

With the arrow still in his leg, Robbie felt the grip of an arm to his neck and pulled backwards by more than one savage. Just when he used his every strength to pull off one, his head lifted and he saw another racing towards him with a spear aimed directly for Robbie. It was coming fast and Robbie fought to free himself. Twenty feet, fifteen, ten, . . . and then a out of nowhere came the 'nay' of a horse, a swing of a sword and the attacking savage's head flew from the body and rolled to the ground. Blood shot up like a fountain from the savage that had yet to fall. The rider on the horse barreled by the savage he just decapitate and sent the body spinning.

The savages were just as surprised as Robbie, and in their surprise, Robbie took his advantage. Breaking free Robbie began to fight, using his fist because they came so many, so fast. He could see Danny battling. He could see the rider on the horse remove an arrow from the horses backside, and not miss a beat in his ride. Swooping down his sword at the savages as he did, kicking the ones that came after him and even helping Robbie once in his pass. In his fight with three men, Robbie watched the long silver blade quickly shoot forward into the chest of one of the savages he fought. The sword retracted and the rider moved on.

Through the small war the waged outside the front gate that Robbie, Danny and now the anonymous rider tried to protect, came steady gun fire as a team of ten Beginnings men, burst through the front gate and began to pick off the targets. Precisely and fast, just as they had been taught.

Hearing the shots, Robbie backed up, he raced to Danny pulling him with him to the line of Beginnings men. And keeping Danny there, Robbie aimed as well. "Don't hit the man on the horse!"

When the savages had dropped and the silence entailed. Robbie saw the rider trot off in the other direction. He ran off after him. "Wait!" Robbie called out. "Wait!" The rider picked up speed and kept on going. "Shit!" Robbie tossed his hand out. "Who was that?"

Danny couldn't miss his opportunity. He snickered. "The Lone Ranger!" He saw Robbie look at him with hostile eyes. "Zorro?" Still no Robbie response. "The calvary?"

"Ha-ha-ha." Robbie shook his head and turned to his men. "Nice work! Thank you." Robbie returned to Danny. "Where did you learn to do that shit?"

"Bruce Lee taught my father and my father taught me."

"You're kidding?" Robbie asked impressed.

"Yeah I am. I had you going though. Hey did you know you have a broken arrow sticking out of your leg?"

Robbie broke it at the head. He tried to not laugh at Danny and that took a lot. He moved toward the front gate.

"You shouldn't have done that Robbie."

"Why?"

"You lost the Neville look."

"Shit." Robbie looked down at his bleeding leg. He spoke in the radio. "I got hit with a uh . . . uh small spear. Give me a Neville point."

^^^

Dean, calmer, waited for Andrea's approval for him to enter her office. Slowly and near humble he walked in.

"Yes." She looked up from the files she read.

"I'm sorry." Dean told her as Andrea just watched him. "I am. I was wrong. You were right. You were perfectly capable of making the decision on Ellen and I shouldn't have done that to you. And you were right about the Robbie thing. That is what has me angry. I can't help it. It just hurts. It doesn't matter what I do, I'm never going to be the person Ellen needs." Dean stepped back to the door. "And I'll get over it again. I just got wrapped up too much in what we had before Brian died." Shaking his head, Dean opened the door.

"Dean." Andrea called to stop him. "I do understand. And apology accepted. If you need to talk about . . ." Andrea's phone ringing, interrupted her. "Hold in." She picked up the cell phone. "Dr. Winters." Her face filled with worry. "Yes, Joe. We'll get ready." She hung up and stood up. "Let's go Doctor."

"What's wrong?"

"We have incoming."

"Wh . . ." Before Dean could say anything Andrea had flew from her office.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Summoned and running there, Hal charged into the police station. "Tell me." He spoke and looked impatient.

The monitor looked up. "We were monitoring and our man was dropped off and discovered."

"That's a good thing. You sent word there was trouble. What was it?"

"Wildcat attack sir." The monitor said. "Or savages as Beginnings calls them. From what we could tell, Danny was out there in a tree and Eagle one was getting our man. Eagle one was hit with a spear, but seemed fine."

"Are they fine? Is our man fine?" Hal questioned.

"As far as we know. We're still waiting."

"What about our escort?"

"No word." The monitor shook his head.

Hal looked at his watch. "He should be returning in a few hours. I'll keep watch. Did they say how many wildcats?"

"No sir."

"Keep listening and keep me posted."

"I will. But sir . . ." The monitor interrupted Hal's departure. "There is one more thing."

"What is that?" Hal asked.

"We were listening. I think there may be one more opposing force out there against us."

"The wildcats."

"No sir." The monitor handed Hal a sheet of paper. "This is what they said. It's not the wildcats or the society. They were looking out for these people too."

"Damn it." Hal harshly flicked his hand against the paper. "This is all we need." Hal took a calming breath. "I'm going to be in the field finishing today's training and then I'm keeping watch. Please let me know if you hear anything further about the Mathias men." He laid the note paper down and left.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

A blue cloth draped over Robbie's thigh with only his injury exposed. With each pull of the suture Dean made, blood seeped from the slice. "Andrea could have done this."

"Yeah, but my legs are my best asset Dean. You're the stitch guy."

Dean shook his head with a smile and continued to stitch. "Go on Danny, you were saying."

"Oh." Danny was especially upbeat. "There he was, right. Surrounded. Fifty or sixty of them, Robbie was trapped. They were on him, beating him. Robbie was at their mercy. I come flying in, and I flew Dean."

"I'm sure." Dean tugged the suture.

"I come flying in and I take control of the situation. Saving Robbie, making him sit down while I battled the savages."

Dean looked up to Robbie. "Any of that story true?"

“Oh yeah. Every word. Did he fail to mention his lightening fast hands. He told that one in the jeep.”

“Failed to mention.”

“Sweetheart!” Andrea called out so upbeat yet concerned. “Honey.” She hurried over to Robbie. “Are you all right?”

“Um . . . gees.” Robbie cringed falsely in pain. “I don’t know. Some brownies later may help.”

“Of course. Dean?” Andrea peered over his shoulder “Are you hurting my boy?”

“Very much so.” Dean snipped the sutures. “Care to dress this.”

“Certainly.” Andrea patted Dean’s hand. “Jason is cleaning up the new guy. Can you?”

“Yep.” Dean moved his tray and walked to the sink. He smiled at Danny. “Good story.”

“Thanks.” After Dean left, Danny walked over and looked at the stitches Robbie had. “Cool injury. Very Neville like.”

“Too bad I didn’t take one to the chest huh?” Robbie joked.

Danny snickered. “Andrea how bad would it have been, say Robbie got arrowed in the chest.”

“Bad.” Andrea bandaged.

“Cool. Hey Robbie we would have hung you up like Jesus just for the . . .”

“Danny!” Andrea scolded reached out and smacked his hand.

“What? I was making a Neville reference.” Danny stated. “At the end of The Omega man when Neville was speared to death, they made him look like he was crucified like Jesus.”

“Robbie.” Andrea spoke so shocked. “Please don’t tell me you let my Denny see that.”

“Nope.” Robbie lied. “Covered his eyes again.”

“Thanks goodness. Our Sweet Jesus watches over us and we shouldn’t be blaspheming. I think you should come to services tomorrow with me Danny.”

“O.K., yeah sure.” Danny rolled his eyes and waved at Robbie and made his escape to find someone else to tell his new hero story to.

Dean moved into the next examining room. Jason was standing over the man whom Robbie found at the front gate. He was attaching the tube from the medication into a shunt in the man’s arm. “What do we have Jason?” Dean walked closer to the table.

“See for yourself.” Jason handed Dean the chart. “Came attached to him when Robbie found him.”

“What is this with the patients being dropped off at the gate. Like we’re some kind of emergency room.” Dean began to read the handwritten note. “*Five days ago the patient returned home with a two inch laceration. The cut exhibited signs of infection. All attempts to control the infection with natural remedies has failed. The patient’s body temperature continues to rise and he has now become lethargic and unresponsive at times.*” Dean set down the chart. “Did you clean it?”

“Yep. Everything is finished. Gave a complete look over for you. The

orders just need signed.”

“Thanks.” Dean walked to the other side of the table, and pulled out his pen as he reviewed the chart. “Jason, I have a ton of blood work to catch up in the lab. Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Andrea is busy with Robbie. Can you run over to Henry’s, I think that’s where Ellen is, and check on her?”

“I can do that. Weakness, headache, staring, numbness and such?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get back to you.” Jason looked once more at the new patient. “He looks like he’s waking.” Jason walked out.

Dean grabbed his pen light and raised it to the eyes of the man, shining them across the eyelids.

The man groaned. “The woman. The woman. How is the woman?”

“What woman?” Dean asked and he did not receive an answer. He proceeded to return to the chart and the paper work that needed signed.

^^^

“You’re supposed to be at Henry’s.” Jason said as he stepped into Joe’s house. “Are we playing musical homes Ellen.”

“No.” Ellen walked into the livingroom. “I’m helping Joe out babysitting.”

Jason looked to Joe who sat on the couch,. “Is she helping.”

“Nope.” Joe answered. “How’s my son?”

“Good. Getting stitched. And the new guy, just a bad infection. We should be able to control it.”

“Which new guy?” Ellen asked.

Joe answered. “The one that was dropped off at the front gate with a note on him asking for our help.”

“Oh my God! Proof.” Ellen hurried as best as she could to the door. “The calvary.”

“Ellen . . .” Joe stood up and Ellen was gone. “She shouldn’t be doing that should she?”

Jason shook his head. “I think she’ll be fine. She may find herself in a bad episode of the F-Troop but otherwise she’s fine.”

Joe plopped back down on the couch. “The F-Troop.” He snickered. “Hey that was funny.”

^^^

Nashville Tennessee

George sat behind an old desk, rubbing his eyes as he spoke on the phone. “All of them?” He asked Jeremy.

“Just about sir. When they went into the next phase of the DNA enhancement of the embryos they lost the whole batch.”

“Damn it.” George huffed angrily. “I want to move this along. We need

to move this along.”

“The other scientist are trying to compensate.”

“I realize this. But they can’t compensate for the loss of the four that were in the genetics field.”

“Perhaps they weren’t as good as you thought they were. Their own creation killed them.”

George snarled and his top lip curled, he mocked Jeremy. “Perhaps they weren’t as good.” George huffed loudly. “I’ll know when I get to Alabama tomorrow. Hopefully they’ll give me news. What’s their latest report?”

“Sent out the troops to Arizona as expected and . . . still no change.”

“O.K., I’ll check back in a few hours.” George disconnected the call and his fingers stayed on the phone. He paused for a moment then he began to dial. A number he called often. A Beginnings number. “Hey, it’s me.” George smiled. “Good. I’m good. And you . . . I’m glad. Just wanted to check on you and let you know I’m thinking about you. Well yeah . . .” George leaned back. “Getting there. I’ll know more tomorrow. Of course I’ll let you know. I’m gonna get going, I’ll call you tomorrow. Be careful . . . Thanks.” With the smile still remaining, George ended his call.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Grateful to Henry for driving her to the clinic, Ellen, not wanting to get in any trouble with Dean, snuck passed the lab, behind Henry and walked slowly to the patient rooms. Even though the distance was not that far. Ellen’s body didn’t want to move. She did feel better on this day, but not yet herself.

“Found him.” Henry whispered and pointed into a room.

Ellen stood by the nurses desk. “Got his chart.” She held it up and walked to Henry. “You should go fix our tracking now Henry, we don’t want to get attacked.”

“I’ll come back for you. How long?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll just walk real slow home.”

“I’ll just check back.” Henry kissed her on the cheek. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck fixing the tracking.”

“No, not that. Working with Danny. He wants everyone to call him Neville.”

“He can’t be a Neville nominee. He’s Asian.”

“That’s what I told him.” Henry tossed up his hands. “But he said heroism has no racial boundaries. Then he lied and said something about the original Neville was Bruce Lee and it got switched at the last second before shooting.”

Ellen smiled. “Danny’s cute. O.K., I’m going to check on this guy. If he’s one, he may know about Frank.”

Henry opened his mouth to say something, but he didn’t. He figured if Ellen kept her spirits up by wishing on Frank being alive, then who was he to dampen them. He just smiled and walked away. He was in a good mood, confident they could fix the tracker with limited problems. And to ensure he didn’t have any bad luck, Henry ran as fast as he could from the clinic the

moment he saw Bev walk in.

Ellen recognized the man as soon as she walked in the room. “Hey.” She called to him softly. “Are you awake?”

His eyes opened some and he watched Ellen come into a blurry focus.

Ellen leaned closer to him. “I know you aren’t well. Remember me?”

“The woman.”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad . . .” He spoke weakly. “I’m glad you’re fine.” He closed his eyes again.

Ellen looked at his vital signs monitor and to his bandaged arm. She checked his IV which wasn’t placed in as good as she knew she could do it. Following the tubing up, Ellen tilted her head in wonder. She read the label. ‘Kenyan-2’. She then looked at his body temperature. “Level two?” She questioned out loud and then opened the chart on the bed. “Dean?” She said his name to herself and she moved to the bandaged arm. Slowly she lifted the adhesive and then the bandage, examining the wound. Her eyes went from the chart, to the wound, to the IV and finally his temperature. “This isn’t right.”

Quietly, with her hands behind her back, Bev snuck into the lab. She stood there watching Dean move about then settle into one place at the counter. With an ornery grin on her face she moved closer to him, and to his back. She bit her bottom lip and inched her way to Dean. Softly she laid her hands on the side of his thighs and pressed her chest to his back as she ran her hands up his legs to his chest.

Dean smiled and let out a breath of relief. It felt good to have Ellen touch him. He turned around and his eyes widened to see Bev. “What . . .”

“Hi Dean.” Bev smiled, laid her hands on his face, moved right against him and kissed him.

It wasn’t a situation Dean wanted to be in. Reacting quickly, he grabbed her hands and pushed them away at the same time he pulled from the kiss. “What would . . . Shit!” he moved Bev aside and raced across the lab when he saw Ellen standing at the medicine cooler. “El.”

“You made a mistake.”

“No see . . .”

Ellen’s shutting of the cooler and grabbing an IV bottle shut Dean up. She moved across the lab ignoring the gloating look Bev gave her. She grabbed a empty requisition from Dean’s stack, stuck it in a phlebotomy tray and carried the medicine and the tray from the lab with her.

Dean started to follow, stopped and ran back in his lab pointing at Bev. “Get out of my lab before I kill you.” He banged his hand on the archway and took off after Ellen. “El wait.” When Dean caught up to her she was walking in the new man’s room.

Ellen smiled as Melissa left. “Thanks.” She checked the oxygen Melissa set up on the man and adjust the back of the bed up more.

“What are you doing?” Dean asked as he walked in.

“Fixing a crucial error you made.”

“What are you talking about? What’s the problem?” Dean asked as he watched Ellen remove the intravenous and switch bottles. “What are you giving him.”

“A higher strength dose of Kenyan.”

Dean noticed the level of it. “He has an infection. That’s too strong.”

“No Doctor, he has chronic tetanus. Did you not fully examine this man?” She slammed the chart into Dean’s chest.

“First of all I . . .”

“You disappoint me.” Ellen spoke with edge.

“I what?” Dean ran his hand down his face.

Ellen attached the new medication then reached into her phlebotomy tray. “I promised this man’s people that if they needed medical treatment or care they would get the best from us. And he will, even if I have to give it to him. I can not believe you missed this.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did. The extremely high temperature.” Ellen placed the tourniquet on his arm. “The slight twitching of the sternocleidomastoid, consistent with early slow phases of lockjaw. His left hand twitches. You didn’t notice? His wound has failed to heal. Yet the chart.” Ellen placed a needle in the man’s arm. “The chart states he was injured five days ago.” She filled up the tube and after removing it, filled another. “His mind is clear, he’s just sleepy. Not lethargic. He remembered me.” She removed the needle, tossing it in the bin. “Tetanus.” She handed Dean the tubes. “I started a heavier antibiotic. Test those for tetanus and his resistance to the tetanus antitoxin we have. You’ll see I’m right. Then maybe you can give him a muscle relaxer so the man doesn’t asphyxiate when his neck muscles choke him to death.” Ellen grabbed the tray and left a bewildered Dean.

“Ellen.” Dean ran from the room after her. “Stop.” He grabbed her arm. “First of all, I don’t make mistakes like that.”

“Like that. No.” Ellen started walking again.

“Look El, I need to talk to you. About what you saw when you walked in the lab.”

“I’d really rather not talk about what I saw. I don’t care what I saw.” Ellen pulled away. She spoke calm. “I ignored what Alex told me about Bev coming to the house and her being your special friend.”

“Ellen.”

“Let me finish. O.K., I can’t get mad at you about being with Bev. That’s your right. I can get mad at you about you blowing off that guy.”

“I didn’t blow him off.” Dean got angry. “The level of Kenyan that was given him would have been sufficient enough to subdue the tetanus until I ran tests on the blood taken. Thank you very much.”

“Oh really. What blood work was taken?”

“The blood . . .” Dean opened the chart. “Ellen, I didn’t examine him. I would have noticed we didn’t have blood work. I’m backed up. You aren’t around.”

“So it’s my fault.”

“No. I’m just defending myself as a doctor here.”

“You signed the orders.” Ellen stepped back and pointed to Dean’s signature. “I’m assuming you examined him.” Ellen walked away.

“No!” Dean shouted at her. “This has nothing to do with this patient

does it? You're pissed off at what you saw, so instead of talking to me about it, you bash my ability as a doctor. Don't walk away. Ellen." Dean chased her. "I'm talking to you. This is bullshit. O.K.?"

"No, it's not O.K. Dean. It's not. And I don't want to be angry with you. I just want to say screw it."

"Screw it. Explain screw it."

"Screw you. Screw us. Screw everything."

Dean started to laugh, he couldn't help it. "This is stupid. You saw . . ."

"I saw her touch you. I saw you two kissing. Did I not?" Ellen started to walk again.

"You saw *her* kissing me. Big difference. She's starting trouble Ellen. Don't give this one to her. And . . ." Dean tossed his hands up following her once more. "I'll say it again. This is stupid. For some ridiculous reason, she's decided to chase after me."

"Well guess what Dean. She can have you." Ellen opened the doors of the clinic and left.

Dean kept up with her. "Don't you think that might be a problem considering I don't want her. I want you."

Ellen stopped walking and faced him. "I don't care."

"You don't care?" Dean shook his head.

"No. See, it's hard to find someone that really cares. It's like, if you only have apples to eat, then you eat apples. But as soon as something else comes along. You then have a choice. I was your only option for awhile. Dean, you have a choice. Actually, no." Ellen shook her head. "You don't. Because I'm not in the choice category anymore."

"I can not believe you are getting upset with *me* because Bev was hitting on me. I'm the innocent here. And you should know I would never do that to you."

"No I don't. There is only one man who would never do that to me."

"Yeah I know. Frank." Dean spoke with edge. "Well if it was hard to compete with him before, I guess I'm gonna have one hell of a time now, aren't I?"

"We're finished with this conversation." Ellen walked backwards, spun and move on.

"El." Dean grunted cutting his hand in the air in anger. "Damn it." He bit his bottom lip. He turned to go back to the clinic that he had made it away from further than he thought. He was totally disgusted but confident he would straighten out the mess. Ellen was going through a hard time. Dean kept tell himself over and over. He stopped walking and closed his eyes holding back any words when he saw Bev walk by him.

Bev smiled, slowing down near him. "Mark my words Dean." She whispered. "You'll come to me. Mark my words,. A man can't go that long." She moved on.

What was her angle? What was her game? Dean had to wonder and he would work on it. Especially since later that evening, they would be discussing Bev as a suspect. The thought of that made Dean smile.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bowman, North Dakota

“Thirty maybe.” The man who just arrived back from Beginnings told Hal in his office. “The three of us handled it until The Beginnings men came out shooting.”

“I see.” Hal rubbed his chin. “Did you speak at all to the Beginnings people.”

“No, sir, I rode off. As instructed and I wasn’t in uniform under your orders for safety reasons, so they haven’t a clue.”

“Good. I want to keep it that way. At least until we make our approach to them.” Hal looked to Sgt. Ryder who was also in the room. “What do you think.”

“I think that’s an awful lot of savages. And they aren’t as dumb as we thought since their tracking was hit with a spear, obviously they knew to take it out.” Sgt. Ryder said.

“I agree.” Hal turned back to the man. “That will be all. Excellent job today.”

“Thank you sir.” He stood up, saluted, then left.

“Elliott.” Hal sat down at his desk. “Thirty?”

“Thirty that think.”

“Something is not right. They randomly strike, they don’t plot. Spearing the tracking is plotting.”

“They obviously know it’s there.” Sgt. Ryder commented.

“I think you and I ought to sit down and discuss the possibility of a community of them somewhere. Not just packs here and there.”

“You mean sit down to just discuss, or sit down with the intention of finding them?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Finding them.”

Sgt. Ryder let out a long whistle. “Can you image if we do. Can you imagine if there is a community.”

Hal chuckled a little, but not in fun. “Could be scarier than a community of the society soldiers.”

“You know it. The society take prisoners. The wild cats. They just kill you and eat you.” Sgt. Ryder raised his eyebrows up. “Then do we really want to send scouts out looking for them?”

Hal drew up a serious look. “If there’s that many out there. We have to.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

There were two things in Robbie’s house that could have gotten Dean’s attention when he walked in. One, Joe sitting with Ellen at the diningroom table. Joe looked perplexed. Or the smell of warm corn flour baking. And the later of the two was what got Dean when he arrived that evening for the meeting. “Whoa. What smells so good?” He sniffed and walked into the diningroom. He waved to Joe, smiled at Henry and took a chance by leaning down to kiss Ellen.

She moved her head. "Still fighting with me?"

Ellen didn't answer.

But . . . Henry did, with a loud, excited. "Yes."

Dean shifted his eyes to Henry and sat down. "What are we talking about?"

"The calvary." Joe answered then faced Ellen again. "Sweetheart, I asked the new man. He hadn't a clue what I was talking about."

"He's sick Joe."

Dean interjected. He shouldn't have. "I thought you said his mind is clear El."

"Shut up Dean" Ellen blasted him. "No one's talking to you."

Quickly Dean looked to Henry who snickered.

Henry controlled himself. "Sorry."

"I'm telling you Joe." Ellen said. "They dress like them. Act like them. Ask Robbie." Ellen pointed to Robbie who entered the room looking as if he had just showered. Hair wet, clothes a little damp.

"Ask me what and do you guys smell that?" He smiled and pointed back to the kitchen with his thumb. "Jess is making tortilla chips. Cool huh?" He sat down. "Sorry, ask me what."

"Robert." Joe spoke up. "The guy on the horse. The one that brought the other man to us. How was he dressed?"

"Jeans, Tee shirt, I think. No uniform. Sorry El." Robbie raised his eyes when Jess set down some tortillas and homemade salsa.

Henry looked shocked. "Oh my God and I thought I was the inventive guy."

Ellen immediately reached into the bowl grabbing one. "We haven't had any real chips and salsa since Miquel was around. Remember he made us grow cilantro because it was needed." She smiled. "I have to admit. I'm jealous you guys get this." She tried it with a loud crunch. "Jess, excellent. And you used cilantro."

"I did." Jess answered. "Cole was working distribution and he laughed at me. Said I was the only person in two years to ask for it. They had it dried. And don't worry Ellen. I have some for you and Jenny. Shall I walk you over there now."

Joe answered for her. "Yes. Take her. We're done."

Ellen tsked and she stood up. "I'm telling you Joe. I know what I saw. They came in and saved the day. There was a really hot Mexican man there man there and he even said his leader looked like a young John Wayne."

Joe grumbled. "Ellen. Go."

Ellen spoke so upset. "Why don't you believe me about this? Any of you."

"Because it's not the calvary." Joe said. "I believe a group of men helped you. The calvary. No. Tell her Dean."

"El." Dean spoke. "I believe your mind is substituting something you associate with safety and heroism for what you actually saw. It's common in trauma cases. Past mixing with present."

"What do you know?" Ellen snapped.

"More than you and besides, Robbie made the valid point."

Ellen quickly looked at Robbie. "You don't believe me either?"

"I didn't say that." Robbie defended himself. "I merely offered my

suggestion on where you got it from. That's all."

"O.K. where did I get it from?" Ellen asked.

Robbie hesitated before answering. He stood up. "Look, don't get mad. All right. But I remembered, and I was a kid, so my Dad confirmed this. Do you remember one weekend you and Frank came home to Gaithersburg? And there was a John Wayne marathon on? You and Hal fell in love with the movie the Horse Soldiers. A John Wayne flick remember."

"Oh." Ellen scoffed.

"No, El, what did you two do. The next time you came down, you rented it. And you watched it over and over until you both knew almost every word by Sunday. We got sick of watching it. You and he got so wrapped up in the civil war era. You made Frank go with you guys to the re-enactment. Civil war, Calvary, For the longest time that's what Hal watched. Frank said that's what you watched. Calling each other to inform each other of a good John Wayne movie on."

Ellen folded her arms and looked at the silent faces of Henry, Robbie, Dean and Joe. She was relieved when Jess came from the kitchen with her chips. "So you guys think my mind snapped back to a point in my life when me and a fourteen year old kid liked old movies? Bullshit. That's more unbelievable than my calvary story. And I'm going. Let's go Jess." Her attitude said insulted and her body motions proved it when Ellen left with Jess.

Robbie looked at the others. "Did my theory sound that crazy?"

Joe shook his head no. "It goes along with what Dean was saying. Jason too."

Henry reached for a chip. "It could be worse. If her mind is looking for safety and heroism, she could be running around Beginnings saying a bunch of Franks rode in and saved the day." Henry noticed the glances he got. "What? It could happen. She could have said that." He ate his chip. "And Robbie, your roommate is way too nice. There's something about him. Did you ever wonder if he's . . .?"

"Henry." Joe shut him up.

"What Joe. I mean he . . ."

"Henry." Joe silenced him again.

"Joe I just think he may actually like . . ."

"Henry."

"Dad." Robbie turned to Joe. "Why are you shutting up Henry. Henry, what about Jess."

Henry noticed the looks Joe gave him. "Nothing. He's a nice guy. I think your taking advantage of him."

Joe, who was sipping his coffee choked violently.

Robbie patted his father on the back. "You O.K.?"

Joe's face was read. "Yes." He struggled his words. "Wrong pipe." Joe coughed loudly, glared at Henry then looked to Robbie. "I'm fine."

"Good." Robbie faced Henry. "And I'm not taking advantage of him. He likes doing this shit. He doesn't have too, but he said what else does he have to do. So why should I stop him? Your jealous because no one cooks for you."

Joe cleared his throat long and hard. "O.K.! Dean, how's the house coming?"

"Final moving tomorrow." Dean answered. "Of course there's a price to pay. Danny volunteered to help move. So I guess I have to listen to made up

hero stories.”

“Not to mention the favor.” Joe pointed out. “Any indication of what he wants?”

Dean shook his head. “No, but it’s Danny. So how bad can it be?”

Robbie rocked in his chair as he talked. “Want my opinion. He wants the understanding spot with Ellen. Not that he’s all that hot for her, but she’s a woman.”

Henry’s hand slammed hard on the table. “I’ll kill him if he asks for that. That’s not right.”

Dean’s head swayed. “I think that with the way things are, I’m not going to be the one who will make the understanding decision.” Dean saw Henry smile. “Not you Henry. I think Robbie.”

Robbie grinned. “Oh yeah? Cool.” Dean gave him a dirty look. “Kidding.”

“No you aren’t.” Henry said.

“You’re right. I’m not.” Robbie stated.

“Boys.” Joe held up his hand before any arguments could ensue. “Can we not discuss which man will bed my daughter next. Thank you. Now this is supposed to be a short suspect meeting, so let’s get on with it so Dean can go work on his new house. All right, let’s discuss Robbie.” Joe saw Dean’s hand raise a little. “What’s wrong.”

“I thought we were discussing Bev.”

“We can.” Joe said. “We’ll discuss Bev.”

“Stays as a suspect.” Dean gave his opinion.

“Stays.” Robbie agreed.

“Stays.” Henry added.

“What?” Joe questioned. “We haven’t even discussed her. Motive, means.”

“Means.” Robbie spoke up. “Her little ass be-bops around here. Who know what man she seduces into doing what. She was one of the last sick with the plague here. I remember her moving about the clinic. And if she’s working for George, then the means to deliver the virus to Jenny could have been handed to her.”

Henry added. “And . . . she’s greedy, she’s selfish. She knew George before it all went down. And she doesn’t even need dedication to George. What the hell does she care about this community. All it would take is phone cal from him with promises for a better life and she’ll buy it. Another Michelle.”

“Who?” Robbie and Joe asked.

Henry ignored the warning looks from Dean. “Michelle. Frank hated her. Dean says he didn’t, but we all think he slept with her. She worked for Robbie and helped . . .” Henry grinned embarrassingly.

Joe’s hand rolled down his own face and rested over his mouth. “Another ripple Henry.”

“Sorry Joe.” Henry slid down in his chair.

Dean added to the Bev topic. “Joe, look who she’s going after. Henry, the next in line for leader. My God . . . history of the world proves what one woman can do when they have a man in power. Look at Hillary Clinton.”

Joe held up his pen. “Hillary Clinton doesn’t count. She had the balls in that household. But . . . I see where you’re going. She’s such a damn trouble maker and so obviously a trouble maker that none of us even think to consider

her as an inside source for George. But she's dumb." Joe stated. "Young and dumb and we can use that to our advantage. Out of everyone we've named. She's not smart enough or cunning enough to not slip up to someone close to her. Or even out of anger. If she's working for George, she would be the easiest to uncover. Not to mention a delight to take out if it holds true." Joe leaned back. "What we need is someone to get close to her." Joe looked at Henry.

"No way." Henry pointed to Dean. "She wants him now. Grabbed his butt today. Kissed him."

Dean flipped Henry off. "Some of us wouldn't do that to Ellen." Dean looked at Robbie.

"Nope." Robbie shook his head. "I know what's been there." Robbie turned to Joe.

"Christ." Joe scoffed. "I'm a married man."

"Never stopped you before." Robbie said.

Joe reached over smacking Robbie behind the head. "That's enough. Anyhow. We need someone who can get her to talk. Someone she may think is powerful or connected to power around here. Someone that will give her an 'in.'" Joe tapped his pencil. "Someone we can trust."

Henry disagreed. "We can't tell another person about finding out who's working for George."

"We don't have to." Robbie said. "We merely find someone we can trust enough to get close to her. Someone that doesn't really give a shit about where she's been. And we tell them with all the trouble she's been starting with Ellen, protectively we want to know why and what she's up too. Family curiosity. They may help."

"But." Joe interrupted. "They have to be someone George would find valuable."

At the end of Joe's words, the sound of the opening front door carried through and so did a crying baby. Johnny walked in.

"Hey Pap." He bounced his daughter as he walked in. "Sorry to interrupt. But she likes you. Can you help me? I'm trying to get her to sleep, but . . . to no avail. And ever since Denice broke up with me she just dumps her on me whenever she goes out with her new guy. God. Shit, I left a bottle at your house. I'll be back." Johnny ran back out.

Henry smiled and whispered to Joe. "When did Denice break up with him?"

"Right after the plague. She said her near death experience made her realize she loved Jordan."

"I heard she was seeing him the whole time." Henry said.

Joe shrugged and nodded

Dean saw where they were going. "Never did get upset over it. Did he?"

Robbie smiled widely and shook his head. "Nope. He may have loved her. But he's young. And remember his reputation? He used to be the town dog."

The door opened again and Johnny walked back in with the baby and a bottle. "Got it."

Joe watched his grandson. "And . . . he's a Slagel."

Johnny noticed them all staring at him, and happily too. "What's wrong?"

“Johnny my boy.” Joe stood up. “Give me my favorite great granddaughter” Joe took the baby. “Let pap-pap calm you down.” Holding the baby who stopped crying, Joe laid his hand on Johnny’s back. “Johnny, come in, sit down. Have a tortilla chip.” He led Johnny to the table. “We need to talk to you.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

“And I searched.” Sgt. Ryder said solemnly holding a glass of lemonade talking to Hal on Sgt. Ryder’s front porch. “I even went to the prison my brother was at. I did find him. He died in his cell of the plague. My other brother. I never found.” He finished off the last of his drink. “This was good. Want some before it gets warm?”

Hal looked at his own empty glass. “Yeah, thanks.” He handed it to Sgt. Ryder.

Sgt. Ryder took it and walked in his house.

Hal rocked in the rocking chair. Prison. Brothers. Flashback . . .

The four boys lined the hall of the wood paneled Gaithersburg police station. Oldest to youngest. Sitting in the metal chairs. They could feel the presence of their father before they even saw him. It was a scary sight as they waited. When Joe walked in, white shirt, black tie, shoulder harness and gun. He looked at his sons, all of them showing signs of a battle. Joe walked up to Robbie, rubbed his head and kissed the nine year old. His hand laid on Hal’s face. Joe moved to Jimmy, examining the massive amounts of cuts and bruises and Joe shook his head at Frank who sported the least.

“Mr. Slagel.” An officer came from a back office door. “Back again.”

“What did they do this time Jerry.”

“Seems one of your boys, they won’t say which one, got jumped by another group of boys. And as usual, it’s all for one with your kids. They went after the boys, more joined in and Frank . . .” Jerry shook his head. “Frank’s facing charges now.”

“Christ.” Joe knew by looking at his sons which one it was. “Charges.”

“Seems, again, someone thought Frank was older than he was. One of the kids had an older brother, twenty-five, twenty-six years old and Frank pretty much . . .”

“Kicked his ass?” Joe questioned. “Give me the man’s name, I’ll handle it.”

“Mr. Slagel these are serious charges.”

“I’m serious too. And when my ass gets a hold of this man for decking my sixteen year old son he’ll see how serious I am. Big or not, Frank’s a kid. A goddamn kid. Now give me his name, I’ll take care of the rest.”

Jerry held up his hands. “All right.” He pulled out a small note pad and wrote down the name. He handed it to Joe. “I can’t give you his number, bus since you’re CIA, you can find it. But something has to be done about this. Never is it one of them in here, it’s all of them. And you have Jimmy who’s

never in trouble, following the pack because of family pride.”

“Your goddamn right. And I’m not changing a thing about that. So don’t suggest it. My boys stick up for one another and that’s the way it will stay. Take one of us on, you take on us all. That’s the way I was raised and that’s the way they are raised.”

“Twenty kids were involved. It took five squad cars to come in on it.”

“Yeah, and my boys I see are the only ones in here. Again. And again, I will just take them home.” Joe pointed to the door. “Let’s go boys, line em up and move em out.”

All four boys stood and walked to the door. Joe opened it.

“Have a good day Jerry.” Joe placed the paper in his chest pocket and followed the boys to the car.

It was silent, the six block ride home from the police station. Hal knew by Joe’s peering eyes into the rearview mirror, the way he finished his cigarette awfully fast, that things didn’t look good. They knew it was coming, they waited for it, and lined up sitting on the sofa, they got it.

“Will one of you boys care to tell me!” Joe blasted. “Why in God’s name I have to get called from work to pick you up at the police station!”

An alarm went off and like a wake up call all four boys started talking.

“Dad.” Jimmy spoke up. “It was my fault. I said something . . .”

“No.” Frank interrupted. “It wasn’t your fault and you know it. We handled it.”

“Yeah!” Robbie added. “Frank handled it.”

“Dad.” Hal pointed. “I said no. I didn’t want to get involved. They made me.”

Joe whistled, shriek and loud. “Enough!” Joe reached in his pocket and pulled out his pack of Camel’s.

Uh-oh, Hal thought, Dad’s lighting another cigarette. He’ll fling the hand as he yells and ashes will fly.

Sure enough Joe did. “Can’t you boys have handled this right? Huh? How many boys jumped you Jimmy. And I know they jumped you.”

“Four.” Jimmy looked up.

“Four? Wanna tell me how twenty got involved. What did you do, go to the park when everyone was there? You couldn’t find these boys one at a time? That’s the way it’s done. One at a time. You boys stand watch. No one else jumps in while Jimmy kicks the shit of him one on one. But *NO*. It’s a free for all the way you boys are. A game. . . . You!” Joe pointed at Robbie. “Look at you. Nine years old.” Joe grabbed Robbie’s face. “One more scar on this face I’m going to jail for child abuse. Too young. For this shit.”

“It’s fun.” Robbie smiled

“It’s crazy. Chip one of those teeth and you’ll go toothless. Hal . . .”

“Dad.” Hal tried to connive. “I was totally . . .”

“Innocent. Bullshit. Since when are you innocent. I’d bet my last dollar that you jumped in first. You always do. And Frank. Goddamn it, learn to control your strength. I can’t keep paying other people’s medical bills. You think I have a money tree out in the yard. You think I just go out there and pick a few hundred dollar bills? Jimmy.”

“Dad.”

“Shut up.” Joe blasted. “This is it. You will never walk in my house

with your ass beat again. You hear me. You will learn to fight and defend yourself.”

“I hate violence.” Jimmy argued.

“Tough. You’re a Slagel. And you have to start sticking up for yourself. From now on, every time you come into this house with your ass beat, Frank is gonna beat your ass. You hear me? He’ll kick your ass until you learn how to kick his.”

“Oh my God.” Jimmy exclaimed.

“Exactly!” Joe blasted. “Now everyone of you wash up. I’m hungry. Let’s uh . . .” Joe calmed down. “Let’s go grab a pizza somewhere.”

A glass of lemonade extended to Hal. “Captain.”

Hal snapped out of it. “Thanks. Sorry.”

“You looked in deep thought.”

“Oh I was.” Hal sipped the lemonade. Cool but not cold. “You talking about prison made me remember how many times me and my three brothers ended up at the police station for fighting.”

“Sticking together?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Always.”

“It’s so evident you were raised like that. That’s the way you treat your men.”

“Train them too. I know I pound them sometimes, but that’s the best way to learn. My father taught us how to fight, how to take care of ourselves. He had some trouble with Jimmy. He used to have my older brother kick his ass until he learned how to fight. And uh . . .” Hal smiled. “Jimmy learned. Eventually it became a game to them. Jimmy came close sometimes. And my oldest brother was big, real big. Frank’s one tough guy.”

“What . . .” Sgt. Ryder shook his head. “What . . . Frank?”

“My oldest brother. Why?”

“How odd. The name of the . . .” Sgt. Ryder stopped himself from saying the coincidence he was going to give. It was too outlandish of a thought. It would be more cruel of Sgt. Ryder to tell Hal that the Beginnings man was big and his name was Frank, than a coincidence the captain would find amusing.. Especially with the Captain in such the reminiscing mood. Sgt. Ryder didn’t want to dampen it.

“Elliot, the name of what?”

“Oh nothing. My dog’s name was Frank.” Sgt. Ryder sipped his drink. “That’s all.”

“Funny.” Hal chuckled. “When Jimmy bought his first pet snake he named it Frank too. Pissed Frank off.”

Seeing the captain smile as he thought of his brothers and talked more of their childhood, told Sgt. Ryder he made the right choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY

September 7
Beginnings Montana

It was an unusual sight for Henry to see when he walked in his house. Ellen sitting on the couch holding Nick. For the most part Ellen would hold the baby only for a short time, then set him down. But she appeared to be holding him, cradling the baby close to her chest, playing with his soft abundance of black hair.

“Hey El.” Henry said softly joining her on the couch. “Good morning.” He kissed her.

“Morning. Back already?”

“Yeah, wasn’t much. Want me to take him.”

“No. You don’t like too. Besides, you can have him back when Joe comes to get me.”

“Where’s Joe taking you?” Henry asked.

“Get this. Church. Joe wants me to go to church this morning before me and Robbie take off.” Ellen heard a long sigh come from Henry. “What’s the matter?”

“Do you think this trip is a good idea.”

“I feel fine.”

“Not your health. This . . . going to the farm to trigger your memory thing.”

“That’s not all I’m doing Henry.” Ellen stroked the baby’s hair. “If Frank is gone, then I need to say goodbye to him.”

“I guess I understand.” Henry’s head dropped. “It doesn’t seem real yet.”

“No it doesn’t.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be real to anyone yet. You’re a big key to that.”

“How do you mean?” Ellen asked.

“I guess, like me, everyone might think, if you see him as gone, then he must be. Because you El, would know, not by seeing it, but by feeling it, that Frank was dead.”

Ellen hated the words, ‘Frank’ and ‘dead’ being used in the same sentence. It gave her the creeps and an uneasy feeling she didn’t want to have. Before she could return a comment to Henry, Joe knocked on the door then walked in.

“Ready Kiddo?” He asked.

“Yep.” Ellen stood up holding Nick. “Though I hate the thought of sitting through a Reverend Bob service.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hand the kid to Henry and let’s go.”

Ellen handed over Nick. “I’ll see you later Henry.”

“Please. I want to see you before you leave.”

“O.K.” Ellen kissed Nick then tip toed up and kissed Henry. “Bye.”

No sooner were Ellen and Joe out the door that Nick began to cry. “What?” Henry asked him so irritated. “Why don’t you like me?”

“Need to talk to you.” Joe told Ellen very calmly as they walked.

“I had feeling something was up. What’s going on?”

“Today at services, Reverend Bob is going to announce a special memorial service for Frank tomorrow morning.”

Ellen stopped walking. “No, Joe. You can’t do that. Frank isn’t dead. He isn’t.”

“Yeah, but what did I tell you? Huh?” Joe moved her to walk again. “If we’re gonna look for Frank, then we are going to do it with out the community knowing. If the community thinks Frank is alive then the person working for George will tell him. I can’t take a chance George knows we’re looking for Frank. I can’t. If George thinks we think Frank is dead, he’ll keep him in one place. If he thinks we’re looking, he’ll move him. That’s why this trip of yours and Robbie’s is about saying goodbye. That’s why we’re having a memorial service.”

“I understand.”

“And you have to grieve tomorrow Ellen. You do. Your grief is a big key to the community thinking Frank is dead.”

Ellen stopped walking again. “It’s so strange you said that.”

“Why is that?” Joe asked.

“Henry just said the exact same thing to me. The exact same thing.”

“Is it any wonder Ellen. You said it yourself. You and Frank are the closest thing two people can get to being one. Everyone knows that, whether you were with him or not. That’s why I believe so strongly that my son is alive out there. I believe it because you believe it. And that’s all the proof I need.” Joe placed his arm around Ellen and walked her to church.

^^^

Nashville, Tennessee

“You have to be joking me. Right?” George asked with such annoyance to Captain Anvers.

“No, sir. I just received word. Your train is delayed.”

“How in God’s name can it be delayed? I’m the only one riding it?”

Captain Anvers hesitated, but then he knew he had to deliver the truth. “Well sir, the conductor, he um . . . the conductor . . .”

“Yes?” George waved his hand to hurry Captain Anvers along.

“Well sir, the conductor was playing around and he broke the break handle. You haven’t any break control on the train.”

“He what?” George blasted. “Shoot the man for crying out loud.”

“Yes sir.” Captain Anvers started to leave.

“Wait!” George cried out. “I’m not serious about that. I need him to drive the train. Just . . . just let me know when it is fixed.”

“I can do that.” Capt. Anvers saluted and walked away.

George smacked himself in the forehead. “Idiots. I have idiots working for me.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The joined voices of those in attendance finished the hymn and Paul ended the song with his usual organ flare. Rev. Bob waded through the silence and stood up, walking closer and facing his congregation. "Before we conclude today's service. I would like to say something. Tragically, this past week, Beginnings lost one of its own. An 'original' a comrade to many of you, a leader. Frank Slagel moved on from this world to a far better one."

Joe pinched Ellen's leg when he saw her smirk and roll her eyes. "Drop your head." He whispered.

Ellen did.

"Tomorrow morning." Rev. Bob continued. "All work schedules that are not community necessary will be suspended for one hour at eleven a.m. for a special memorial service for Frank. All of you are invited to attend so that as a community we can join during our loss and seek guidance together. Let us pray . . ." Rev. Bob lowered his head as did everyone else in church. "Oh Heavenly Father . . ."

^^^

"This absolutely has to be done by two." Robbie explained as he walked with Dan, one of Beginnings' security men.

"Why?" Dan asked.

"Because. It does. I don't know. Frank always said it had to be done by two. And when you gonna cut that hair." Robbie tugged on Dan's long ponytail.

"Ow. What are you doing. Frank's not here, so you take his place."

"Yeah." Robbie grinned. "And you're taking mine." He handed Dan a clipboard. "At least for a couple hours. You're head of security."

"Gee thanks. Just what I wanted. Responsibility."

"Oh my God."

"What?" Dan looked up from his clipboard. "Jenny?"

Robbie snickered as he saw Jenny in her Sunday best coming over the hill. "Why is she wearing that blue dress?"

"Because she can. Jealousy over wearing a dress will get you no where. Wear one at home. That's what Ed Wood did."

"Ha-ha? Aren't you funny. I'm not the one with girl hair."

"Girl hair?" Dan laughed. "You've been hanging around Denny too much. Uh-oh. She's waving."

"God, it sucks being so hot." Robbie rubbed his chest. "Every female wants me."

"Robbie!" Jenny ran to him. "Got a minute. Hi Dan. You have a strand of hair . . ." Jenny reached up and tucked it behind Dan's ear. "There. Tighten the tail. Robbie . . ." She caught her breath. "Can I talk to you?"

"I guess. What's up. Whoa!" Robbie was tugged away from Dan.

"I need some advice." Jenny said.

"I'm not real good with female problems but shoot." Robbie folded his

arms.

“I need to know how to be a bully. You know, pranks kids would play on other kids to bully them.”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Weren’t you a bully in school.”

“No.”

“You used to pick on me. I distinctly remember when I was five, you told me my freckles were a road map to hell. My destiny.”

Robbie laughed, then stopped. “Sorry. But that was you. And I wasn’t a bully in school. Could have been, was afraid to. See, Frank and Jimmy were picked on so much as kids, my Dad vowed that if we ever picked on anyone, he’d tie us up and let that person beat us up.”

“Really? I wonder if Joe has a statute of limitations on that policy. I’ll ask him.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I will.”

“Jenny, who are you bullying.”

“Um . . . no one in particular. I’m uh . . . I’m writing a book.”

“A book?” Robbie asked.

“Yes, we have no authors in Beginnings. Well, Danny. But Danny does everything or at least says he does. He says he writing the new Moby Dick. Did he mention to you that Captain Ahab was originally Asian and they changed it at the last minute.”

“I didn’t hear that one.” Robbie said. “A book? You know, I may not have been a bully, but I have some good ideas.”

“Really? Will you share them?”

“Sure.” Robbie shrugged.

“Great.” Jenny pulled from her belt purse a piece of paper and a pen. “Shoot.”

“Now?”

“Yes, it’ll only take a minute and I feel inspired. Go on. Tell.”

With one arm folded across his waist, Robbie thought for a moment, then Robbie rambled.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

The scent of the home was sweet. Many different perfumes joined together to create a single smell of beauty. Yet Hal didn’t look like he enjoyed it. He sniffed and sneezed as he stood in the foyer, two feet from the door of the huge white house.

The door opened at the end of the long hall and Hal caught a glimpse of blonde hair. But Grace stepped out of the room, bringing the door behind her closed. Her name failed to fit her. She was big, she was crass, her hair bright silver which made her look older than her fifty-five years. She emerged with thunderous steps as she walked to Hal trying to project intimidation that was already present in her appearance.

Hal sneezed once turning his head. "Excuse me."

"You do that all the time when you enter this house."

"It's the" Hal turned his head and sneezed again. "Perfume." He sniffled.

"Here." She handed him a folded piece of paper. "The monthly list. I'm sure you will oblige us."

Almost looking as if he cringed, Hal, with one eye open slowly unfolded the paper.

"Fear not my dear Captain." Grace spoke smug. "You are not on that list. I highly doubt you will be." She quickly glanced at Hal's less-than-subtle exhale. "Trust me when I tell you, the thought of you frightens and disturbs us as much as the thought of us does the same to you."

With a sneeze, Hal stepped back and opened the door. "Have a good day."

"Thank you. Take care of that with speed."

"By this evening." Hal pulled the door closed. He looked at the two guards on the porch then to Sgt Ryder who stood at the end of the path with two more guards. Hal walked to him. Sgt. Ryder looked nervous.

"Captain, tell me. Please . . ."

"Spared."

Sgt. Ryder's head dropped. "Thank God."

"However." Hal started to walk with Sgt. Ryder. He showed him the paper. "Others are not."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie was at least an inch taller than Joe, so in order for Joe to really get that eye to eye contact going, Joe had to look up. And when Joe did--standing yards from the awaiting helicopter--Joe saw something in his youngest son. Arrogance. Robbie played annoyingly with a piece of hard tack candy in his mouth, swishing it from side to side, as he stood with his hands on his hips nodding. And all Joe could see was himself, not because Robbie acted that way, but because Robbie wore an irritating pair of sunglasses.

"What? Are you looking at me or what?" Joe reached up and lowered Robbie's shades. "Listen to me."

"I'm listening." Robbie looked away over to Ellen who stood with Henry.

"No you aren't." Joe grabbed hold of Robbie's chin and held his glances--physically. "It's nearly noon now. I want you back before the sun even thinks about going down. You hear?"

"Yep."

"You have enough fire power?"

"Yep."

"You watch Ellen. Got that? Anything happens to her, I won't send people out after you."

"Dad. Come on." Robbie shook his head. "I will canvass the area by air first. O.K.? We'll be fine."

“Be careful.”

“That too.” Robbie looked over at Ellen. “El! Let’s go.” Robbie adjusted his M-16 over his shoulder. As he went to walk to Ellen, Joe stopped him.

“Robert. I mean it.” Joe was very serious. “You’re my kid, and I love you. Be careful. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you too.”

“Thanks. I’ll be fine and you’ll be yelling at me tonight.” Robbie walked to Ellen, grabbing her hand and taking her from her goodbye to Henry. “Let’s go. Bye Henry.” He moved with Ellen to the helicopter and opened the door for her. He saw the look on her face. It screamed scared. “Tell me now. Are you O.K. to do this?”

“I’m O.K. to do this.” Ellen took a breath and stepped up into the chopper with help from Robbie. He shut the door and Ellen looked out the window waving to Joe and Henry.

As Robbie moved from Ellen’s door, Henry called to him. “Robbie.”

“Yeah?”

“Watch her.”

Robbie took a step closer to Henry. “I will and she needs this. I need this. Actually . . .” Robbie stepped back. “If you need to know the truth. We’re only doing this so we can go off and have . . .” Robbie grinned. “Sex. Ha!” He grinned again and walked to the chopper.

“I hate your son Joe.”

“Yeah, well.” Joe raised his eyebrows.

As Robbie reached for his door, he heard another voice calling to him.

“Robbie! Wait!”

Robbie looked around the chopper to see Andrea. He shook his head and met the out of breath woman. “What’s wrong?”

“Whew.” Andrea grabbed her chest. “Here.” She handed him a small tan sack. “I thought . . . I thought you might get hungry. I made some lunch.”

“Are there brownies in there?” Robbie smiled.

“Of course.”

“Excellent. Thanks.” Robbie kissed her on the cheek. “You should have been our mom years ago.”

“Oh how sweet. Now you make . . . hey.” Andrea was tugged back by Joe.

Joe waved Robbie on. “Let the boy leave Andrea.”

Robbie went back to his door, opened it and handed Ellen the bag as he got in. “Ready?”

“What’s this?”

“Lunch.” Robbie fixed his sunglasses.

“Robbie, I’m not getting airsick am I? Every time I flew with Johnny I got sick.”

“Nah. Right now. You’re flying with the best.” Robbie smiled as he adjust his control and started the chopper.

As Joe stood with Andrea and Henry watching the helicopter start and lift. He heard it. Sniffing. He looked to beside him to see Andrea. Her hand was cupped at her nose and her shoulders bounce. “Christ Andrea. What’s wrong?”

“Our boy is leaving Joe.”

“For a couple hours. Yes.”

Andrea shivered her tear filled breath. “Look at him fly. Aren’t you proud. I’m so proud.”

Joe rolled his eyes and grumbled. He’d heard enough. With little compassion, Joe turned Andrea and led her off the landing field.

^ ^ ^ ^

Sliding as he moved quickly around the lab, Dean set down charts in front of Johnny. “You’re sure you don’t mind doing this. I have a ton of things to get done at the house.”

“If it’s a choice between moving beds or making rounds and helping catch up on blood work. I’m here.”

“If you can’t handle any emergencies. Call me. O.K.?”

“Yep.” Johnny started looking at the charts. “When are these people going to get over their pneumonia?”

“That’s what some of these tests you’re running are gonna hopefully show.”

Johnny fluttered his lips. “Doubtful. I think they’re sick forever. Hey Dr. Dean. What are you gonna do if Ellen hates the house? Or doesn’t even care to see it.”

“Cry.” Dean laughed as he talked.

“You’ve been working hard to make the house into a Barbie house.”

“How do you know that?”

“Todd from fabrics told me you sweet talked Ben into giving decorating tips.”

“Ben made curtains.” Dean said.

“Did you have to put out for them?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Spare me the Slagel humor. And speaking of putting out.” Dean leaned on the counter with one hand. “When?”

“No way. I’m not putting out for you.”

“Johnny.” Dean nudged him. “What your grandfather asked you.”

“I know.” Johnny snickered. “I’ve been giving it thought. I figure, tonight . . . maybe tomorrow I’ll start ‘operation why’s Bev bothering Ellen’. I don’t want to embarrass the girl.”

“Embarrass her?” Dean asked. “What do you mean.”

“I mean, she’s been chasing after you right. Well it would be embarrassing if all of the sudden she realizes I like her, which I don’t, and she feels foolish for even considering you.”

“You are such a Slagel.”

“Do I have to have sex with her?” Johnny asked. “Seriously. Do I?”

“Probably not. Maybe you can just get close to her.”

“But if I want any real secrets. I should sleep with her. Of course then I run the risk of having her fall in love with me and never leave me alone.”

“Is that so.” Dean was enjoying their talk.

“Yeah. I’ve heard I’m pretty good. I’ve been around the block. Probably more than you.”

“Probably.” Dean laughed. “But, Johnny, how can you be good. Your a kid.”

“What’s that mean.”

“Experience doesn’t match maturity in that department. Knowing how

comes with maturity.”

Johnny chuckled in amusement. “No way. You old guys get to a point that sex becomes a chore.”

“Johnny.” Dean laid his hand on Johnny’s back. “Sex never is a chore when you’re older, it becomes a fine art you have mastered.”

“Right.” Johnny laughed loudly.

“Let’s settle this. We’ll get an honest opinion from someone who knows.” Dean smiled. “Let’s ask Trish.”

“Trish?”

“Hi!” Trish waved chipper as she walked in the lab. “Busy?”

Johnny spun around on his stool. “How long has she been standing there.”

Dean whispered. “She just walked in.” He spoke normal again. “Hey, Trish. Can you help us out with something. We need an honest female opinion.”

“Oh!” Trish was excited. “Something medical. I’m honest and I’m female. Go on shoot.”

“It has to do with sex.” Dean said.

Trish hesitated then smiled again. “I might get embarrassed, but go on.”

“If you want to have good sex. Where do you get it from. A young man or say an older man.” Dean asked.

“It depends what you consider good sex.” Trish commented. “What’s important. Longevity or style. If you want longevity, then you go with the young man. Because they go and go. But they just don’t, well, know. If you want style, you go with someone older. They know how.”

Dean smiled and held his hand out to Johnny. “There you have it.”

“But!” Trish held up her hand, “If you want both, then you go with someone closer to sixty.” She shrugged at their aghast expressions. “Anything else.”

With a heavy stomp-stomp, Jenny stormed into the lab. “Trish come on. What is taking so long. Did you ask.”

“No.” Trish shook her head. “We were talking. Sorry.”

Dean interrupted what looked like a secret conversation between the two ladies. “What did you need Trish?”

“I need something really strong for constipation. Something that will clear out the old system.”

“Like an enema?” Dean held back his snicker. “Why do you need this Trish?”

“Not me.” Trish looked insulted as she pointed. “Jenny.”

Johnny tugged on Dean’s jacket whispering. “If Jenny needs an enema right now, I’m moving beds.”

Dean tried to keep a straight face. “Um Jenny . . . Do you uh . . . not feel well.”

Jenny tilted her head. “Why would you ask . . . oh!” Jenny waved her hand. “It isn’t for me. I need a laxative that can be put in food. Hopefully without any taste or smell.”

“Who are you going to sneak a laxative to?” Dean asked. He didn’t get an answer from either of the ladies, they just shifted their eyes around. “Jenny?”

“Dean I really need it. And I need it right now. The icing is getting put on and Bev is . . .” Jenny shut up when she realized perhaps she shouldn’t have mentioned a name.

“Bev.” Dean raised his eyes. “I ethically can not do this. I can’t distribute a medication for you to do that to someone, even if it’s Bev.”

“Ouch!” Jenny grabbed her stomach and hunched down. Her acting was so bad it was good. “Oh my God!” She held tight. “The gas pains. Dean, please. I haven’t gone in days. I need something. Please.”

Dean looked back to Johnny laughing. “You’re on call. You handle this. I’m out of here.” Dean smiled at Jenny and Trish. “Moving day.”

Johnny stood up from the stool. “I’ll distribute the med. And Dean, about our little plan.” Johnny stood behind him whispering. “If they’re feeding her what I’m gonna give her. I’m not going forward with the plan for at least another day.”

Shaking his head with a snicker then with a fake scold to Trish and Jenny, Dean left the lab.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Twelve men sat in red chairs that used to be behind the desks in the class room of the school. They sat there like children awaiting punishment. And that feeling grew with each click of the Captain’s boots they heard draw nearer and nearer.

Hal enter room 110 of the school room. He saw Sgt Ryder prepare the men to stand at attention, but Hal halted him with a raise of a hand and a shake of a head. “No need.” Sadly Hal stood before the twelve men. He leaned dramatically against the desk and spoke distraught. “Gentlemen, I think you all know why you are here. You . . . are the chosen few.”

They knew it, but still they moaned.

“They don’t ask it of us much. But they do now. You all know the routine. The women have picked you. You are to be there this evening. You are to be clean. And shaven. Keep conversation to a minimal, they don’t think we’re intelligent enough to speak. They hate when we speak. You know they believe our place is to protect, to work and to . . . you know. Please under no circumstances are you to make any vulgar bodily functions that you could somehow control. Last month I received three complaints. And . . . you know the preparations. Each of you know what you must do prior to going there to ensure . . . well, though I preach mighty and swift with the sword, that is not a route you can go with this.” Hal took a deep breath and saw one man, Peter raise his hand. “Yes Peter.”

“Deliver the bad news. Which one was chosen by . . . by . . .” Peter swallowed. “Grace.”

Hal walked up to Peter laying a firm hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” Peter nearly shouted. “She picked me last month. No. This is so unfair. Why? Why do we have to subject ourselves. Can’t Blue say I’m ill. Can’t he captain? My God., last month I was there. With Grace. It was hell. Shear hell.”

Hal looked back to Sgt. Ryder. “Elliott?”

“Captain, we never established that they could pick the same man twice.”

Hal nodded. "Anyone else here on the list last month?" Hal saw no show of hands. "In fairness, I will tell them to pick someone else in Peter's place because he is ill. I will do the same for any of you if you get picked next month. But let me remind all of you why we subject ourselves to this torture. This is a species of human that is all but becoming extinct. Even the society must genetically enhance their offspring to ensure a semi equal ratio of male to female. They will forever remain the lower gender. They are precious and should be regarded as such if we seek to preserve them. We must treat them well and protect them. We know what the society does to them. Give the women what they want. Keep them happy. Because we're fortunate to have them around still. We could be living in a world without them." He saw the men lower their heads.

Peter raised his hand. "They know this. They know they are spoiled. I don't mind that we spoil them and pamper them. But do they have to treat us like we're . . . we're beasts."

"Probably yes." Hal answered. "Sub standard to them. Look at what these women went through in our world before we protected them. Is it any wonder they regard men as beasts?"

"Do you think they've all become like ours?" Peter asked.

"Not all. You have the few that are just as much a male Wildcat as the ones they run with. The ones the society hands, well . . . are they human anymore? But trust me, any community that harbors women, treats them the same as we do. If it's any consolation, I'll bet the men of Beginnings go through the exact same hell as we do. They have to, they are civilized and wish to preserve life as much as we do." Hal let out another breath. "Well Gentlemen. I'll leave you with Sgt. Ryder for further instructions. I feel deeply for all of you. But . . ." Hal smiled as he walked toward the door. "I wouldn't trade places with you under any circumstances."

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"It's near here." Ellen called out over the helicopter noise. "I know it."

"Why, do you see a landmark?" Robbie asked.

"Yes. That beat up water tower." Ellen pointed to the water tower embedded in the trees to her right.

"Where do you remember seeing that from?" Robbie asked.

"The front porch of the house. I saw it was in the distance."

"O.K. I'm going that way, keep your eyes peered."

Ellen only turned her views away from the window to nod at Robbie, then she returned to looking out.

It was a view that by ground, would not have been seen. After circling around the farm house so hidden, Robbie spotted it. "Oh shit."

"What?" Ellen felt the chopper lift. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"Up."

"No shit. I want to go down."

"After. I don't want the blades blowing this. Look." Robbie pointed

and heard the heavy exhale of Ellen.

Like an abstract painting the land below looked. If it was a square, set in the top right hand corner was the gray roof to the house. Fifteen yards from the house, center of the square were sporadic brown spots. Fifteen, twenty of them. Then directly center was a larger one. And from that large spot of blood was a streak of brown, a thick heavy line that crossed the field and led directly from the high grass into the trees.

“El. See.” Robbie said. “See the brown spots.”

“Yes.”

“Blood. So where are the bodies?”

“They took them.”

“Exactly. Carried them, but . . . see the long line of blood.”

“Like a trail.” Ellen commented.

“That’s someone they carried out also. But someone they didn’t have an easy time with. When they carried him, he was too heavy.”

Ellen let out a breath. “And his body brushed against the grass leaving a trail.”

“Care to make a wager that trail of blood is Frank’s?”

“No, because I wanna prove that blood is Frank’s. If it is, unconscious or not, he can lead us somewhere.”

“Exactly.” Robbie raised his hand and handed her a clipboard. “Go in the back, there’s a case. See what you can come up with to take samples. We’re gonna start where you think Frank dropped and go from there. Ready to do some work.”

“I’m ready.” Ellen started to get up. “Robbie? If they took him, he was alive right? They wouldn’t take him if he were dead. Right?”

“What would be the point?”

Ellen smiled. “That’s what I thought you’d say.” Ellen, holding the clipboard still, stood and went to the back of the chopper.

“You cold?” Robbie asked after seeing Ellen shiver. He stayed low in front of her.

“No. The wind just gave me a chill.”

Robbie squinted and examined the grass. “A hundred and fifty feet.”

Ellen wrote down what Robbie said. She watched him reach and grab a handful of grass. He handed it to Ellen. She laid it on the clipboard and rolled the paper that said 150 feet, all around it. She pulled a piece of string that dangled from the metal part of the clipboard and tied it around the paper that held the grass. She took that and placed it carefully in the tan sack she carried around her shoulder.

Robbie stood up, they had made it into the trees. He took the clipboard. “Blood is heavier in this area. They held him here for a few minutes. While they got a truck or jeep.”

“How do you know?” Ellen asked.

“Come here.” Robbie grabbed her hand and brought her deeper into the woods another twenty feet. “Broken branches, the brush is smashed here.” Robbie crouched down. “Tire tracks.”

“Are you sure.” Ellen looked. “It just looks like holes.”

Robbie pulled her down. "Look close, tilt your head and peer at the ground."

Ellen did. "They go that way." She pointed.

"Yep they do." Robbie grinned. "We now have a direction. We didn't have one before. This is good. If this blood proves to be Frank's. This is really good."

Ellen leaned into Robbie and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for this."

"You're welcome for this." Robbie stood up helping Ellen to her feet. "I say let's at least check out the roads from the air. We have enough gas. There may be lots of ways they went. But this is a start. I've been charting our course, so I pretty much have an idea where we are. You ready to go?"

"No." Ellen shook her head and turned back to look at the farm house so far in the distance. "Could we just take a few minutes to go in there. We could have that lunch Andrea made and there's something I want to get."

"Did you forget something?" Robbie asked.

"No. Let's just say, there's something in that house I need. Something that gives me a future to hold on to. Can we?"

Robbie looked at his watch. "Not for long. We've been in this field for two hours. I want to make sure I have enough daylight to canvass the roads from above."

"It won't take long. I promise. Please."

"I'm in the mood for those brownies anyway." He smiled at her. "Let's go in the house." Robbie took the tan sack from Ellen and tossed it on his shoulder. He took the clipboard. "Lead the way."

Ellen slid her hand down to his and walked with him toward the farm. Robbie saw a certain look on Ellen's face that wasn't there when they left Beginnings. And he was sure at that moment, with what they had just found, he had the exact same look on his face. The look of hope.

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Beginnings Montana

What Henry was doing was beyond Dean. Walking up to his new home he could see Henry standing out front holding Nick. In a long line behind Henry were all of the kids. From Joey to Josh, standing there in front of the door.

"Henry?" Dean called his name. "Are you locked out?"

"Oh no, Dean. I'm teaching the kids how to enter the house without getting yelled at."

"What do you mean?" Dean asked.

"When I was a kid, young, I used to think that 'take off your shoes' was a normal hello. I found out later it wasn't. So I want them to learn the technique of taking off their shoes so they don't get yelled at. Because you know as well as I do, Ellen is going to be that way."

"Henry." Dean paused before laughing at him. "How hard can it be for these kids to take off their shoes."

"It's an art Dean. Especially when it snows see, because you don't want to step into the wetness in your socks. Yuck." Henry made a face to Alexandra

and Billy. Alex thought it was cute. Billy looked more annoyed.

“Dad.” Billy looked at his father. “Can you please tell Uncle Henry that we don’t need to learn this. I’d like to go back to Pap’s.”

“Henry do you mind running them down to Joe’s?”

“No not at all. I’ll be back to finish helping.” Henry said. “Come on kids.”

Dean watch them start to leave and he saw Josh join them. Immediately Dean held out his hand, grabbed hold of Josh’s shirt and tugged him back. “Where you going big guy?” Dean looked up to the teenager that was much taller than him.

“To Pap’s.” Josh saw Dean shake his head. “No? How come?”

“You’re helping. Let’s go. The trim in your bedroom needs to be finished being painted and you have a bed to make in there.”

“Aw.” Josh tossed his hands down.

“Josh.” Dean laid his hand on Josh’s back. “No whining. In.”

“O.K.”

Dean followed Josh inside, smiling and taking off his shoes. Though there were boxes laying around the livingroom, Dean was pleased with his house and how nice it looked. He was also pleased with the ringing of the doorbell. A simple chime. “Hey Josh.” Dean grinned. “Did you hear that? A doorbell. What do you think?”

“I think it means someone’s at the door. And I’m going to my room.” Josh pouted and moved to the hall that led to the bedrooms.

“I’m not ready for a teenager.” Dean spoke to himself and opened the door. Jess was there.”Hey Jess.”

“Hi. I was at the clinic. Johnny said you needed to speak to me.”

“I do. Come in.” Dean held the door opened for Jess. As Jess stepped in, Dean saw Henry trotting his way to the house. Dean smiled and shut the door. “Jess, do you mind if we talk while I unpack?”

“No. Not at all.” Jess looked around. “Great place.”

“Thanks.” Dean lifted a box to the diningroom table. “I’m a little nervous about it being unfair though. You know how everyone else lives in the townhouses.”

“Not everyone. Some others will be lucky. Not this lucky. But you know what Danny says.”

“No what does Danny say?” Dean asked.

“He says you saved the life of the community and ancient Chinese secret dictates the people of Beginnings repay you.”

Dean laughed then stopped laughing when his front door opened.

Henry walked in kicking off his shoes. “That wasn’t very nice Dean. Hey Jess. You didn’t take off your shoes.”

“Whoops.” Jess hurried to the door to remove his.

“See Dean.” Henry nodded. “You should put a sign out front. Ellen will get mad if this carpet gets tracked.”

“Let’s just hope Ellen comes here to live.”

“What do you mean?” Henry asked. “Of course she’ll come here. Why, because she’s still mad at you.”

“That and Robbie.” Dean opened the flaps to a box. His tone changed to a serious one. “Come on Henry. You’ve seen the way she’s been with him.”

Henry lowered his head. “O.K., granted, El’s a little wrapped up in

Robbie right . . .”

“A little?”

“Yes.” Henry said. “But don’t you think that’s to be expected? My God Dean, Frank’s gone. When we lose someone we love. We search and we want a piece of them back so bad, that we reach for the closest thing to them.”

Dean nodded. “Robbie. Frank’s brother.”

“Exactly.”

“Henry’s right.” Jess interrupted. “If you don’t mind my opinion.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “Not at all. An outside opinion may be what I need.”

“Then my opinion is what you’ll get. This is what I see happening, especially over the past couple days. Robbie’s being over protective of Ellen, taking on his bother’s role. Natural. He should look out for her, that’s what Frank would want. Right?” He saw he got agreement. “Ellen, like Henry said, is looking for a little bit of Frank. Robbie is Frank’s brother. Your fears are founded about worrying about Ellen being with Robbie.”

Dean tossed his hands up. “Here I thought I would feel better.”

“Wait.” Jess held out his hand. “Hear me out. O.K.? Ellen very easily could turn to Robbie. But Robbie’s no Frank. And when she sees that, she’s gonna slip back into the history she has established with you. I haven’t been in Beginnings very long, but from what I heard, you Dean, are always a part of her life. It’s Robbie I’m worried about.” Jess saw the sudden surprise looks of Henry and Dean. “I’ve become friends with him. We’re getting close. Don’t you guys worry about his feedings at all? You should. Yeah he’s the upbeat guy, making jokes and having a good time. But he’s also one of the many men in this community who does not have that closeness he needs. We all need. Here’s the problem I see. Robbie loves Ellen. Is Robbie smart enough to look past what Ellen’s doing. Look past her search for Frank. Or is he gonna get so wrapped up in it, he’s going to be crushed when it’s all said and done.”

Dean’s hands hesitated in his grip of a nicknack. “Whoa. I didn’t think of Robbie at all.”

Henry helped unpack as he talked. “Why would you? You don’t like Robbie.”

“I like Robbie.” Dean said. “You’re the one who doesn’t like him.”

“Oh.” Henry set down a nicknack. “You’re right.”

“Jess.” Dean looked to him. “Thanks for your view on things.”

“You’re welcome. And I don’t want you to worry Dean. I live with Robbie. If I have to, if I see him not seeing what’s going on, I’ll speak to Joe about it, or to him.”

“Thanks.” Dean smiled slightly. “He’s really lucky to have made a friend in you.” Slowly Dean’s eyes shifted to Henry who was snickering. “What is so funny?”

“Oh nothing.” Henry caught that after-laugh breath. “I was just thinking back to something Joe said the other day. Ignore me. I get like this.” Henry giggled again.

Dean shook his head. “I can’t imagine what Joe could have said that was that funny. Anyhow . . .” Dean let out a breath and started to unpack again. “Getting back to why I needed to talk to you.”

“Shoot.” Jess said.

“O.K., when the plague first hit, I was very wrapped up in not only

finding a cure, but finding a common denominator that played a factor in our all surviving.” Dean explained. “For years I tested everyone’s blood. Broke it down. Did all that. For years. After I found it, this was only after we started taking survivors. I stopped. Why go on. But . . .” Dean held up his finger. “Everyone I tested was different. Except for the Slagels. See they had this mutated strand and I attributed that to the fact that the immunity spanned through half the males in the family.”

Jess nodded as he listened. Henry played with the winder on the musical statue he unpacked.

“I thought it was a fluke.” Dean said. “Cause most cases I saw were one father, one son. Never more. Until you Jess. How many of your brothers survived the plague?”

“Two and my father.”

Crash! Henry dropped the statue. “Shit.” He grabbed the pieces. “You had brothers and a father that lived. Oh my God. Where are they?”

“My father died of sugar. The insulin went bad. My brothers, they were killed by what you call savages.”

Dean looked stunned. “That’s what Robbie told me. He told me about your family. I needed to hear it from you.”

“You’re hearing it. In fact, I was in the service. When I went home to my father’s farm, they hadn’t a clue the plague was so wide spread. Why would they. They had all lived.”

“Well . . .” Dean finally noticed what Henry had broken. “Henry, you’d better put that statue back together. That’s Ellen’s Scarlet O’Hara. She’ll kill you.”

“I’ll fix it she’ll never know.” Henry tried not to show how worried he was as he gathered all the pieces.

“Anyway.” Dean continued. “I’d like to run some tests on you. I want to see if you have a similar gene to the Slagels. It’s merely out of my curiosity and for my records. You don’t have to. But as a scientist, I’d like to know.”

“Sure.” Jesse agreed. “Just tell me when.”

“We can start tomorrow. Simple specimens that’s all.” Dean heard Henry snicker again. “What now Henry?”

“You’d better tell him now before he agrees fully.”

“Tell him what?” Dean asked.

“What you need.” Henry looked at Jess. “He needs sperm. Didn’t tell any of us when he first asked. Just handed us a cup and said enjoy.” Henry’s voice dropped to a whisper. “He never did have a good sense of humor. Of course he could say enjoy. Back then there were five women. Two were in their sixties. One was Ellen, Andrea the other and Jenny was jail bait. Not too mention she was Jenny. And Dean, he had Ellen. He was getting . . .”

“Henry.” Dean shut him up. “Please.”

“Just warning him Dean. And . . .” Henry went on. “Better drop a lot or he’ll make you give more. How embarrassing.” Henry fiddled with the broken pieces, rambling on. “Making some of us feel incompetent because we supplied too little. Do you know how much he . . .”

“Henry.” Dean stopped him. “Shut up. Jess, back then . . .”

“He’ll make Ellen play with it.” Henry kept going on, not paying any attention to Dean. “Well she’ll work on it. But still. He makes her touch it. He has turned her so cold about some things in the name of science. You should see

what they do to rabbits.”

“Enough.” Dean handed Henry a cloth that had been wrapped around a nicknack. “Take those pieces somewhere and fix them now. O.K.? Before Ellen has a fit.”

“O.K.” Henry dumped the pieces in the cloth and wrapped it up. “You don’t need me to help set things up?”

“No.” Dean said. “Jess you busy?”

“Not at all.” Jess answered.

“See. Henry.” Dean pointed to Jess. “Jess will help me. Fix the statue.”

“All right.” Henry carried the cloth and walked to the door, slipping on his boots. “I’ll be back.” He opened the door. “Oh Jess. Dean’s not a nice guy. He redefines the meaning of mad scientist.”

Jess laughed as Henry left, looking at Dean who looked so frazzled. “You know Dean, I’ve never experienced the effect of being in the same room as Henry and Danny. Is it . . .”

“It warrants an alcohol induced state.” Dean returned to unpacking. “And worse, if you ever see Ellen with those two . . . run.”

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Anderson Farm

Robbie drank a glass of water standing in the livingroom while he stared at the long table with the abundance of photographs.

“I loved those too.” Ellen said softly as she walked in the livingroom.

Robbie turned in surprise. “I didn’t her you. Shame on me. I guess I got kind of caught up in those.”

“One of the things I want.” Ellen reached around him and grabbed the photograph of the Anderson couple.

“What are you doing?”

“This.” She showed him. “I love this. These people were married before the plague and they survived the plague. They had such a long history and a long life together Robbie. Look at all their family. These two people are the meaning of soul mates.”

“Like you and Frank.” Robbie stated.

“Yeah.” Ellen looked in awe at the picture. “Lovers or not. He and I are connected and will always be that way.”

“What’s this?” Robbie reached to the cloth in her hand.

“Me being silly I guess. This was in the bedroom. This was the cloth I used to clean up Frank when he was sick.” She brought it to her nose, closed her eyes and smiled. “You can still smell him on this.”

Robbie grabbed her hand, lowered his head and brought this nose to the cloth. “Frank.”

“Frank.” Ellen’s eyes filled with sadness. Her hand dropped and she stepped back turning away from Robbie.

“El.” Robbie moved to her. “We’ll find him. He’s out there somewhere and we will find him.” He laid his hands on her shoulders and brought this lips near her ear. “I promise you.”

Ellen leaned back into Robbie, letting him hold her. “Even when I went

to Colorado. I wasn't away from him this long. He's so far away from me Robbie. So far. I don't know how to feel. How to act. What to do. I miss him so much."

"I miss him too. I never realized how big of a part of my life Frank was until now." Robbie closed his eyes tight. "I want my big brother back too."

"I just . . ." Ellen turned around and faced Robbie "I worry. How hurt is he? What are they doing to him. It crushes me to think of what they could do to Frank."

Robbie swallowed in pain.

"And even though we believe he's alive. He's out there somewhere. Lost. Taken." Ellen saw Robbie turn his head. She laid her hand on his cheek making him look at her. "I know you are doing all that you can do. Frank would be so proud to see you. Especially since . . ." Ellen snickered slightly.

"What?"

Ellen smiled. "He's always worried about you being head of security."

"Don't I know it." Robbie smiled too. "Man did he pound shit into my head. I would blow him off and he'd get so pissed."

"But look at you."

"I remembered it all and . . . I can't believe myself lately. When I hear some of the things I say. I sound like Frank."

"You're doing a great job for him."

"Thanks." Robbie spoke with relief and wrapped his arms around her holding Ellen tight. "Hearing that come from you is the closest I can get to Frank saying it."

"And getting this hug from you is the closest thing I can get to Frank giving it." Ellen closed her eyes. "Robbie. Just . . . just tell me everything is going to be all right. I need to hear that."

"Everything is going to be all right." Robbie released the embrace slightly.

"Thank you." Ellen spoke softly. She stood on tip toes and softly laid her lips to Robbie's. "Thank you." She pulled away only a little. Her hand touched gently to his face.

Robbie closed his eyes and tilted his head onto her hand. Rubbing the roughness of his cheek against the softness of her palm. He got lost, but only for a moment. He lifted his head and opened his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Ellen still remained in his arms, so close. "Robbie. Robbie, kiss me."

"El." He tried to pull back.

"Kiss me. I need to feel that from you. From you especially. Kiss me."

"Why especially from me?"

"Because right now . . ." Ellen brought her lips closer. "You're the only one that can give me just a little of Frank. I need to feel that."

"El, no." Robbie felt her lips brush against his parting them softly. "I'm not . . ." More they moved against his. There was a tenderness, an apprehensiveness, a parting that increased. "I'm not Frank." With a certain edge of intensity, Robbie laid both his hands on Ellen's face, pulling her back from him, but still keeping her near. "I'm not Frank."

Before Robbie could say anything further, Ellen pressed her lips hard against his. And despite what Robbie knew in his heart, what he knew was right and wrong, Robbie lost it. His mouth took control, and his lips widened over

Ellen's. He pulled her into him, kissing her hard and following the lead of not only her mouth but her body as well. Ellen gripped to him, walking back, bringing Robbie closer to the sofa behind her.

His hands slid with such a firmness up her back that they lifted the shirt from her jeans. He slipped them under her shirt, feeling her bare back. Feeling Ellen's hands as they grabbed the edge of his shirt and began to take it off.

The break in the kiss as Robbie's shirt lifted over his head, should have been Ellen and Robbie's moment to think. It wasn't. Still holding tight, Robbie stepped forward moving Ellen to the sofa, leading her down, then bringing his body to hers.

Robbie brought her leg tighter to his waist as he moved his body against Ellen's. Her lips responded to every motion his made. Intense with passion and filled with emotions. Just as his hand moved to remove Ellen's shirt, Robbie stopped. He pulled from the kiss and looked at Ellen, long and silent.

"Robbie."

"Think about this." Robbie said so soft. "This isn't right. It's not right El."

Ellen swallowed harshly as she ran her hand down her face.

"El. Not here. Not now. And especially not with all that's happened. It wouldn't be right and it would be for all the wrong reasons."

"You're right."

"I know I'm right." Robbie lifted his body from Ellen, stood from the couch and held his hand out to her. "You and me. We're so close that we're beyond this, we are." He helped Ellen up. He kissed her quickly and reached down for his shirt. He tossed it on tucking it in. "You know what I mean?" He walked to her and tucked her shirt in the waist of her jeans. "We're beyond getting caught up in an emotional time and making a mistake."

Ellen smiled at him "I can't believe this is you talking."

"I know. Trust me right now, I'm trying to convince myself of what I'm saying as much as I'm trying to convince you." Robbie raised his eyebrows. "But . . . I love you. And I know I'm not about to take advantage of you . . ." Robbie grinned. "Not now . . . maybe later."

Ellen tossed out her hand playfully smacking Robbie. "Thanks for stopping it."

"I'll kick myself later." Robbie laughed. "I'm not this chivalrous."

"I would have let it happen."

"I know. Them hormones of yours just . . ." Robbie laughed then he turned serious. "I think you need a closeness right now, and I shouldn't be the one who gives that to you. Now . . ." He held up a finger to her. "I could."

Ellen pushed his finger away. "Maybe we should be going."

"Yeah." Robbie grabbed his M-16 which laid by the photograph table. He bent down and picked up the cloth that fell to the floor, he handed it to Ellen. "Frank would be so pissed off if he found out we came here for him and ended up . . ." Robbie snickered and handed the photograph of the Anderson's to Ellen. "Anyhow, it turned out to be a good day. Right?"

"Right." Ellen took his hand.

"We found evidence they took Frank. Or at least we think we did. And we have a lead." Robbie walked to the door with Ellen. He spoke upbeat. "I didn't get laid, but hey, you can't have everything."

"Robbie." Ellen stopped him in the doorway. "You're a very special

part of my life. I want you to know that.”

“I do.” Robbie kissed her quickly then winked. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

90 Miles east of Binghamton, Alabama

“I know I’m never getting there.” George tossed his hands up when he felt his train start to slow down. “What the hell is going on.” He stood up and walked from his cabin. He looked up and down the hall. No one was there. Heading to where the front of the train was, George moved with haste. Finally he saw one of his soldiers. “Soldier, why are we stopping.”

“People on the tracks ahead sir. We’re checking to see if they’re savages.”

“And we’re stopping? Why would you even think about stopping?” George asked. “Christ. Back this thing up then go full speed ahead. Run them over.”

“Sir?”

“Run them over. And get me to Binghamton. Now.”

“Yes sir.” The soldier raced off to the front of the train. As he made it to the conductor, the train slow to a near stop. “Bart.”

The conductor, grey, and tall, wearing an old fashion conductor’s uniform, turned around. “What’s up?”

“The president says, back it up and hit them.”

“Hit them?”

“Hit them.”

“All right.” Moving his hands on the controls, Bart backed up the train. He could see the figures of the people standing on the tracks ahead. They faded as the train made room. Then with a switch of the controls the train left out a loud whistle and the engines churned. Picking up speed, the train moved down the tracks. Faster and faster. Closer and closer.

The soldier stood at the window with Bart as they rolled forward. Moving with a charge to the people who wouldn’t budge.

“Bart they don’t know we’re gonna hit them.”

“They think they can stop us. Little do they . . .”

At the same time, Bart and the soldier cringed, hunched and tossed their head sideways when the train plowed into the people with a ‘thump’ against the front, a splatter of blood to the window, and a rapping as the train rolled over them.

Bart pointed his finger to the window with irritation. “I’m not cleaning that up.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal felt like he did when he was a kid. He remembered racing to the television when he would hear the previews for a movie he wanted to see. And now he did something similar. Racing to the police station to hear the Beginnings transmission he wanted to hear. Hal would drop whatever he was doing and run when he heard his name called. Of course he started to catch on when he realized a lot of those wasted trips were Craig being facetious.

“It’s him?” Hal burst in the station out of breath.

“Yes.” The monitor said. “He just radioed for the chief.”

“Is that what we’re waiting for?” Hal asked.

“Yep.”

Hal caught his breath, leaning on the counter and staring at the radio. The chopper noise that followed the hiss made Hal smile.

“This is Eagle one, anyone there?”

“I’m here.”

“Hey chief. We’re about twenty minutes from home. Found the location.”

“Anything?”

“Nothing there. From the scene description we were given. Someone cleaned up.”

Hal snapped his finger and smiled. “We were right. I’ll bet he was at the Anderson farm.”

Robbie continued. “So as soon as I land I’ll search you out. I have something to discuss. But wanted to let you know, we were fine, in the air, and no sign of Mathias’s men.”

“Glad to here. See you soon.”

“Eagle one out.”

Hal stood upright. “There’s that name again. Mathias.” Hal drew up a thinking look and laid his hand on the monitor’s back. “Let me know if that name comes up again. I’ll be with Sgt. Ryder.” Hal got agreement from the monitor, gave a light pat to his back and walked out.

Hal walked toward the homes and to where Sgt Ryder lived. They had a meeting to discuss sending out scouts to search for the Wild cats. But Hal knew as he walked, that meeting would now have to include something else. The third force out there, one Hal knew nothing about. One Hal would make sure he found out about. If they were as big of a threat as Beginnings made them sound, Hal would definitely have to learn all that he could about Mathias and his men.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The curio cabinet fit nicely in the corner of the diningroom section of Dean and Ellen’s new home. It was quiet, the smell of dinner filled the home. The house was impeccably neat and the kids waited patiently, playing in their rooms. Like Dean, they were waiting on Ellen.

Dean side by side with Henry in front of the curio. Both of their heads tilted to the right as they stared at the Nicknacks they worked hard to arrange geometrically appealing.

Henry shook his head. “Try the other way.”

At the same time both of their heads tilted to the left.

“Henry. It isn’t going to work. She’ll know.”

“No she won’t. She hasn’t seen it in years. She probably forgot what it looked like. And when you look at it like this, you can’t even tell.”

“One, Ellen is not going to look at the cabinet like Quasimodo. And two, she’s going to notice Scarlet O’Hara’s arm is deformed and her nose is missing.” Dean reached for the statue and Henry stopped him. “We have to take this down before she gets home.”

“Dean, if we take it down then the whole thing will be off. This was the worst part. This cabinet and Ellen’s old Nicknacks took us forever to make look good. It was worse than those stupid curtains Ben made for the kitchen. What was up with those?”

“They’re called valances Henry. They just hang on top.”

“Oh.” Henry nodded. “No wonder I thought we were short.” He shrugged. “I’d better get going, you heard Joe. They’re on their way.”

“Yeah.” Dean shuddered some in nervousness. “Thanks for all your help today.”

“No problem. It was fun doing this for El.” Henry walked to the door, put on his boots and opened the door. He took one more look around the house so perfect. “You did good. Good luck Dean. She’ll love it.”

“Let’s hope.” Trying to look confident, Dean held up crossed fingers as he watched Henry leave. He walked to the door, making sure the outside light was on. As he turned around, the curio, though in the far corner, caught his eye, and so did the crooked Scarlet O’Hara. Dean moved to it, reached for the statue and stopped. He tilted his head to the left, looked, and then let the statue stay.

^^^

It was dark as Robbie drove Ellen from the hanger across town and to the living section.

“El, I’ll take this bag of samples with me. We can have Dean look at it in the morning.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go there, we can do it before Frank’s service. Wait . . .”

“What.”

“Aren’t I going to Henry? Because you just passed it.”

“No you’re going home to Dean.”

“Well you just passed that too.”

“No I didn’t.” Robbie slowed down so he can talk before the new row of houses came into view. “New housing was needed. Danny had a quick way to do it and Dean got his first. And well . . .”

“Oh my God.” Ellen said in awe. “Houses.”

“Modular.” Robbie stopped.

Ellen blinked as she looked at the long gray house on the end. The porch light lit the small wooden porch. “Is this Dean’s house?”

“Actually, it’s your house.” Robbie tapped on the steering wheel. “Yours, Dean’s and all the kids.”

“Let him share it with Bev.”

“Oh cut it out.” Robbie told her. “You know as well as I do, Dean’s not involved with Bev. And El . . .” Robbie dropped his voice to a whisper. “He has really worked hard on this. Go on.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Go on.”

As Ellen looked up to the house, she saw the front door open and Dean stood there waiting, so nervously. “Thanks Robbie.” Ellen stepped from the

jeep, stood there waving as Robbie drove off. She turned back to the house when she heard the screen door shut. Dean stood on the porch. She couldn't believe the house. She was speechless.

"Hey El."

Ellen moved slowly to the porch keeping her eyes on Dean.

Dean put his hands in his pockets. "How was the . . ." He was silenced by her kiss. Ellen's arms went around his neck pulling him to her. Dean's hand immediately grabbed onto her, embracing Ellen as he kissed her. He let out a slight moan as the kiss ended and he held her tight, her cheek to his. "I'm sorry about our fight."

"I'm sorry too."

Dean kissed her cheek and stepped back some. "Welcome um . . . welcome home El." He reached out and opened the screen door.

The moment Ellen stepped in with apprehension, she hesitated more. "Oh Dean." Her mouth dropped open as her foot slowly slipped from her shoes. "Oh Dean." She stepped further into the living room. She walked to the couch touching it. Looking at the pictures on the wall, the boarder, the diningroom table set for eight. "It's ours?"

"Ours." Dean walked in behind her and shut the door.

"Oh Dean." Ellen spoke breathy. "Did the furniture come with it?"

"Some."

Ellen shook her head and walked to the diningroom area. "A breakfast counter." She pointed. "Oh look at this." She turned around. "Nice curtains and what happened to my Scarlet O'Hara."

"Henry dropped her."

"I'm killing him. But right now . . ." She went into the kitchen. "Look at all this space."

Dean listened to her from the diningroom. He could hear her open and close things.

"A laundry room. No more steps. Your office." Ellen came quickly from the kitchen. "You have a little office there."

"Yes. And . . . I brought up one of the computers from the cryo lab. I figure any data entry I have to do, I can do here. That way I'm home more."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You know how the data entry holds me up."

Ellen walked by Dean running her hand across his face.

"El, I take it you like it."

"I love it. I love it." She kissed him. "Do the kids like it?"

"Yeah, they think they're a little far from their friends." Dean laughed. "They're in their rooms."

"How many bedrooms?"

"Four. Two small, one medium, one large."

"Four?" Ellen spoke with excitement. "This way?" She pointed to the hall off the livingroom.

"Yep."

"How many bathrooms?"

"One and a half." Dean followed as Ellen stopped at the first room. The door was closed. "Josh's room."

Ellen knocked, turned the knob and pushed. The door stopped. "It's stuck."

“Wait.” Dean knocked on the door. “Josh. What are you doing?”

“My room.” Josh answered.

“Let us in.”

“It’s open.”

Dean tried the door and pushed. He peeked his head in and pulled it back out. “I’m killing him.”

Ellen peeked in and waved to Josh. She cringed at the room whose floor could not be seen. She stepped back in the hall. “How long have you lived here.”

“Four hours.” Dean said. “Josh, finish that room.”

“I thought he would live with Robbie or Joe since Frank’s not here.”

“El, Josh was a big part of Frank’s life. He was part of your family with him. You’re my family, and he’ll be a part of what we have too.”

“Thank you.” She pointed to the next one. “Whose room?”

“Billy, and Joey’s and . . . well, Nick’s now.” Dean knocked and opened up the door. Alex, Billy and Joey sat on the floor of the larger room playing a game. Nick was a sleep in the crib.

Ellen walked in and kissed her children. “Look at all the room in here. Who is on the top bunk?”

“Joey.” Alexandra answered as she moved her game piece.

Ellen, squatting on the floor looked to Dean. “Should he be on the top bunk? He could fall off and get hurt.”

“Joey?” Dean laughed. “Please, he’s in Slagel training.”

Ellen smiled and stood up. “Next room.”

“Alex’s.” Dean led her there and pushed on the open door. “Henry decorated it. He made pink paint.”

Ellen smiled as she peeked into the small bedroom. The walls were a very light pink and the trim was white. “Henry did this?”

“Yeah. Henry has plans for this house. I told him you probably wouldn’t mind. It’s not quite finished. We need to add more trim.”

“This house is perfect. I’m so excited.” Ellen grinned widely. She saw the open door of the last room of the hall. She walked in. There wasn’t much furniture. A bed and two dressers. “Our room?”

“I’m hoping I don’t have to sleep on the couch. I will if that’s what you want.”

Ellen’s hand smoothed over the bedspread. “This is great Dean.”

“I knew about this before what all went down, went down. And I didn’t know when you and Frank came back if you were still going to live with me or not. I know we had the understanding, but to be honest El. I didn’t know who would be the person you lived with.”

“Were you hoping to win me over with this?”

“No.” Dean shook his head, then looked at her. “Maybe just a little.”

“You would have.” Ellen stepped to him. “I’m so materialistic.”

“I know.” Dean chuckled.

“And I was in the old world. Why do you think I stayed with Pete.”

“I knew this too. But . . . maybe that’s why I wanted to make this so different.” Dean grabbed Ellen’s hand. “El, forever I have been wanting to give you something no one else could.”

“You have.”

“What was that.”

“The Harvard Sweatshirt.”

Dean bit his bottom lip. “O.K., bigger than that. When I found out Joe was authorizing modular homes because Danny told him they erected easier and had more room than the townhouses, I had to do something special with the one I got.”

“So Danny picked you the best one?” Ellen nodded slowly. “What do you owe him?”

“Excuse me?”

“I know Danny. What’s he want?”

Dean held up his finger with an open mouth. “See there’s the problem. He hasn’t named his price. I signed a favor slip though.”

“One of many. He has a whole folder.” Ellen kissed him. “Thank you for this. I can’t tell you how this makes me feel.”

“I’m hoping secure.” His fingers reached out and ran down her face. “So much as happened this past month. Too much. We had a lot of loss. Heartbreak. You’ve gone through a lot. I guess for you, for me and for these kids, all of them, I wanted something stable. Secure. Because in this world, an ‘old world’ normal life is so hard to come by.”

“So now we have a home. With room where we can all live.”

“And eat.” Dean pointed back. “Dinner’s done. I invited everyone over. It’s the Slagel Sunday dinner you know. I hope you’re ready for it.”

“I’m ready for this all.” Ellen started to follow Dean down the hall.

“Dean? Can I invite the women over for a moon lodge meeting.”

Dean stopped walking. “Um . . .”

“You said ‘old world’ normal. Dean, I always had people over.”

“O.K., just forewarn me all right.”

“I will.” She moved quickly behind Dean. “Oh and Dean. Don’t get your hopes up. Bev won’t be invited.”

Dean spun around, opened his mouth to say something, shook his head, kissed Ellen and walked to the kitchen.

^^^

“East.” Robbie explained as he sat with Joe, a map spread out across Joe’s dining room table. “Definitely east. The tire tracks led that way. However the road was maintained going north too. My guess they went straight across South Dakota. But how far, I don’t know. There was a lot of blood. They had to take Frank somewhere to get help.”

“If that is Frank’s blood.” Joe said. “I guess Dean will tell us that tomorrow.”

“I want him to tell us now, but tonight is not a good night.”

“No it isn’t. We can’t send anyone out until we get a cover story anyhow.”

“Are we still going with a run?”

“Yep.” Joe agreed. “We have to come up with what kind. Sending Jess is a good idea. He can keep us posted if he sees any clues that they stopped somewhere with Frank.”

“I say we shoot for Tuesday morning.”

“Tuesday morning is good.” Joe folded the map. “It’s gonna be tough.

I'd like to start them at the Anderson farm, but it'll be a tough cover up if we do that."

"I'll think of something."

Joe reached over patting Robbie on the cheek. "Good job."

"Tell me that after Dean tells us that was Frank's blood."

"I'm telling you now. I'm proud of ya'." Joe stood up, leaned down and kissed Robbie on the head. "And speaking of Dean. Let's go. You coming to dinner?"

"Yeah. Did Andrea make desert?"

"Yes." Joe said. "And she's over there now. I'm surprised she hasn't called."

Robbie rose from his seat. "You think there's enough to invite Jess over?"

Joe stopped walking. "Why?"

"Well, I feel bad that we have this big family thing every week and he's alone."

"Isn't that sensitive of you." Joe said sarcastic.

"I'm a sensitive guy." Robbie stood straight and proud.

"Just don't let me discover how sensitive you really are."

"Huh?" Robbie asked baffled as he watched his father move to the door.

"Nothing. Go get your uh . . . buddy."

"Thanks." Robbie met up with Joe and walked out with him. "Meet you there."

Joe watched his son dart the other direction and then Joe headed to the street that led through the living section. He stopped when he saw on the corner, a small hole dug. "What in Christ's name." The hole looked as if it were drilled. Joe peered into the deep hole squatting down.

"If you reach real far Bugs Bunny might pop up."

Joe's eyes rolled and then he looked over his shoulder and up to Danny. "Hello Danny." Joe stood up.

"Walking to Dean's? I am. I was invited."

"What is it a party?"

"Yeah." Danny walked with Joe. "Did you like the hole."

"It's a hole and do you know who in the hell is digging . . ." Joe stopped at the next row of house. "Another hole?"

"There's a hole on every corner."

"Somehow I have a feeling you know why."

"I do. I dug them."

"What?" Joe halted and faced Danny. "Why are you digging holes?"

"O.K., I was going to ask you about it tonight."

"It's a little late, don't you think?"

"Not about the holes. The meeting."

"What meeting?"

"The one I want to have with you first thing in the morning."

"Tomorrow is not a good day. Tomorrow is Frank's memorial service."

Joe picked up his pace, slowed down at the next row when he saw another hole.

"Yeah, I know. But I think you may like it. Can we meet?"

"Early." Joe answered.

"Five O.K.?" Danny asked.

“Not that early. I’m still in my pajamas at five.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Danny.” Joe rubbed his eyes. “Are you always so perky?”

“Always. They all me Mr. Perky Joe. Of course, the call me Mr. Resourceful And now the hero guy. Did you know that?”

Joe just nodded and put his mind on getting to Dean and Ellen’s. He knew Danny rambled about something. As they walked he heard the name ‘Bruce Lee’ once or twice. But Joe paid no mind to Danny, because he was sure he’d hear it all again, only with more detail and a different angle. That was just Danny.

^^^

Their bedroom was lit by the light the crept through the partially closed bathroom door. Laying next to Ellen, Dean pulled her closer to him, feeling her bare back press against his bare chest. He brought his lips to her shoulder, then slid them up to her cheek. “You O.K.?” He whispered.

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“Can I ask what about?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Why?” Dean kissed her again.

“Because it has nothing to do with what just happened here and I don’t want you to think that it was on my mind while we made love.”

“I won’t think that. I know your mind goes a mile a minute afterwards. Talk to me.”

Ellen rolled onto her back and looked to Dean who propped his elbow on her pillow and rested his face in his hand. His other hand played with a strand of her hair.

“El. Talk.”

“I was thinking about Frank.”

“Oh.”

“Not in the capacity you think. See, today when we went to the farm, we found a trail of blood that led to the woods. And tire tracks.”

“You didn’t tell me this.”

“We were gonna wait until tomorrow. We took samples from the start of the trail until the end. And we want you to test tomorrow to see if it’s Frank’s. Because if it is, it’s proof that they took him. And he had to be alive because why would they take him if he wasn’t.”

“And this is heavy on you mind.” Dean said.

“Yeah.” Ellen nodded. “It’s an answer I guess. I don’t know.”

“And you’ll feel better once you know?”

“Yeah. So just ignore the mood. O.K.?” Ellen kissed Dean’s non responsive lips as he stared out. “What’s wrong?”

Dean slid back from her and slipped from under the covers. He sat on the edge of the bed, grabbed his Levi’s and put them on.

“Dean. I’m sorry.”

“El.” Dean shook his head and turned on the light. He squinted as he made his way across the bedroom to his dresser. He picked up the phone and turned back to look at Ellen who sat up in bed holding the covers to her chest.

Dean dialed. He sniffled and ran his hand through his messy hair. "Hey Robbie, it's Dean. Sorry to bother you. El, says you guys got some samples today. And I can't sleep. Would you mind if I ran down there and picked them up . . . thanks. I'll be right there." Dean hung up.

"Dean." Ellen watched him toss on a shirt. "You don't have to do this."

"Yeah I do." He moved to the bed and kissed her. "You need me to do this. And I don't mind at all. Besides, I'm curious too."

"Are you going to the lab?"

"Nah. I got that bionic eye. Remember?" Dean winked. "My shoes are by the door. I'll be back in five minutes."

"Dean?" Ellen called to him as he neared the bedroom door. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Dean tried to open the door.

"Dean?"

"Yes." He looked back again.

"I love you."

Dean closed his eyes and smiled. "I love you too." He started to leave. "Get dressed. We have work. I'll be back."

Ellen felt so much relief when Dean left to get the samples. Though she told herself she could wait until the next day, her heart didn't believe that for a second. It wasn't so much proof of Frank's being alive that she was hoping for from those samples. She didn't need proof, Ellen knew. It was more so for the hope. Hope that the blood that looked so much like a trail of death would actually end up being a trail of life. A trail that would lead Beginnings to Frank.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

George was exhausted from his trip, and he tried to get some rest when he arrived. But rest played second fiddle to the news he had been waiting to hear. And when George was summoned, he went.

It used to be a small clinic, now used as a hospital set up for society soldiers. The third floor corridor was lit by baseboard lighting. George walked down, his footsteps one of the two sounds there. The other sound, beeping of heart monitors.

George saw Dr. Morris walk from the last room and that's where George knew he needed to be. "Dr. Morris." George called out in a whisper as the doctor stood outside the door writing in the chart.

"President Hadly." He shook George's hand.

"Good news or bad?" George asked.

"Good."

"Talk to me."

"As you know it was touch and go. We were waiting when the patient arrived up there. We stabilized him and moved him down here. Which was the best move because we have the means to handle it. The bullet wounds, though not in deadly areas, were enough to cause a loss of blood, and the patient had pneumonia in both lungs. The pneumonia is clearing and the vitals are very strong."

George let out a slow breath. "Is he awake?"

"No. Still unconscious. If he's going to awaken, he will soon."

"If?"

"Well, he will wake, but we can't be sure how he will be."

"Explain that." Georg requested.

"As you know he was dead for six minutes. There could be some brain damage. And he has a head injury."

"So he could wake up a bumbling idiot. Meaning he'll need full lobal programming."

"Yes. But we're hopeful that won't be the case. We'll know more when he awakens. Which, like I said will hopefully be soon. He is getting stronger by the hour. But I must tell you. If you want this man, alive and working, then any attempts to prep him for CME implantation will have to wait for three to four weeks."

"Because of the head injury?" George asked.

"Yes. And the fact of his illness and his injuries. You want him completely healed before any more surgery is done."

"I can wait a month." George said "I waited this long. As long as I have him alive, that's my ace in the hole. I'm going to get a lot of leverage and a lot of gains from this."

"One more thing Sir. When he awakes, what if he asks about the Beginnings woman. What should we tell him?"

"Tell him nothing. It most definitely is in our best interest to keep these two as far apart from each other as possible. Whereabouts, unknown. We gain more control. Trust me."

Dr. Morris nodded. "I'll keep you posted."

"Please do. And thank you Doctor." Before George stepped away, he had to see. Slowly he walked into the room and listened to the strong beeping monitor. Closer to the bed he walked. With his hands folded behind his back, George stood at the side of the bed. He glanced at the intravenous, then to the monitor, and to the bed. He stared at the peaceful face that didn't twitch. The eyes that were closed. And George leaned down to him. "Hello Frank. I got you." George grinned wide. "You son of a bitch. I finally got you."

THE PLAN . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

September 8
Kingman, Arizona

The sergeant that led the raid for the Society army stood off from his waiting men. He spoke on the phone to Jeremy Lyons, George's go between while George did business. "We've arrived it's almost sunup now."

"I trust that when I hear from you again, you will have made the raid Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Jeremy said. "Then I will inform the president when he calls in our victory over this UWA is imminent."

"Yes Sir." The Sergeant ended the call and turned to his corporal.

"You didn't tell him."

"The trip isn't a complete failure." The sergeant said. "Maybe we got lost somewhere."

"The sign said Kingman."

"I know." The sergeant tapped the phone. "Corporal, if you were five hundred men, where exactly would you hide?"

"Hide?"

"Yes. That's exactly what they're doing. They're hiding." The Sergeant paced from the corporal. "And we just have to find them."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe's hand rolled over his own face as he sat at his desk staring at an upbeat Danny Hoi. His hand went from his hair, across his forehead to his nose. His fingers pulled the skin drastically as he listened. "Danny look . . ."

"No Joe hear me out." Danny held up his hand. "Frank Avenue."

"Christ."

"No, Frank."

"Danny!" Joe's hand slammed down on the desk. "Can a week not go by in this community without you coming up with ways to change it?"

"Make better." Danny corrected. "You people are gonna be awfully glad I arrived. I'm only trying Joe to make it cooler here in Beginnings. I mean, if we're all gonna live here we might as well love it and have a good time when we're not working."

"True."

"They do call me, Mr. Fun."

"I thought they called you, Mr. Resourceful, Mr. Perky and the Hero guy."

"Those too. Wow, am I the name guy. Anyhow I have to keep within the reputation I established. Right. Can't let people down."

"That would be a tragedy." Joe said with sarcasm.

"Yes, it would. And wait until you see the plans I have for a public pool

next summer. But don't worry I won't bother you with it now. I still have details to work out."

"A pool." Joe sat back. "Danny, what the hell does street names have to do with making things more fun around here."

"Oh Joe, for security alone it will be a blast."

"Really."

"Really. O.K. Watch." Danny stood up.

"I get a visual?"

"And audio."

"It's seven in the morning Danny."

Danny looked at his watch. "That it is. "Ready?"

"Sure." Joe lifted his hands then cupped them behind his head. He watched Danny grab a radio.

Danny deepened his voice. "This is Eagle one, I'm on that, you know, road that swings around to the front gate. I'm gonna ahead into town on that road in there. Where can I meet you Steve?" Danny switched the radio to the other hand and scooted over turning to face where he stood before. "This is Steve, Eagle one, I'm on that road that comes from town and I'm doing my rounds. Just finished the second and third street on the right side if you're facing town. How about I meet you on the forth street three houses in." Danny went back to his other position. "Roger that Steve-O. This is Eagle one out." Danny held up his hand. "But . . . if we do my plan." He did his deep Robbie voice. "This is Eagle one, I'm on Garfield heading east into Main. Where can I meet you Steve?" Danny switched position again. "This is Steve, Eagle one, I'm on Main right now, just finish Elm and Tennessee, two hundred block. How about I meet you on Crest. 208." Danny grinned. "See Joe, easier, not to mention all the air time saved and we don't sound like bumbling idiots."

"Are those the names you chose."

"Nah. I have the names written down on the map I drew. I can start erecting the poles today when I'm done with my other work, of course."

"Of course."

"And we'll paint the signs. They'll be up by this week. Come on Joe, what do you say."

"Give me the map." Joe held out his hand. Danny gave it to him. "Go ahead, Do it. You have a copy of these names so you don't change them on me and make me nuts."

"Yep." Danny nodded with excitement. "Thanks Joe, you won't regret this. The first street is called Frank. Just for you."

"I see." Joe looked. "I also see you named every road we have."

"Have to. And gotta run, I have a lot to do. Thanks again." Danny hurried to the door. "Oh Joe." He spun around. "Any thoughts to giving me that run so I can start renovating the empty storage into a Bowling Alley."

Joe just peered up.

"Just asking. Later."

Joe moaned some as Danny left. "Street names." The map dropped from Joe's hand as he looked at it. "Now how in the hell did I know this would be a name of a street." Joe shook his head. "Hoi Avenue." Then Joe smiled.

Bowman, North Dakota

It looked almost as if Hal was crazy. Walking across the empty field in his uniform. Speaking loudly as he walked tall with his hands behind his back.

“Rules are rule.” He spoke strongly. “Look at this as a game. I want no man taking out his anger on his brother here. If you do. You deal with me. Sgt. Ryder, Sgt. Evens and I will referee and will tap you when we deem you a causality. No weapons. Hands only. Ready?” Hal walked back off the field to the side where Sgt. Ryder and Sgt. Evens waited. “Begin.”

Sgt. Ryder blew a whistle and moments after it’s loud ear piercing sound, from both ends of the field, from beneath brushed, behind trees and dug into trenches at least a hundred men charged on foot. Fifty on each side of the field and they raced to each other. Vocally they cried out as they ran and as they met up with each other, the fighting began.

With a clipboard, like judges in a dance contest, Hal, Sgt. Ryder and Sgt. Evens walked through the battling men. They would see one fall and they would tap them out. The fallen man would leave the field and go off to the sidelines.

Hal seemed to enjoy it, watching the men in their sparing attacks. Hal grinned widely. Because he knew he not only was watching the training, he was watching to see which men he would choose to go scout for the Wild Cats and Mathias’ men.

The grin did not remain long on Hal’s face, when he felt the tap on his shoulder and turned around his stomach churned. Before him were one of the guards that watched the large white house of the hidden.

“Yes?” Hal swallowed as he asked.

“Sir.” The man saluted. “Gr . . . Gr . . .”

“Don’t say it.”

“Grace.”

“Gees!” Hal cringed. “What. Don’t tell me she needs to speak to me.”

“Oh Boy.” The man shook his head as he blew out slowly causing his cheeks to puff. “Oh Boy.”

“Christ.” Hal rubbed his forehead. “I knew it. I knew it. All right. Tell Gr . . . Gr . . .”

“Grace?”

Hal cringed again. “Yes, tell her it will have to be in a few hours. I have training of men and a meeting. I’ll send for her.”

“Can I write her a note?” The man asked. “Do I have to speak to her personally?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” The man saluted Hal and ran off the field.

Hal looked for Sgt. Ryder. “Elliott.” He called to him, summoning him over.

“Yes Captain.”

“I know the men have a day off, but I need to speak to those twelve who were chosen. Seems, Gr . . . Gr . . .”

“Grace.”

“Yes.” Hal ran his hand down his own face. “Wants to meet with me.”

“Oh Boy.”

“Yes. So find them I need to recap their night. I have to be prepared.”

“Right away.” Sgt. Ryder trotted off the field.

“And you aren’t leaving me alone with her!” Hal shouted, received a raised hand from Sgt. Ryder, then Hal went back to what made him feel better. Watching his men train.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen could hear the music playing in the lab before she even entered it. Low volume, a little slower than she remembered the song being, but nice. She leaned on the lab doorway watching Dean do his normal thing. Racing about the lab doing things, a scientist on a mission. On the long counter was the tan sack and spread out were all the grass samples Ellen and Robbie brought back.

Ellen walking in quietly, so as not to be heard, snuck up behind Dean in his rare occurrence of standing still. “Morning.” She whispered at him.

“Hey.” With a smile he turned around. “You’re not working, I hope.”

“Don’t want to work with me?”

“Don’t want you to work yet.” Dean laid his hands on Ellen’s waist and pulled her closer. “It’s nice to see you in here.” He kissed her. “I missed you.”

“No you didn’t.”

“You don’t think? Johnny is worse than you at times.” Dean shook his head and stared at her. He blinked harsh to bring himself out of his daze, kissed her quickly and returned back to his work.

“Something wrong?”

“I’m getting wrapped up.”

“In your work?”

“No, you.” Dean walked to the samples. “Especially after these. I can’t.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked him. “Dean?”

“Taking advantage of Frank’s absence is one thing. Having you all to myself eventually or at all is another.”

“Why do you say that. You piss me off.” Ellen lifted a sample of grass and Dean lightly smacked her hand and put it back down.

“El, history tends to repeat itself. I get you, Frank takes you.”

“Oh bullshit.”

Dean laughed.

“No, Dean. Besides, I was living with you right? Well now, you gave me a really cool house.” Ellen brought her face close to Dean’s. “Even if I hate you, I’m not going anywhere. Hell, I’m the envy of all the women. I love it.”

“Well if you’re gonna stay at the house.” Dean spoke trying to hide his snicker as he worked. “There are a few conditions.”

“Conditions.”

“Yep.”

“What?” Ellen asked.

“Now this is based on the fact that you’re only staying with me for my house.”

“O.K.” Ellen leaned against the counter “What’s the conditions, I can pay up. Hey, I want the house.”

“All right. You have to make all the beds.”

“Yuck.” Ellen cringed. “Doable. Go on.”

“You have to take turns with me bathing Joey.”

“Aw.” Ellen tried not to smile. “He splashes and never gets out. But . . . for the house, I can handle that. What else?”

“And . . . you have to make love to me at least once a week.”

“Now you’ve gone and crossed the line. Forget it.”

Dean raised his eyes, watched Ellen smile and kissed her.

Robbie’s clearing of his throat preluded his speaking. “When Frank’s away, Dean does play.”

Still close to Ellen, Dean whispered. “It’s a Slagel thing isn’t it.”

Ellen nodded and moved away from Dean. She faced Robbie and Joe who walked in. “Morning.”

Joe merely pointed and smiled. “You look different.”

Robbie slightly rolled his eyes. “She probably got laid last night. Now . . . she would be glowing had her and I finished what we started yesterday at . . .”

“Robbie.” Ellen called his name.

“Robert.” Joe said sternly.

“What did I miss?” Dean asked. “Hmm? No, wait. He’s a Slagel. Filling in for Frank. I don’t want to know. But . . . I will tell Frank.”

Robbie took a step to Dean. “I’ll beat you up.”

“I’ll give you a virus.” Dean smiled.

“Hold on.” Joe interrupted. “Dean, you just said you’ll tell Frank?”

“When we find him” Dean said.

“Does that mean?” Joe asked and saw the look on Dean’s face. “It does.”

“Yep.” Dean pointed to the samples. “Consistently on every sample, it was Frank’s blood. They took him Joe, somewhere. And going by where Ellen said Frank was shot, I know Frank. He can probably handle a lot more than that. And . . . going on Ellen’s theory, if they took him he must be alive, why would they take him dead. Unless they discovered a new thing I don’t know about. I doubt it.”

“So you think by where he was shoot, he may still be alive?” Joe asked.

“Like I said, from what Ellen described, chances are good.” Dean answered.

Joe was so pleased and he looked it. “Excellent. This goes no further than this room. Not even Henry is to know. Got that? The less people who know the better. I’d like to include Henry and Andrea, but . . . Andrea is still on the suspect list and Henry is an iffy. I’m going to start making the preparations for a paper run for recycling. I went through history, we haven’t hit the area I want to search.”

“Joe, how are you going to get away with that without letting it be known you’re looking for Frank?” Dean asked.

“One man will know.” Joe said. “The others will just think it’s a run. Robbie’s um . . . roommate will be the one who knows. I’m certain because of all he told us and how long he’s been here, he’s not on the inside.”

“Good. Then when he comes today for testing, I’ll speak to Jess about the sort of things he should look for.” Dean commented as he re-wrapped the

samples. “You know, evidence that will indicate where they stopped with Frank.”

“Why are you testing Jess?” Ellen asked. “Is he sick?”

“No, not at all.” Dean noticed the clueless look on Joe’s face too. “You don’t know either? I thought that the Slagels had a rare mutation causing the immunity to be passed on more easily. You know, because most cases were one parent, one child. I’ve never seen brothers. But I stopped questioning and testing survivors after I found the similarities in your . . .”

“Dean!” Joe yelled. “Quit rambling, I hate when you explain something medical, you ramble. Get to the point.”

Ellen gasped. “Joe, are you rude.”

“Yeah I am. Go on Dean.”

“Jess has you guys beat.” Dean said. “Not only did his father survive the plague but so did his two brothers. However they died of other circumstances.”

Joe was speechless.

Ellen was not. “So do you think they may be related to Joe?”

Dean snickered. “No. I think that our community is so small that all we would have seen was the Slagel occurrence because of the rarity. But there are other families out there we just haven’t come across them Until now. I’ll know more when I test Jess.”

Joe looked very seriously at Dean. “Did you tell Jess?”

“Tell Jess what?” Dean asked.

“What all he has to give up?” Joe spoke with a raised eyebrow.

“Or rather . . .” Robbie interjected. “How much he has to give up.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Dean asked.

Robbie decided to clarify. “Try this. No dirty magazines, just a cup and the words of advice ‘enjoy’.”

Dean scoffed. “All of you make too much out of it. Too much.”

“Dean.” Robbie said his name firm. “I was a young guy. You made me feel as small as my sample.”

Dean swayed his head. “You guys whine too much. Almost every male did it. It’s not big deal.”

“Did you?” Robbie asked.

“Um . . . yeah. I gave a sample.” Dean started working again.

Robbie snickered in shock. “You had help.” He shifted his eyes to Ellen. “Did you help him?”

“I plead the fifth.” Ellen said. “Anyhow, this is going to be interesting because I’ll be involved in the Jess testing. Right here. I didn’t know when you guys gave your sample. Boy . . .” Ellen paused to think looking so serious and tapping her lip. “I wonder if I’ll be able to look at him with a straight face when he steps out of the back room with his cup.”

“Ellen.” Joe winced.

Ellen ignored Joe. “Dean, will you let me know if you see the classic signs on my face that I’m about to laugh.”

“Ellen.” Joe said her name stronger. “All right. Me and Robbie are out of here. We have to plan the run and get ready for the memorial service.” He took a deep breath. “Gonna be even harder knowing what we do know. So Ellen, grieve.”

Ellen gave a thumbs up as Joe and Robbie started to leave. “Joe, Jason

has that video camera in his lab to document his experiments, would people think I'm odd if I taped Frank's memorial service."

Joe just stopped and spun around, he back handed Robbie in the gut when Robbie laughed. "Ellen, why in God's name would you video tape it. That's sick. Not to mention morbid."

"Joe, we can tell Frank all about it when he gets back. But don't you think it will be worth it watching him watch it."

Joe took on a thinking look. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. And we can get away with it. Yeah, let's do that for Frank."

"Thanks Joe. I'll get it off of Jason." Ellen smiled as she watched Joe and Robbie leave. She turned to see Dean staring at her. "What?"

"Video taping Frank's service?"

"Oh yeah. Trust me Dean, if I knew we were going to go back in time and bring you back from the dead I would have video taped your service as well. It was so nice."

Dean didn't know what to say. "Thanks."

"No problem."

Still a little in disbelief, Dean returned to his work.

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Binghamton, Alabama

"Twitching." Dr. Morris explained to George as they both peered into Frank's room. "His left hand is moving, twitching often."

"Like a muscle reaction?" George asked.

"It's involuntary yes. And he's also experiencing rapid eye movement. Something we haven't seen in him before. So, he's dreaming. And . . . his heart rate has been changing."

"He's getting ready to wake up."

"I'd say so." Dr. Morris answered.

"All right, from here on in. Nothing is said in his room. Nothing outside on the outside chance he can hear it. Got that? And I'll order guards to be outside this door."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And let me know as soon as he wakes up."

"I will."

Dr. Morris walked down the hall and George could have walked away too. But he didn't. He couldn't leave without looking at Frank. Saying something to him. George walked in the room and close to Frank's bed. "Soon Frank." He spoke to him. "Soon you will wake up. And I can't wait to see your face when you see who has you."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

So annoyingly, holding Jason Godrichson's camera, Trish stood outside

of the chapel getting shots of the faces who entered the memorial service for Frank. She stopped recording and lowered the camera when she saw Ellen walking with Joe. She hurried to her.

“Ellen. Can I speak to you.”

Ellen released Joe’s arm and let him go in ahead of her. “What’s up.”

“Well, remembering Princess Di’s funeral, I wanted to know what you would think if I got crowd reaction for the video.”

Ellen shifted her eyes. “That might no be a bad idea. Try to get the faces of those who really didn’t like Frank.” Ellen started to walk. “Well, scratch that. It could be very depressing if anyone rolls their eyes. Just get the sad faces.”

“Got it.”

Ellen moved from Trish, placed on her grieving face and walked into the chapel.

Reverend Bob read the scripture like he meant it. “. . . and yes we are fully confident that we would rather be away from these bodies, then we will be fully home with the Lord . . . Amen.”

The congregation responded.

Reverend Bob closed his bible. “Corinthians always offers beautiful passages. Comfort in times of sadness. Reassurance in times of insecurity. And words of wisdom in times of happiness. Ellen shared with me this morning that Frank often read from the book of Corinthians . . .”

Ellen saw Joe and Robbie both look at her. “He asked me.” Ellen whispered.

Joe rolled his eyes and looked forward to the reverend.

“. . . and when you know a man like Frank.” Reverend Bob spoke. “It should not be surprising to us that he lived by the bible and read often the word of God . . .”

Joe’s jaw clenched and he looked over Robbie to Ellen again. Ellen sucked in her lip and stared forward.

“. . . a rich man Frank was. Not of money, but of things that matter most in this life. A man rich with strength, many friends and rich with words of wisdom he shared with us all.”

Dean knew it. He didn’t have to look to know what the childish expressions of Robbie and Ellen would be. But when he looked, his eyes glanced down to the leg nudging match that entailed between Robbie and Ellen. Dean merely reached his hand down, grabbed Ellen’s and held it.

Ellen leaned her head on Dean’s arm. “Sorry.”

Dean wrapped his arm around her as he stared forward, laying his hand on Ellen’s cheek, pulling her to him and spreading his fingers so as to cover any expression she made at that moment.

Reverend Bob paused momentarily when he saw the sadness Ellen portrayed. “I could stand before you and speak words of comfort. I could read passage after passage. But that isn’t what we need. We need to feel Frank. We need to share in memories. That is why we have this memorial service. So . . . because I’ve known Frank and have been a member of the community for quite some time, I have taken the liberty to ask a few of you to share some words

about Frank. Eulogize him as only you can do.” Reverend Bob stepped back and took his seat.

Ellen and Robbie’s heads immediately swayed to each other when Dan, one of Frank’s most trusted Security men, gripped emotionally to the edges of the podium, lowered his head, bounced his shoulders and let out a single long sob.

Dan sniffled loudly and long and raised his head. He ran his hand down his reddened face. “I’m sorry.” He held up his hand. “It’s just a very . . . it’s an emotional time for me. I guess it didn’t seem real until today.” He let out a heavy breath. “I kept hoping to see him come back.” Dan’s lip quivered. “When I first came to Beginnings, and I was one of the first survivors here. Frank . . . he saw something in me. And he took me under his wing. I thought, sorry Ellen, I thought when I first met him he was one of the meanest men I had ever encountered in my entire life. But when you got to know Frank, you saw that he had a heart as big as he was. He taught me how to do things I never thought I could. He taught me how to take care of myself and anyone I’m around. I loved Frank. And I’m gonna miss him. This community will never be the same without him. But I’m sure, there’s always gonna be a little bit of Frank hanging around.” Closing his mouth tightly, Dan stepped from the pulpit and walked to Ellen, he extended his hand to her, gripping hers. And then as Dan looked at her, he lost it again, crying as he made his way back to his seat.

Ellen whispered into Robbie. “Frank will never let him live that down.” She felt Dean’s arm move from around her and curiously Ellen watched Dean stand up. “Shit.” She whispered and looked at Robbie. “Dean?”

Dean stood silently before everyone. “I promise not to bore you with anything medical.” He brought from everyone a light rumble of emotional chuckles. He cleared his throat. “When Reverend Bob came to me yesterday morning and asked if I would speak second today about Frank. I . . . I kind of laughed. Frank and Dean being used in the same sentence usually meant impending disaster. But then I started thinking.” Dean leaned on the podium, his wrists rested against the edge of it and he spoke relaxed. “I thought what would I say? And I thought this after the laugh. And I got serious. Someone once told me there is a fine line between love and hate. And for as much as I hated him at times, I guess . . . I guess I loved him too. I never realized how much life and spirit he brought to me until now.” Dean paused. “I miss him. I miss his walking into my lab and calling out my name really loud to make me drop things. I miss his fighting with me over Ellen. I miss his telling me I had little-man-attitude. And without Frank being around, his children will miss knowing one hell of a father. There is nothing I wouldn’t do, if I could bring him back. Beginnings is not the same without Frank. None of us are the same without Frank.” Dean straightened up. There were strong sniffles in the chapel. He walked solemnly down and sat next to Ellen.

“Oh Dean.” She kissed him on the cheek. “That was really nice.”

“I wrote it yesterday before I knew what I knew.” He whispered to Ellen. “But don’t worry. I do want him back, even if it is just to kill him for kidnaping you.” Dean patted her hand then looked up when Henry stood before the congregation.

“Frank.” Henry spoke his name. “He was my best friend. I knew him

well. A lot of people really didn't know Frank. Probably because they didn't like him." Henry shrugged. "I don't know. I guess if you look at it. You can see their point. He could be really mean. And loud." Henry shook his head with a loud breath. "Boy could he be loud. How about when he would yell over the radio. And he'd yell a lot. That was just Frank." Henry looked to Johnny who sat in the same row as Ellen. Johnny's head was down as he stared at his hands. "And Johnny. When I look at you, all I see is your father. Which you should take pride in, Because your father was someone to be proud of."

Johnny lifted his head and smiled to Henry, a sad smile. Joe reached over and grabbed Johnny's hand.

"Your father saved my life more times than I can count. He saved a lot of our lives. And he did it with style. He did it without regards to himself or to his life. It didn't matter who it was, Frank's life played second to whoever he tried to help." Henry's hands held to the podium. "And I forever will be grateful for having known him, loved him, been friends with him. I will never forget him. And I will make sure, for the rest of my life, no one ever forgets Frank Slagel."

Ellen watched Henry sadly step from the podium and back to his seat. She saw through the corner of her eyes, Robbie standing up. Her hand grabbed his as he slid from the pew and walked to the front of the chapel. She thought how strong he looked, and handsome dressed in a grey shirt and black tie. His hair combed neatly instead of spiked up and tossed about.

Robbie swallow before he said anything. He held his hand up a little above the podium. "I remember." Robbie closed his eyes. "When I was six, my father let me walk to the store for the first time. But I had to walk with Frank. I can still hear my father yell out the screen door. 'Frank, hold Robbie's hand'. I didn't see it, but I'm sure, knowing Frank, he winced. But I didn't. I was so little for my age, and Frank, he was so big for thirteen. My little hand was so lost in my big bother's hand. So lost." Robbie stared at his own hand. "And I loved it. I was so proud to be walking with my big brother. I felt like the coolest kid in the world. Thinking, 'hey, look at me. This is my brother Frank.'" Robbie snickered. "And it's funny, isn't it. I still feel the same way when I would walk with him. Proud to be seen with him. I guess every kid who has a big brother looks to them with pride. I always looked up to Frank. He has gotten my butt out of trouble for as long as I can remember. And man, the shit he could do." Robbie swayed his head with a smile. "To work with him. To fight side by side with him. To even stand next him,. They are the greatest privileges I will ever know. And yeah we had our ups and downs. We're family. But from kids on up, I wanted to be like him." Robbie grew very serious his words gasped with emotions. "Because he's been my hero since I was three years old." Biting his bottom lip, Robbie looked forward, stepped away from the podium and walked straight out of the chapel.

Through the silence of the chapel, Ellen stood up, slipping passed Dean and following Robbie out. He stood in the quiet empty street. His back to the chapel.

"Robbie." Ellen walked up to him laying her hand on his back.

"I know . . . I know he's out there. But he still needs us El." He turned around. "I don't think I can ever remember a time where Frank really needed help. He needs our help." Robbie closed his eyes as he spoke with passion. "And if I have to give my life to do it, I'm making sure he comes back. I want him

back.”

Ellen, with no words to say, stepped to Robbie. Her arms went around his waist and her head fell to his chest. And while the service finished inside without them, Robbie and Ellen stayed on the street in their own emotional embrace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal's stomach grumbled in anxiousness. He just wanted to get it over with. He knew it was going to happen, it was just of matter of when. Like a bomb going off, Hal waited for doomsday to arrive.

"I like the teams you picked." Sgt. Ryder told him as they sat in Hal's office. "Captain?"

"Huh?" Hal looked up. "I'm sorry."

"Deep in thought?"

"Deep in dread." Hal took back to the paper Sgt. Ryder handed him. "You didn't say. What do you think of my teams I picked out?"

"I'm sorry. I like them."

"Good, I'll start prepping them tomorrow. We might as well send out the Mathias scouts as well as the Wild Cats. We should also be hearing from at least someone regarding the search for our men and Beginnings man. When is he due back for supplies?"

"Tomorrow morning." Sgt. Ryder answered. "Boy you are in deep thought. Usually you know exactly . . ."

"Shh." Hal held up his hand. "Listen. *It* nears."

"I'm leaving." Sgt. Ryder started to stand up.

"You're staying. Prepare."

There was a knock at the door, only one and it opened bringing in Grace. She looked back in the hall. "Wait there and don't leave. I will not walk these streets alone." She straightened her moo-moo style dress and closed the door. "Captain. Can we be alone?"

"No." Hal answered as he sat down again after being a gentleman and standing on her entrance. "Elliott must be here. He's learning the tricks of the reins if I must leave."

Grace smiled some. "Elliott that will be a welcome. Perhaps you can make your men behave like civilized human beings."

Hal waited for it, he wanted it over with so he figured he might as well get it started. "I've spoke to my men. They said nothing out of the ordinary occurred."

Mistake on Hal's part. Like a monsoon wind she blasted him. Hal thought--only for a second--that he saw fire spit from her mouth. "Where do you get off taking their word over mine!"

Hal leaned back.

"Do you realize captain, Three of those men had dirt. Dirt imbedded in the grains of their skin. Dirt! Do you believe that? Dirt."

Dirt. Dirt. That word started to make him smile.

"Is it any wonder you find yourself in this position?" Grace asked loudly.

Upon her words, Hal seemed to leave that office. Escaping the pain of that moment to the pain of another . . .

"Is it any wonder you find yourself in this position?" Lucille, Joe's fifth fiancé yelled at a fourteen year old Hal. Lucille was older than Joe, it was

his experimental phase when he was tired of the young dumb ones. Of course Hal never remembered that phase lasting past Lucille. She could have been attractive had she not been so nasty. Turning on the sweet as pie act when Joe waked in. *“Are you listening to me?”*

“Are you listening to me?” Graces voice interfered with Hal’s memory.

Hal snapped back. “Um, yes. Go on.” But Hal didn’t listen his mind went back to that day again. The day that Lucille found a few innocent pornographic magazines and went after Hal.

“Look at you. Is it any wonder I’m not shocked to death at this moment.” Lucille was in her bitching glory. “Do you really think I need to subject myself to this when I make a bed. Being your father’s slave. Working unappreciated for you boys. And you don’t care. Do you help? No. Look at you Hal Slagel. You scream future rapist.”

Hal snickered at his thought. Not at Grace, though it appeared otherwise.

“Captain.” Sgt. Ryder called his name. “Any suggestions?”

“Um . . . You said the man filling in for Peter was what?”

“Pornographic.” Grace nodded.

Hal tried not too laugh. “Sorry. Let me hear it all first. Finish.”

Grace began to. She had a list. Rambling off on things such as preparatory actions not taken prior to arrival at the house. And as Hal thought of how he would get his men out of this mess and forever save them from the ‘Grace’ torture again, he thought of how he got himself out of that mess with the porno magazines.

“Robbie.” Hal walked into the second bedroom. Robbie sat with Jimmy on the bed. Both of them look worried. Hal did not. He shut the door and smiled.

“Tell us.” Robbie said. “I know it’s bad.”

“Nah.” Hal joined them on the bed. “I explained everything.”

“Shit!” Jimmy freaked. “See, now Doug at the store is going to get in trouble for selling them to me. I’m only sixteen. God, it’s against the law you know. I knew I should have never have gotten those for Robbie. He was too young.”

Hal fluttered his lips. “He doesn’t know what he’s looking at anyhow. Don’t worry. I didn’t say it was you. O.K.? I explained it to Lucille and she is explaining it to dad.”

“Thanks.” Jimmy said in relief. “I’m sorry they thought they were yours.”

“Me too.” Robbie said.

“Hey, what are big brothers for. Huh Robbie?” Hal rubbed his head. “If not to take the entire blame?”

“The entire blame?” Jimmy asked. “Wow.”

“Yep.” Hal exhaled. “The entire blame.”

Upon completion of Hal’s words, the door to the bedroom blasted open as if an explosion went off. The door slammed against the wall and brought in

something worse. Frank stood in the door. He huffed. “Which one of you told Dad they were my fuckin magazines?” Frank asked so angrily his face was red. “You have three seconds or I start beating you up. One, two . . .”

The three boys looked at Frank.

“Three.” Frank slammed the door and dove after Jimmy. Hal knowing what he had to do to help, took his opportunity as Robbie jumped on Frank to help. Hal darted from the room, screaming the entire way. “Dad! Frank’s mad because we told and now he’s beating us up! Dad! Help!”

The loud shrill long call of his name brought Hal back to the painful world of Grace. “Captain!” Her face was so near to his. “What do you plan on doing.”

“Can I get back to you?” Hal asked.

Graces hand slammed on the desk. “I should have known. We don’t ask much. We merely ask that you handle these situations. I certainly hope Captain, you aren’t ignoring our needs.”

“Never.” Hal told her. “While I determine a suitable action, what do you have in mind? Any suggestions?”

Grace raised her head high as she moved to the door. “We can forget about this whole mess. If you can get Peter to be a permanent monthly guest at the house for myself.”

Hal’s eyes widened. “I’ll uh, see what I can do.”

“It would prove beneficial and I can guarantee there will be once less complaint each month.” Grace opened the door. “I expect to hear from you with in the hour.” she stepped out. “Soldiers, guard me on my way back.” The door closed.

Sgt. Ryder looked at Hal. “You can not even consider her request,. I’ve heard what that woman does. It would be cruel to ask Peter that.”

“I know. But she likes him.” Hal tapped his fingers together. “One less complaint Elliott.” Hal smiled. “Doesn’t hurt to ask now does it.” Hal stood up. “Isn’t he up for promotion? I think he is. Yes.” Hal paced around with a thinking, smiling face.

“It’s bribery.”

“It’s Gr . . . Gr . . .”

“Grace?”

Hal cringed. “Yes, it’s her not bitching. And one less slot open per month and another less chance of us being picked.”

Sgt. Ryder stood up. “I’ll go summons Peter.”

Hal grinned with arrogance and thought again, and returned to his desk.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

Sitting at his desk, Jeremy Lyons held the phone tight to his ear with closed eyes. He just received the dreaded call from George and delivered the news he so much wanted to keep from him. Jeremy listened as George spoke stern to him.

“I’ve deliberately kept you away from our soldiers for this very reason.

You know what to do. Get ready. I know exactly where to put you.” George told him and hung up.

“Damn it.” Jeremy spoke to a deadened phone. He laid it down and stood up. He had things to do and preparations to make. And by the way George sounded, he’d better do them quickly.

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Binghamton, Alabama

George stared at the phone. He didn’t let his anger take over him when he heard the news that his troops failed to find the UWA camp. He would wait until they returned, listen to what they had to say and then start interrogating the UWA men again. But George knew his men well. He also knew it was very possible that they ended up in Kingman Texas.

George began to dial the phone again, he held it to his ear as it rang. “Hi. It’s me.” George smiled. “Yeah. Just wanted to let you know we’re moving ahead. So get ready. I’ll keep you posted. Is it a good time? Then I’ll wait . . . I’ll let you know. Take care of yourself.” With another smile George ended that call and he went back to doing whatever he did to occupy his time. And at that moment it was just a matter of waiting.

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Beginnings, Montana

Ellen peeked into Dean’s home office. He sat with his feet on his desk staring at the computer, the keyboard draped across his lap. His desk was a mess, papers and books all on it. “Dean?” Ellen poked her head in the door. “You need anything?”

“No. I’m fine thanks.” Dean looked up and smiled and returned to his work.

Ellen pulled the door closed and walked back in the livingroom. The house was quiet, the kids were in bed. She sat down on the floor with Henry. “So where were we?”

“He’s been in there an awfully long time El.”

“Yeah, but he’s home. Right? At least if the kids want to kiss him they can.”

“You know what I think El.” Henry said.

“What’s that?”

“I think that you guys should let me live here. I can room with Josh.”

“Oh I don’t think Dean would let you. Me, I don’t care.”

“I lived with him while you were gone.” Henry nodded. “And he said his house was never cleaner. And El . . . he took my son. Took him right from me.”

“Tell him you want Nick back.”

“I did. He said that now that you live here, so does Nick. He said I can have him a day or two a week.”

“But Henry, you don’t like caring for babies.” Ellen reached up and grabbed for her glass of tea.

“True El, but it’s the principal of it don’t you think?”

“Most definitely. And Henry, thanks for the ‘take off your shoes’ sign.”

“Not a problem.” Henry waved his hands. “People can be such pigs. They just don’t know how to take off their shoes in a new house.”

“To me it was habit.”

“Me too.” Henry leaned to her. “Hey El, do you think that Nick will get confused, I mean with Dean raising him now. At least with Frank he saw the dark hair. Dean’s so Caucasian.”

“I don’t think Henry. You’ll be around. You’re gonna be his father too. And besides Nick shouldn’t realize he looks different. The kids around here don’t look at each other differently. Even Marcus doesn’t get a second glance. Look at him. Do you suppose he looks in the mirror and realizes that he doesn’t look like Mark.”

“Actually if you saw Mark first thing in the morning when he comes to work, they look alike.”

“Really?” Ellen laughed. “I thought Mark was cute.”

Henry made a cringing face. “His face stays puffy for hours. If I were a woman I wouldn’t want to wake up next to him.”

“Oh I have to make it a point to get up there early in the morning.”

“It has to be before nine or he looks normal again.”

What were they rambling about? Dean wondered as he heard Henry and Ellen’s laughter seep through his closed door. He lifted his notes, read them, set them down and began to type, speaking his entry out loud.. “Initial test on DNA for Jess Bowen shows mutated strand. Patient unable to give sperm sample do to pressure.” Dean shook his head. “I’m killing them guys for scaring him.” As his fingers clicked again, his private phone rang. Dean blindly reached for it and braced it between his shoulder and ear. “Dr. Hayes.”

“Hello Dean.”

The keyboard dropped from Dean’s lap, his notes flew and Dean sprang up. He felt the heat hit his face when he recognized the voice.

“Miss me?”

“George.”

“Guess who I’m staring at right now? You think he’s dead. He’s alive and well.”

“Frank?”

“That’s the one.”

Dean raced across his small office, flew open his door, leaped over Ellen’s legs as he raced out the door of his home bare foot.

Ellen and Henry both stood up.

“Must be an emergency.” Henry said.

“Must be.” Ellen closed the door and went back to sitting with Henry.

Trace the call. Trace the call. That’s all that ran through Dean’s mind as he headed through the living section at his top speed. He had to get to the tunnels. If George was looking at Frank, the reprogramming could tell Dean

where Frank was.

“Dean. Let me tell you, if you’re thinking of finding out where I’m calling from don’t. You know as well as I do, I have someone other than John in Beginnings. Do you want to take that chance with Frank.”

Dean stopped running. He caught his breath, and noticed he was center town. “Why . . . why are you calling me.”

“Here’s the deal Dean. I have something you want. And you have something I want.”

“And they are?” Dean paced in circles center town.

“I have Frank. I lost my top genetics specialist in an accident. I have files and formulas people can’t figure out. I want you Dean, to come and work for me.”

Dean laughed, he laughed hard. “Fuck you.”

“No see it’s fuck you. The way I see it, you’re the one who’s fucked.”

With so much sarcasm Dean spoke. “How do you figure?”

“You’ve already lost one child. It would be a shame if you lost another now wouldn’t it.”

Dean’s heart sunk as he sat down on the wall in the small park.

“Accidents happen everyday. You don’t know who my person is. You don’t know who to trust or who to watch. Do you? So easy it would be for something to happen to Billy. I hear he’s quite the wanderer thinking he’s more grown up than he already is.”

“I’ll have them watched.”

“Make a move like that and Frank dies. I have him in my control right now Dean. You want him back? You want your kids safe. Fair exchange. Simple. You leave Beginnings and join my side. I thought Frank would be a good weapon against Beginnings. I think you’ll be a better one. How broken Beginnings will be. Frank dead. Dean leaves. You come with us.”

“You want me to just up and leave my family? I think you’ve lost it.”

“No you’ve lost it.” George stayed calm. “The way I see it Dean, I have you by the balls. You have no choice. If you stay in Beginnings, one of your kids will die. I will guarantee that. And Frank . . . he’ll become a CME or SUT as you call them. Stay. But if you leave. When I feel enough time passes and you aren’t going to try anything funny. Then I will have my person get your family out of there and I will return Frank to Beginnings. Unscathed.”

“I’m supposed to believe this?”

“You have my word. And didn’t you say at the memorial service today that there was nothing you wouldn’t do to bring Frank back? What did you do Dean? Lie in a church.” George tsked.

“How do I know you have Frank?”

“Pneumonia, high resistant viral strain both lungs. Shot, both arms, shoulder, gut and leg. Minor wounds caused a lot of blood loss but not enough to kill him. Got a few more scars than the last time I saw him. I don’t know what more I can tell you. I have him. You know that.”

Dean ran his hand down his face. He thought, that’s all he could do is think. “You made sure you have your guarantees. What are mine?”

“You get none.”

“Bullshit. I want guarantees. If I’m going to up and leave to save my kids and Frank, then I want guarantees too.”

“What did you have in mind.”

“I tell one person.” Dean stated.

“No.”

“I tell Ellen. She has as much to lose as I do if she opens her mouth.”

“If you tell her, I know her, she can’t be-bop along Beginnings like Frank is alive. She’s a big key to them thinking he’s dead. Everyone knows how connected her and he were. She has to make it seem like he’s dead.”

“She will.”

“Why Ellen?” George asked. “Of all people why her?”

“She’s my guarantee that if you break your word, you will die.”

“What?”

“You heard me. What did I do for the army George? You don’t think her and I have at least three dozen different biological strains here in Beginnings. We do. I have antidotes too. Easily delivered to Beginnings’s people. Not to you. I leave, I call her when I see Frank. If she doesn’t hear from me in one or two days or if I tell her Frank is not fine, she is to tell Joe everything and give out the antidote. Joe can fly over and dump it on you. Trust me George, it will spread like wild fire on your people. What the hell do we care if everyone dies on your side of the country. I’ll walk out of that camp and back home. She will hear from me periodically. If something happens to one of my kids. Same deal. Don’t think about taking her out, because I’m smart enough to leave a back up somewhere in the plan. I stay with Frank until he leaves. My assurance you do not make him into one of your soldiers. Frank gets returned before my family joins me. If he doesn’t make it back. Again, same deal.” Dean’s heart raced and his breathing was heavy as he listened to the silence come from George.

“You’re awfully confident you can wipe me out.”

“Very easily. Do you care to test that?”

“Why haven’t you done so already if you have the means?”

“You can say I value the human life. The innocents that you’ve taken.”

Dean spoke cold. “But if it comes to between them and those I love. I really won’t give a shit who they are.” Again Dean waded nervously through the silence. A thin line of sweat formed on his brow and gathered between his hand and the phone.

“You tell no one but Ellen.”

Dean let out a breath.

“We will set up specifics of the deal when I call you back.”

“When will that be?”

“I’ll call you back when I’m ready to come and get you.”

“Which will be?” Dean questioned.

“When I’m convinced that Beginnings thinks Frank is dead. When Joe thinks Frank is dead. You want a guarantee, that’s one I want. Use your little woman to your advantage Dean, she can do some convincing. Perhaps if you marry her again that will show the people she has moved on. Convince them. See, I’ll know. Runs to look for Frank that are listed as just runs will be a dead giveaway. Behavior, will be a dead giveaway. If I even think that you guys are planning to raid us, or you’re up to something to get Frank back. I’ll return him to you just so you can see how we destroyed him and I will definitely keep my threat against your child. Don’t test me either. I’ll give you up to two weeks to convince me. After that, deal’s off. If I’m convinced, I’ll set up when I come for you. Remember you tell only Ellen. At least I know strategically alone there’s

nothing you two can do. Until then.” George hung up.

Dean stood in the street. He looked at the timer on the phone. Ten minutes he spoke to George. What had he agreed to? He just felt as if he signed a deal with the devil. It was a deal where not only his life but others as well depended on. Frank. His children. Never in his life did Dean think he would be such a bargaining tool. But George must want him and need him badly to agree to Dean’s terms. And Dean would use that to his advantage. With his phone still in his hand, and the deal agreed to, Dean had to think of his next step.

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With so much passion and heart Ellen’s words were near tear filled. “No Dean.” Her hand pointed out to him. “I will not let you do this.”

Joe sat on his sofa, Robbie next to him. They sat in Robbie’s livingroom.

“Ellen.” Dean stepped to her. “There really isn’t a choice. Now is there? I can pretty much guarantee nothing is going to happen to me. I don’t want to take a chance on my kids and I can’t just turn my back if I have a chance to help Frank.”

Joe’s hands ran across his face as he stood from the sofa. “I can’t let you do this.”

“This is Beginnings Joe.” Dean said. “We pride ourselves on being safe here. Do I want to leave? No. But I don’t want to worry that my children aren’t safe. We don’t know who the insider is. We don’t. And this is Frank we’re talking about. Frank. Are you going to tell me he wouldn’t do the same for me? If I were out there and he had to leave to get me he would. And so will I.” He walked to Ellen. “You have to be a part of this. You have to play your part. I’ll go and I’ll be back. But I’ll be back with Frank.”

Robbie stood up also. “Dean’s right. This is the best way to get Frank. We go with George’s plan keeping it between the four of us. We convince the community that Frank is dead through our actions. We let Dean go. We track him. We should have time. Let me talk to Danny about a tracker. I’m sure we can get it from him with no questions asked. We track Dean to where George has him. We send a scouting party out first. Scout the area. Scout the camp. The place they have Dean. Pictures and such. We learn it.”

“That way we pretty much have a grip on where Dean’s is if he fails to call us.” Joe said. “I think George wouldn’t underestimate Dean. I think George will think there’s a virus somewhere here he created. Dean will call, we can have the system set up to trace the call. And with Robbie’s plan we can pretty much stage our rescue of the two. Sneak attack in.”

“I can lay that out.” Robbie said with certainty. “That’s my field of speciality. That’s what I did in the service for nine years. Once we have all we need on the place they have Frank and Dean, we can get them. And we can do it so carefully that by the time George figures we’re getting them out of there, he won’t have his inside man take a chance because we’ll be watching Ellen and the kids like hawks. Even if we have to synchronize the rescue with getting Ellen and the kids out, we will.”

“Four man rescue team?” Joe asked Robbie.

“Depends on their man power and the size of their camp. We may have

to go with six.”

“No!” Ellen shouted. “You can’t do this. Frank’s already out there. You can’t let Dean go too.” She walked up to Dean. “You can’t go. Please tell me you’re not doing this craziness.”

Dean stared at her. “I’m sorry.”

Ellen grunted and backed up with folded arms.

Joe knew it wasn’t what Ellen wanted to hear. But this was an opportunity to get Frank. And though they had to do it minimally, they could. “Robbie you will plan the rescue. Every detail. I know you can do it. But . . . I’m going to need you here when it all goes down. You leaving will throw suspicion especially since you’re head of security now. Besides, I trust you impeccably with the lives of Ellen and the kids. I want you on them watching them when it all goes down.”

Robbie nodded. “I understand. You want to go, don’t you Dad?”

“I *will* go. I promised Ellen I would bring him back myself and I will. But . . .” Joe took a breath. “I’m gonna have to retire to do so. I think now is a perfect time. Step down to council position because my mind is not straight with all that has gone down with Frank. More like an extended sabbatical. I’ll make a few runs in the mean time with Cole after I retire, to make it look legit.”

Dean drew up a look of concern. “Wait a week before doing so. Try to push more on Henry since he will be . . .” Dean swallowed. “The leader of this community. Throw hints his way and others that you aren’t up to it.”

Joe agreed and he walked to Ellen laying his hands on her shoulder. “This will work. We can bring Frank back. He’s alive Ellen and he’s fine. You have to do your part. O.K., you can’t dwell on Dean’s leaving. You have to think about him bringing Frank back. And Dean’s going is an assurance that nothing will happen to Frank in the meantime. Think about that.”

Ellen took a long breath and turned around. “I guess you’re right. Frank’s all right. He’s alive. And we have to help him. If we don’t do this we may never find him.”

Robbie spoke up. “We will eventually. But it could be a long time. It’s a big country out there.”

Joe saw that Ellen was coming around. He kissed her on the cheek. “O.K., we have a direction. Inform Jess that the search for Frank is off. I do however still feel we can trust him so let’s train him for the scouting.”

Robbie nodded. “Jess is a good man for this. He was in the Canadian special forces. This is right up his alley.”

“Good.” Joe said. “And Ellen, you know of your part. And going on what George had said, suggesting a marriage. I think that may be something to consider. The people in this community see you move on, they will really doubt Frank’s being alive, and this inside person will see this. That’s where our main concern lies. Us four have to be convincing. Dean, what do you think about the marriage? Even if it’s just until Frank’s back. It can be annulled after that. Of course we have to make it look real to Reverend Bob so it will have to be legit.”

“I understand.” Dean commented. “And it could be a good idea.”

“Stabilization in Ellen’s life.” Joe explained. “Especially after all she’s been through. I’ll need you two to start talking about it, letting it be over heard.”

Dean watched Ellen nod to Joe and he shook his head. “The marriage is a good plan, but it doesn’t have to happen to convince people. Scratch the marriage idea.”

“If it’s not going to hurt, why not do it?” Joe asked.

Dean looked at Ellen. “It’s not right. And I . . . I can’t do it.”

Joe was shocked. This really surprised him.

Ellen moved to Dean. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t marry you El.” Dean looked at her. “Not for this reason. It’s not right. To get married only to break up when it’s done. I won’t. I’m sorry. It doesn’t have to be done so why do it. It’s just icing on the convincing cake. And we don’t always need icing.”

Ellen bit her bottom lip. She was silent for a long time staring at Dean. As she saw Joe ready to speak she held up her hand. “Dean.” She whispered “We’ll talk about this later. O.K.?”

Dean shook his head. “No. We won’t. El, please. Let’s not talk about it at all.”

“You don’t want to marry me.”

“Not for this reason.” Dean reiterated.

“You’re really not going to do this.”

“No.” Dean said. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t need to be done.”

“I think it does. If George mentioned it, we could do it. Because he has Frank and right now he holds the high card. We don’t know who his person is. Dean?” when she received no response, Ellen tossed her hands up and moved toward Robbie’s front door. “Fine. This is stupid. You’ll do everything else but this. I’m going home. To my home. Joe, Robbie, let me know when we need to discuss this more. Just know this. If I’m going to go along with this plan then I’m going to do all that I can to make sure it works in our favor.” Ellen stormed out slamming the door.

Joe wasn’t going to say anymore. Ellen had said enough and he could see by the look on Dean’s face, Dean didn’t need any more question on the subject that left the room with Ellen. “All right.” Joe bent down to the coffee table and picked up the tablet he had there. “Let’s sit down and recap what we wrote down . I want to go over again everything that George said.” Joe moved to the sofa and sat down, Robbie did too. Dean still stared at the door. “Dean?” Joe called to him. “Join us?”

Dean in thought took another second of staring, as if he expected Ellen to return. “Um . . . yeah.” Slowly he turned and joined Joe and Robbie. He felt really bad at that moment for turning down Ellen, but he felt strongly in his reasons for doing so. But those feelings and thoughts would have to wait. It was time to return to the discussion of George.

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Binghamton, Alabama

Dr. Morris made notation in Frank’s chart as he stood by Frank’s bedside. “Vitals strong. Respiration normal. Reflexes normal. Everything is normal.” Dr. Morris closed the chart. “So tell me Mr. Slagel. What is holding you up from coming back to us? Hmm?” Tucking the chart under his arm, Dr. Morris checked Frank’s intravenous once more and walked from the room.

Dr. Morris’ footsteps moved as steady as the beeping of Frank’s heart

monitor. The sounds of his walking faded away until it no longer could be heard. And then Frank . . . opened his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

September 9
Beginnings, Montana

As she did her hair, trying to get finished early before she had to get the kids up for school, Ellen heard the thump coming from outside her bathroom door. She opened it up and looked into her bedroom from where it come from. She saw Dean opening his dresser. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here." Dean pulled out a pair of jeans. "And I need fresh clothes."

"How did you get in."

"The window."

"Well, I'm going to have to tell Henry to put an alarm system on my windows to keep out unwanted pests."

"Ellen." Dean said her name strongly. "Why are you being like this? Why did I have to come home to find myself locked out of my own house. A house I just moved into thank you very much."

"You're a dick." Ellen walked by him and to her dresser.

"Excuse me?" Dean stopped her, taking hold of her arm.

"Did you not hear me?"

"Oh, I heard you. Can we talk?"

"Nope. You said last night we wouldn't talk about it. God, how much like Henry you are being."

"Ellen . . . listen."

"No." She pulled away. "What is it about me? I'm good enough to sleep with, I'm not good enough to commit to? And you don't have to even look at it as a real marriage."

"And that is exactly the reason I will not marry you."

"What?" Ellen said with sarcasm. "What kind of reason is that. Mr. I'm going to save Frank but I have reservations about some parts."

Dean slowly took a breath and walked over and closed the bedroom door. He had an edge to his voice, his hand moved with a ridged action as he spoke. "Look. From the moment I knew I loved you, that was the moment I knew I wanted to commit to you and spend the rest of my life loving you. Now, history shows we were married. But you see, in my mind, time was rippled, I'm not blessed with that memory. And that is a memory I want. There's is nothing more that I want than to marry you El. But I'll be damned if to get that I have to cheat. I don't want our marriage to be a ploy, a front and I certainly don't want you to have the easy out when it's all said and done. And you will have that. Frank comes back, marriage annulled. If circumstances were different and I didn't love you as much, I would do it. But that's not the case. Marrying you means far too much to me then to have my shot and it be short lived."

"If you question the fact on whether or not I love you enough to marry you for real, then question no further. If a real marriage is what you want. I will give you a real marriage with no intentions of taking the easy way out when it's all said and done. I love you enough to do that."

"If you would have said that yesterday before my phone call from George, I would believe that. But you want Frank back . You'll say or do anything to get that. And you may believe what you say is true. But when Frank

walks through those gates all will change. It always does and it always will.”

“You don’t believe what I’m saying is true?” Ellen spoke with some hurt in her voice.

“I believe you believe it . . . for the time being.”

“Then the hell with you.” Ellen tossed her hands in the air. “You say you love me. I say I love you. Well you know what I think. I think you’d be afraid to take the step no matter what the reason. You say you want to marry me? Well I think you’re a coward Dean and I think you would find an excuse not to no matter what the circumstances.” Ellen started to walk out.

“Then I’m a coward. But I’m a coward with reason because I’ve been burned one too many times by you.”

Ellen stopped in her stride out the door. Calmly she walked back in her bedroom and straight to Dean. “Fuck you.” She turned around and walked back out.

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If one were to ask Ellen to describe Johnny’s appearance she would say, though he looks like, Frank. He is much better looking than Frank was at his age. And Johnny knew he probably was one of the best looking guys in Beginnings. He was sneaking around with the women before he was sixteen and before understandings even began.

He needed milk, and Johnny’s time was so limited since Joe ran him around in every division he could use him. Distribution always seemed like a pain to Johnny. But on this day it fit into his plan that he reluctantly agreed to help his grandfather with.

She stood there, leaning against the counter talking to Cole. Bev flirted, perhaps to get a little more. And Johnny, in plan mode, made it obvious. He stood next to her and . . . well he stared.

It took a few minutes into Bev’s conversation with Cole. At first she thought Johnny was staring and then she knew. So annoyed Bev swung her head to Johnny and rolling her eyes, she spoke so snippy. “What are you looking at.”

Suave would describe him, running his forefinger and thumb down the sides of his goatee. He flashed his bright smile and leaned close to Bev staring his dark eyes at her. He spoke deep and smooth. “Your legs. They’re the best pair in Beginnings.” Taking his milk from Cole along with a ‘what are you up to?’ look from him, Johnny left distribution.

Bev’s mouth dropped open and her eyes followed Johnny out.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Every man that could, lined up in the field. Standing tall and proud Hal walked down the long line of men. Rows deep they were. Peter stood there waiting as Hal approached him. They exchanged salutes.

“For displaying qualities of leadership. For handling pressure in extreme circumstance like no other could. And for bravery he has shown me. I

hereby promote, Private Peter Haskell to the ranking of Sergeant. And with this promotion he will lead his first regiment out west to scout for the camp or camps associated with the Wild Cats.” Hal extended his hand to Peter. “Congratulations son.”

Following the shaking of hands, Sgt. Ryder edged his way to Hal, he cleared his throat subtly.

Hal leaned down bringing his ear closer to Sgt. Ryder. “Yes.”

“Grace . . .”

Hal cringed.

“Grace is going to be upset. You’re sending him away. I saw his schedule.”

“Gr . . . Gr . . . she’ll just have to get over it. She never mentioned he had to be around now, did she?” Hal stood straight and grinned. He watched the new Sgt. Haskell gather up this men for a scouting expedition that would leave Bowman in a few short minutes. To Hal everything was falling into plan.

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Beginnings, Montana

Dropping the last child off at the nursery, Ellen headed to a place she seldom saw the inside walls of. The library. Not that Ellen was particularly the reader. She wasn’t, but the calvary soldier was awakening and wanted something to read. Ellen wanted to do him the favors of picking out that special book. Beginnings had a great library. Or at least she heard.

“Boo.”

A small shriek came from Ellen then a laugh as Danny walked up behind her.

“Out and about early. I didn’t think you were working yet.” Danny said.

“I’m not. But why not take advantage of the free babysitting right?”

“Right. Where you off too?” Danny asked.

“The library. God, I think I was in there once.”

“I didn’t know you read a lot.” Danny commented.

“I don’t. It’s not for me. It’s for the Calvary soldier that is ill. I’m picking him out a book. Only I haven’t a clue what to get him or where to start.”

“I’ll help you. I’m very averse in libraries. you know.” Danny grinned. “They call me Mr. Library.”

Ellen laughed as they neared the library. Upon entering they saw Trish who usually worked at history.

“Hi.” Trish smiled but spoke at a library whisper. “Well if it isn’t Mr. Library.”

Danny nodded. “What did I tell you?”

“Trish why are you working in here today? Doesn’t Lynn usually work the library?” Ellen asked.

“Usually but she has a case of this terrible stomach flu. She thinks it was some thing Josephine baked.” Trish shrugged. “Go figure. Why are you here Ellen, you don’t read.”

“Yes I know. It’s not for me. It’s for someone in the clinic. Danny’s helping me.”

“We have a great thriller and horror section. Go take a look-see.”

Ellen motioned her head. “Come on Mr. Library show me the way.”

With his hand holding onto Ellen’s arm, Danny led her in the right direction. “Is this guy going to read it or are you reading it to him.”

“I’ll read it to him if he wants.” Ellen looked around the sides of the books. “Wow, how can you tell what they’re about.”

“Open the inside or some have it on the back.” Danny answered

“Like a video box.”

“Exactly.”

Ellen reached for a book and snickered.

“What is it?” Danny moved to her.

“Look at this. It’s her picture. God how awful.”

“True, but she wrote that good vampire series.” Danny put the book back and grabbed another. “How about him?” He showed Ellen the author’s picture.

“Oh I never liked him. And what’s up with that pose. The hand to the chin thing they all do. I would think if they want to sell books they might pose nude or get someone attractive to decorate the back cover. I would.”

“No you wouldn’t.”

“Yes I would.” Ellen put the book back.

“Wait. I know an author who takes great pictures. He’s in the next aisle. I’ll be right back.”

“O.K.” Ellen browsed the titles, pulling one, putting it back. In her reach for a thick book, thinking it had to be good because it was big, she heard the annoying voice of Bev, and the mention of Dean’s name made Ellen’s listened. She pulled the book some, seeing Bev as she talked to Todd from fabrics.

“I just felt so bad for Dean.” Bev stated. “He was wandering around last night because *she* kicked him out of the house.”

“And the house he worked so hard on for her.” Todd commented.

“His house too. Anyhow . . . he was really appreciative when I let him stay with me.”

Ellen’s heart sunk and she moved to replace the book. In the slow deliverance of it to the shelf a hand met hers helping her place it back. She shifted her eyes with the shocked expression still on her face. Danny was there.

“I got a good book for your friend.” He held it up. “Let’s uh get out of here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Ellen followed him up to the desk where Trish sat waiting.

Trish looked up from a book she read. “Find something for the sick person?”

Danny laid the book down. “He might like this. It’s an all-like.”

“Oh I couldn’t agree more.” Trish opened the cover. “Library card please.”

Danny looked at Ellen then back to Trish. “I don’t have a library card.”

“Then you can’t check out this book.”

“Trish.” Danny didn’t know if she was serious. “Lynn let’s me check them out without a card.”

“O.K. but if you excuse me for saying so. Lynn’s a fool. People just don’t return books as it is. Imagine if you didn’t know who had it.”

“Just write down my name.” Danny told her.

“How will I find you. The library card makes it so much easier.”

“Can’t I have the book without a card?” Danny asked.

“Certainly . . . not.” Trish answered. “But . . . would you like to check it out?”

“Yes.” Danny said hearing Ellen snicker.

Licking her finger, Trish leaned down and opened a drawer pulling out a piece of paper. “Fill this out. This is an application for a library card. And include your address since you know what yours is, you made them up.” She handed him a pen.

Danny leaned on the desk to begin to fill it out. He looked at Ellen. “A hundred and fifty people in this town and they’re afraid they won’t be able to track us down. We’re we gonna go?” Shaking his head, Danny filled out the application.

^^^

Andrea exercised the leg of the society soldier, Tom Collins. She spoke to Dean as she did, Bending the leg up and laying it back down. “Muscle tone, Good. Reflexes improving.”

Dean wrote down in the chart. “Any responses at all to touch.”

“Some.” Andrea said and smiled at Tom. “He’s not feeling it. I am. It’s a good sign.” She laid down his leg. “Anyhow . . . I’ll let you get some rest.” She covered Tom up. “We’re going to be trying you in a wheelchair today. How’s that?”

“A wheel chair.”

“Yes.” Andrea told him. “So you can get around our little town. As soon as I see you practiced enough we’ll move you to containment, there are a lot of people there who can assist you if you need it.”

“Doctor, what’s your opinion, will I walk again?”

Andrea smiled at him. “I believe with a lot of hard work you will not need the use of a wheelchair forever. I believe that. But . . . are you ready to work hard Tom?”

“I’m very ready.”

“Good.” Andrea laid a hand on his leg. “Dr. Hayes. Walk with me?”

“Yes.” Dean lifted a hand and waved to Tom then followed Andrea out. “So you really believe he’ll walk again.”

“The spinal chord is healing nicely. I see no reason for prolonged paralysis. But I want to talk to you about something.”

“Oh Boy.”

“What’s that mean.”

“You have this serious look on your face and . . .you’ve stopped walking.”

“You know me.” Andrea smiled. “I’m concerned. I heard a rumor that’s spreading around Beginnings. Ellen kicked you out?”

Dean let out a breath with a laugh. “Man, one person sees you walking around in the middle of the night and things get out of hand.”

“So she did kick you out?”

“Last night. I’m back. It’s not permanent. I don’t think.” Dean

shrugged. “We just had a disagreement.”

“Sorry to hear that. Especially with her just coming back home.”

“Well . . . if the truth be known she’s up . . .” Dean paused. He had to remember how careful he had to be when he talked. “She’s upset still about Frank.”

“Understandable. It is still soon.”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded. “And you know, with her and this Robbie thing. She’s in this searching phase. Looking for a little of Frank. I guess I’m just not understanding enough. You warned me.”

“I did.” Andrea said. “Because I’ve been there. When my Miquel died, I was the same way. Remember how I befriended Alonso? All because he was Hispanic and he reminded me of Miquel. Right away I attached myself to him. It gives you a little of that back. You want to be around those who are most like those you’ve lost.” Andrea took a second to think and smile. “So you two made up?”

“Not yet, no. Our conversation ended this morning with ‘fuck you’.”

“Oh Dean.” Andrea tsked. “Language.”

“I didn’t say it she did.”

“Why don’t you talk to her.”

“I will.” Dean responded. “When I see her later. Maybe by that time she’s had a chance to cool down.”

Andrea looked at her watch. “Why don’t you go home for lunch in a few hours. Spend some time with her.”

“You know what. That might not be a bad idea. We can talk then. I have a meeting with Joe this afternoon. I’ll cut out early? Thanks Andrea.” Dean started walking again, this time toward his lab.

“Dean?” Andrea called out to him. “Why are you meeting with Joe?”

“Um . . . it’s uh . . . personal thing about Ellen. You know, he’s her Dad and you also know Joe. Have to schedule time.” Dean tossed his hand up and moved again.

Andrea looked oddly at him as Dean disappeared quickly down the hall.

^^^

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” Ellen asked the UWA soldier. “Just let me know.” she fluffed his pillows up.

“I’m fine.” He spoke weak as he watched Ellen. “The book is very nice.”

“I’ll read to you. And my friend Danny will read to you also.”

“Why . . . why are you being so kind to me? It’s a wonderful gesture on your part.”

Ellen spoke as she tucked in his covers. “Well saving my life was a wonderful gesture on your part as well. I will never forget that.” Ellen rested her hand on the bed. “Ever. What you guys did to help me and Frank. I am grateful.” Leaning down she pressed her lips to his forehead. “Thank you.” She looked up when she heard the clearing of a throat. Dean was walking into the room.

“El. You’re not supposed to be working.”

“I’m not. I’m visiting Gerry.”

Dean walked closer to the bed. "Gerry, your doing better I see."

"Yes. And the woman is being very kind."

Dean's eyes raised to Ellen.

Ellen whispered. "It's a respect thing he has. You can call me Ellen."

"No, that would be too much to ask." Gerry said.

Dean opened his chart. "What was your last recorded temperature? Are you sure you're not feeling dizzy or abnormal in any way?"

Ellen gasped. "Don't answer that Gerry. He's being sarcastic because you're being polite. He is the epitome of the word Dick."

Dean slammed the chart. "Look, I'm not wanting to fight with you."

"Oh." Ellen spoke long and drawn. "Really? Well you're not getting a fight, you've secured an ending to that."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I think you know."

"El." Dean stayed firm speaking to her across the body of Gerry. "Look I want to talk to you. Can we go somewhere?"

"Nope."

"El."

"Nope."

"Ellen listen . . ."

"Where'd you sleep last night?" Ellen asked with edge.

"What?"

"Where did you sleep last night?"

"You kicked me out, so that is none of your concern now is it?" Dean spoke with resentment.

"I think it is. Where did you spend the night?" Ellen asked again. This time stronger.

"And I told you before it is none of your concern."

"Fuck you, it isn't my concern." Ellen snapped at him.

"No El, fuck you. You kicked me out!"

After his eyes and head shifting back and forth one too many times, Gerry had heard enough. Especially from the doctor. "HEY!" He shouted the loudest he could. "Don't you dare take that tone with the woman."

Dean's moth dropped open and his head swung to a view of Gerry. "First off we're arguing. Second she is my . . ."

"I don't care what she is to you. She is a woman and should be treated with respect. Where is your leader?"

Dean blinked several times. "What?"

"Where is your leader? I want to inform him of your behavior to the woman."

Ellen looked smug. "The leader is my father."

Gerry stared harshly at Dean. "Apologize to the woman or I will talk your leader. I hate to rat on a fellow man but you crossed the line with her. Apologize."

Dean was silent.

"Apologize."

"Yeah Dean apologize."

"Ellen don't." Dean spoke strong.

"If Frank were alive." Gerry said. "He would kill you."

"He would." Ellen came back.

“Madam. Whatever the relationship may be between you and this man, may I, as someone who has respect for a woman, tell you he is not even worth speaking to.”

“Thank you.” Ellen spoke calmly. “You are absolutely right. He’s not. And I’ll be back Gerry.” Ellen walked around the bed and out of the room.

“El.” Dean chased her out. “Ellen stop. I want to talk to you.”

“Talk to you new lover.” Ellen spun, yelled, and spun back around the other way.

“Where is this coming from? Ellen.” Dean followed her.

“I know where you spent the night last night, Dean.”

“O.K., so you know. Big deal.”

“Big Deal?” Ellen said with such a shock. “I certainly hope you enjoyed it because that body can lay next to your body from here on in.”

“Why would I want to lay next to Henry. Do you think I had sex with Henry?”

“Henry?” Ellen stopped walking.

“Yeah Henry. I stayed with Henry. And why do you think Henry and I are lovers. Is he starting trouble again.”

“Henry does not start trouble.”

Dean laughed. “Oh, I beg to differ. Did he tell you something happened between he and I last night? I can just see him doing . . .”

“No, Bev did.”

“Bev told you something about Henry and I?” Dean asked.

“No, she told Todd from Fabrics, she slept with you.”

Maybe Dean could have had more tact. But he didn’t. He immediately started to laugh. “And you believed her. God, Ellen what . . .El?”

Ellen had sped off.

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Binghamton Alabama

There was so much disbelief in his voice as he spoke. George would have yelled had he not been so stunned. “Hid?”

“Yes sir.” The sergeant that led the raid on Kingman answered nervously.

“They hid.”

“Yes.”

“Five hundred men hid.”

“We believe so.”

“What are you? A moron?” George’s voice raised. “Five hundred men who live and train in one place can not hide.”

“Well sir, I couldn’t find them anywhere. They hid.” The Sergeant was so serious as he spoke. “You know how clever these UWA soldiers are. They can outsmart us at times.”

“Sergeant. Elmo from Sesame Street can out smart you at times. Did it occur to you that they just weren’t there?”

“No sir.”

“No.” George closed his eyes and ran his hand down his face

mumbling. "This is why I need men like Frank Slagel."

"Excuse me."

"Nothing." George said. "You're dismissed and send me Lt. Merrick in."

"Right away." The Sergeant left and was almost immediately replaced with Lt. Merrick.

"President Hadly." Lt. Merrick stood tall.

"Lieutenant. Starting first thing tomorrow I want those UWA soldiers interrogated again for information and I will be present this time to make sure it's done right."

"Yes sir."

"And the man that gave you the false information."

"Yes."

"Shoot him and shoot him now. Do it in front of his fellow soldiers."

"Yes sir." Lt. Merrick, stone faced, left George's office.

George sat back in his chair at his desk and desperately tried to stay calm. He had other things on his mind that must be fore most. Frank and Dean. The Legion of Doom was what he planned to refer them as once George had them on his side.

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Beginnings, Montana

Jason reviewed the list of missing files Andrea had given him as he walked down through the tunnels to the cryo-lab. He didn't quite understand that how in a community as small as Beginnings, files could actually get lost. Bet Andrea explained it wisely. If Dean was working on the files, Dean will lose them And the risk would now run greater since he had a home office.

Andrea hated the tunnels especially when the weather was getting cold, so Jason graciously offered to search out the missing files. He buzzed himself into the cryo-lab, turning on the lights as he walked in the door. "Files, files." He scratched his head at the mess. Sample cups laying around. Papers scattered about. He didn't see any files. He saw a small warming light on in the backroom. The former cryo-wall slash Henry-world. Hoping that the files would be in there, Jason walked in. He peeked at the glass dish with a brown substance that sat under the light. It grew something, Jason hadn't a clue what that was. His eyes skimmed about the room seeing nothing that resembled files. As he turned to leave the quiet lab, he jumped at the sound of a kicking on compressor. Wondering were it was coming from, Jason listened. It was close. It was in the room. Not seeing anything, he began to leave again when his eye caught it. Had the warming light not been on, Jason wouldn't have been so curious as to what was hidden under the black blanket. It was large and covered and set in the corner. The closer Jason stepped to it the more he heard the running compressor.

He reached and felt the solidness of the object, the metal feel and Jason slipped the cover from it enough to expose what it was. A long white freezer was hidden there. His fingers crept against the crease and he gripped the lid. It wouldn't budge. It was locked.

"Dr. Godrichson." Johnny's voice called out.

Jason jolted. “Johnny.” He grabbed his chest.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s . . . what is he hiding in here? This is a weird new lab.”

“Don’t know.” Johnny walked inside and recovered the case. “Not my business. Only El and Dean know.” He laid in Jason’s hands the files. “Andrea said you were here looking for these. I knew where they were. They were Ellen filed. Which means stuffed in a drawer until she felt like getting to them.”

“Thanks.” Jason looked at the files as he felt led out. “I would have never found them.”

“Glad to help.” Johnny waited until Jason was clear of the room and he followed him. Reaching back to close the back room door, Johnny looked once more inside, then at Jason, the shut off the back room once again.

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Robbie balanced his chair on the hind legs as he sat in Joe’s office, looking so smug, his arms crossed against his chest. “Henry, you will just say or do anything to make me stay on that suspect list. Won’t you.”

“See Joe.” Henry pointed. “He’s making it out to seem like I have it out for him.”

“You do.” Joe said. “And saying he is George’s prodical son. His golden boy. His right hand man and child by proxy is not motive or means. Dean?” Joe looked at Dean.

“I’m with you Joe. Robbie’s not a suspect.” Dean said as he peered more at his notes, looking more like his thoughts were elsewhere.

“Then I say we scratch him off the list.” Joe stated, holding his pencil ready.

“Joe!” Henry shouted. “That’s not fair.”

“Try this. If Robbie stays so do you.” Joe looked at Henry.

“All right.” Henry pouted. “But that’s blackmail Joe and it isn’t very nice.”

“Well neither is telling Bev that Dean slept with you last night.” Joe raised his eyes up to Henry as he scratched out Robbie’s name.

“Oh my God Joe. I told Bev no such thing. Granted I don’t want her near me and it could be the best thing to do to get her away from Dean as well. But to tell her Dean and I slept . . .”

“Henry!” Joe yelled. “That’s not what I meant. Someone told Bev Dean stayed at your house. Care to clarify who that could be?” Joe raised his eyebrow at Henry.

“Haven’t a clue Joe.” Henry tossed his hands in the air.

Grumbling a ‘hmm’ Joe returned to his notes. “All right. We have two more suspects to get to before we finalize this list. Me and Jason.” Joe cringed, he cringed big time. “Henry, for Christ’s sake what?”

“I don’t think you should be on the list that’s all. I don’t have a motive for you.”

“Well I do.” Joe said and saw everyone looked at him. “I gave it some thought.”

“Are you confessing?” Henry asked.

“No!” Joe yelled. “Just giving you boys something to think about. O.K.”

And we'll discuss me after Jason.”

“Oh this must be plausible.” Henry said. “If he’s saving himself for last it has to be good. I’ll wait. Let’s talk about Jason.”

So annoyed Joe looked. “All right. Jason. I don’t even think we have to discuss his means.”

Robbie nodded in agreement. “Medical knowledge. Blood knowledge. Virus. He was working with Dean in the cryo lab too. Remember? And Dean said something about someone messing up the recipe or something.”

“Formula.” Dean corrected. “And Robbie’s right. Jason has all the medical knowledge and means as far as that go.”

“And.” Joe added. “The time machine. Especially with the new power supply, he could make trips back without notice. And here’s one thing for all of you to think about. When Robbie and Frank went to the Garfield project to get into the cryo-lab, soldiers and guards were waiting for them. Almost like they were set up. Someone tipped them off. Could have been Jason.”

Henry, as usual seemed so excited. “Oh that’s good Joe. And I lost a piece of my hair that day, remember. That bullet went and sailed right by me and nearly . . .” Henry saw the looks he was getting. “Nearly . . . it’s not a ripple in time comment Joe.”

“I know. It’s a lame comment. O.K., Jason?”

“Stays.” Robbie answered without looking up.

“Stays.” Dean reiterated.

“Goes.” Henry snickered at the glances. “Kidding. Stays.” He took a second to laugh at himself. “O.K., Joe. Your turn. Give your theory about yourself.”

Joe prepared his notes. Joe readied himself to speak and as Joe’s mouth opened, there was a knock at Joe’s office door. “Come in.”

“Aw!” Henry whined. He turned to see Ellen. “El, you put us in a commercial break.”

So nervous Ellen seemed. “I’m sorry.” Ellen rubbed her arms as she stepped in closing the door.

Joe looked up to her. “What’s wrong?”

“I uh . . . I know you guys have this meeting. But I have my nerve up and I need to say something and I need to speak to Robbie. Can I?”

Dean rested his notes on his lap and watched Ellen bounce a little. He wondered why she was so nervous.

“Do you need to leave with him?” Joe asked.

“No.” Ellen shook her head drastically. “I want to do this now. In front of all of you so there are no questions asked later. O.K.?” She turned to Robbie. “I have to tell you something.” She cleared her throat and looked only at him. There was a certain quiver to her voice. Ellen actually trembled. “I’ve known you since you were a kid. We’ve uh . . . we’ve known each other a very long time. And Frank, Frank was very proud of you. He had always said that if something should happen to him, he wanted you to take care of his family. Take care of me.” Again Ellen cleared her throat. “And . . . I’ve been through so much in my life, more so recently. I just want to stop. O.K.? I want to stop. I want to live a stable life. I want to just . . . stabilize. We’re really great friends and always have been. We never fight. Ever. I love you. And if you would. I would be honored if you would just end this all with me . . . and . . . Will you . . . will you marry me Robbie?”

Robbie's eyes widened and he stood up.

Dean's heart sunk and his notebook fell from his lap as he too stood up. "El, what are you . . ."

Ellen held up her hand to Dean keeping her eyes on Robbie. "Will you."

Henry nearly fell over. "No. Robbie you can't do this. El! No."

"Robert." Joe said his name calmly.

Robbie looked around at them. He bit his lip. "Wow." He let out a breath.

"Robert." Joe said with such warning.

Robbie raised his eyebrows. "Sure El, I'll marry you. Thanks."

"No, Thank you." Ellen tip toed up and kissed him. "Sorry I interrupted." She hurried from Joe's office.

There would have been silence had it not been for Henry knocking over the chair he missed when he went to sit.

Joe stared at Dean's expression. So confused. So lost. He saw Robbie move to the door. "Robbie, what are you doing?"

"Dad." Robbie reached for the knob. "Can we finish this later or tomorrow. Thanks. I have to talk to Ellen" He opened it up, walked out, closed the door, opened it and popped his head back it. "Um to clarify that. My fiancé" So wide and shitty Robbie grinned and removed his head from the door bringing it closed.

Joe tossed his papers in the air. "I give up." He saw the 'need answer' looks from Henry and Dean. "Don't look at me. I'm just as shocked as the both of you." Joe sat down in his desk chair. He rubbed his eyes harshly. "Oh boy."

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Binghamton, Alabama

Something told UWA soldiers, Kyle, Link, Jeff and Ted, the footsteps they heard were not good ones. Sitting on the floor of the room they were held, they looked up when the door opened. Four Society Soldiers, armed, walked in, Lt. Merrick behind them. No words were spoken as Lt. Merrick emerged forward. He only walked up to Ted, extended his revolver, pulled back the hammer and fired one, single shot into Ted's forehead. With the splattering of blood outward like a burst water balloon, and the shocked cries of the UWA soldiers, Lt. Merrick with a calm look to him, put away his revolver and walked from the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

It was so obvious to the four man scouting party of the UWA that they had stumbled onto something. Less one man who went back to Bowman for supplies, they rode in on their horses into what definitely looked like a temporary camp. Dismounting and searching about. Long wooden pegs left on the ground, holes for them, remnants of several campfires long burned out and . . . bandages. They were cloth, brown stained and hardened and they were tossed into a brush area. Sgt. Doyle had wandered into the trees, deep in thought and deep in search. And had his foot not hit against it, he would have never spotted it. Slowly he bent down to the canvass bag. Cautiously he opened it. As he checked out the contents he heard the call of his name.

“Sgt. Doyle. We found something!”

Grabbing the bag, Sgt. Doyle left the woods and walked to the camp where the call came from. He spotted one of his men. “What do you have?”

The soldier walked nearer to Sgt. Doyle he handed him a UWA patch. “Torn from the clothing sir. Just like the Captain told us to do if ever taken.”

Sgt. Doyle took the patch. “Then they had our men here. And I found something myself. Right now we need to canvass the area for clues to which direction they went.” The Sergeant spoke to his team. “Mark where we are at and we head on home. Job accomplished for now.”

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Beginnings, Montana

Though they lived together, and at that moment in the evening, in the huge kitchen getting dinner ready, Ellen and Dean were miles apart.

“Excuse me.” Ellen reached around him for some plates.

“I’m talking to you. Can you respond please.” Dean cut up vegetables for a salad.

“Nope.”

“This is bullshit El.”

“What is? You don’t want to do the vegetables? Tell you what, I’ll do that, you watch the pasta. You know the noodles that Andrea makes have to be watched.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Dean cut hard with the knife, slamming it against the cutting board. “Ellen.” Dean set down the knife and pulled her back. “Look, games gone on long enough. O.K.? I get the point?”

“What are you talking about?”

Dean paused before saying anything. “This little charade you and Robbie set up.”

“Charade.” Ellen nodded. “You think I set up a charade with Robbie for your benefit?”

“Yes.”

“For what purpose?” Ellen questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“For the purpose of me seeing that you will marry someone for the ‘Frank’ plan, even if it’s not me.”

“Let me tell you something Dean.” Ellen stepped to him. “I won’t marry just anyone. O.K.? And I asked Robbie for the exact reasons I gave. I did not. Did not set that up with him for your benefit so don’t flatter yourself.”

“So you’re really going to marry Robbie?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Why?” Ellen asked.

“El.” Dean stepped to her. “Look.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Are you doing this to get me to change my mind about marrying you? Because . . .”

“No.” Ellen stepped back. “I don’t need to change your mind. I changed mine already.”

“That fast. You stitched your feelings that fast?” Dean asked with edge.

“No. I switched who I’m going to have a marriage with that fast.”

“People will see right through it El. They’ll see it’s not real.”

Ellen grabbed the plates and walked from the kitchen. “Then I guess I’m going to have to make it real. Aren’t I?”

“How serious are you?”

Ellen slammed the plates. “I’m dead serious Dean.”

“Robbie Slagel. Of all people you’ll marry Robbie Slagel.”

“What’s wrong with Robbie?”

“For one thing, it’s Frank’s brother.”

“And of all people in this community for me to marry. If I marry anyone, who do you suppose Frank would want that to be?” Ellen didn’t get an answer. “Dean, this conversation is over. O.K.?” Ellen walked back to the kitchen

“You got me.” Dean followed her. “You win. If you want me to say it, I’ll say it. I don’t want you to marry Robbie. O.K.? I don’t.” Dean stepped closer to her. “Please El.” He brushed his lips against hers. “Can we please stop fighting. I can’t take it. It’s driving me nuts. Please.”

“We’ll stop fighting.”

Dean hugged her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Ellen kissed him quickly. “It’s not good for the kids anyhow.”

“No it’s not. I’ll get them for dinner. How’s that?”

“Sounds good.” Ellen turned off the stove. “Oh and Dean.”

“Yeah?” Dean stopped on his way out of the kitchen.

“Thank you for saying how you feel.”

“You’re welcome.” Dean smiled.

“But uh . . . I’m still marrying Robbie.”

The smile fell from Dean’s face.

Bowman North Dakota

Hal shouldn't have been disappointed. His man was only returning for supplies and he was aware of that. But something in Hal wanted to hear more, like perhaps they found a clue to the whereabouts of his five missing men. But nothing. The only word the returning man gave was that they had made it nearly across South Dakota. Nothing was to be found. That was the second supply scout to return and the second that delivered empty news. Hal dreaded the thought of having to cross the 'central border' as he called it. If they did that, they were leaving safer territory. But Hal knew if it had to be done, it would. And maybe the next day's light would breed better news. For that, Hal could only hope and pray.

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Beginnings, Montana

Seldom did Robbie ever show true anger and frustration. In his actions and in his voice, Robbie showed them to Joe. His face was a slight shade of red and his voice was edgy boarding on a high tone as his hand cut through the air. "What is your problem with this Dad? Huh?"

"You can not do this." Joe's hand came down hard on Robbie's table. "You hear me?"

"I don't think it's your place to say anything." Robbie took a stand with his father. He rarely ever did that.

"Not my place? Goddamn it Robbie, this is Ellen we're talking about. This was your brothers wife. Don't you think you're giving new meaning to the phrase keeping it in the family?"

Robbie's top lip twitched as he bit his tongue on what he wanted to say. "Look. Drop it Dad, O.K., I'm marrying Ellen."

Joe glanced his eyes to Jess who was in the livingroom, and knowing how much Jess knew, Joe didn't have to mince words with his son. "Look, I'm not stupid. I wasn't born yesterday. I know you and I know Ellen. I saw through that little act in my office. Dean may question it. Henry may be fooled. I certainly was not."

"All right." Robbie raised his voice. "So what if that's the case. *If*. But what's the big deal about it."

"How in the hell is Frank going to react when he finds out you married Ellen?"

"How is he going to react if he finds out she married Dean? It's the best way and I'm doing this."

"God Robbie." Joe shouted. "The whole principal of it is wrong. Wrong."

"No, it's right. Frank would rather have her marry me." Robbie spoke with emotions. "And I'm the best one to do this. I'm taking care of her until he returns."

"And then what?" Joe questioned.

"Excuse me?"

“Then what?” Joe’s voice softened. “Are you graciously going to step aside when it’s all said and done. Are you going to say, ‘Here Frank, here’s Ellen.’?”

Robbie moved to the livingroom. “I’m leaving.”

“No you aren’t leaving!” Joe followed him. “In your mind you know damn well this is a facade you and her came up with. But in your heart Robbie, you want it to be real. You always have. How are you going to be when Frank comes back and you get crushed!”

“I’m not going to get crushed. I’m too smart for that.”

“Are you?” Joe asked.

“Yes. I know what we have to do , I know how it has to be done. I know how we have to act. And trust me Dad, if I get caught up in it then that’s my own fault now, isn’t it?”

“You’re going to.” Joe spoke fatherly.

“Yeah, well, probably. But I’ll deal with it.” With his final words, Robbie left.

Joe stared at the closed door. “He’s going to marry her, isn’t he?” He looked to Jess.

Jess stood up from his seat on the couch. He laid down his book. “I think Robbie’s a smart man and I don’t think . . . I don’t think you should worry.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I don’t think Dean will let it get to that point.”

Joe turned his head back to the door. “Yeah, but what of Dean doesn’t have a choice. What if my son doesn’t give him a choice?”

^^^

Reviewing notes from the week on the pneumonia cases that finally were showing signs of improving, Dean sat in his little office at home. The small window behind him was open a bit. It carried in the cool autumn air, it carried in other things. Dean could have shut the window, but he didn’t. The voices that flowed through the window were informative. They were Ellen’s and Jenny’s. He worked as he eavesdropped, he shouldn’t have, but he did.

“Ellen, I’ll say it again. This is such a great porch.”

“Yeah, I’m in the rich section of town.”

“Can I ask you something about what I heard today?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about Robbie.”

There it was. It was the conversation Dean had been waiting for. His fingers moved slower and he zoomed in more. Surely Ellen would give some hint on how real this marriage was.

“What about Robbie?” Ellen asked.

“I heard . . . I heard you’re going to marry him.”

“You aren’t going to lecture are you?”

“No.” Jenny answered softly. “I’d like to know why? I mean, isn’t it sudden? I’m sorry. I’m intruding.”

“No. Maybe if I explain to you, then if you hear anyone talking, you can be my explanation to them.” Ellen took a long pause. “See I know it’s soon

after what happened to Frank. But so much has happened in my life. So much. Brian. Frank. What happened to me. And this house is a fresh start. This house made me see I want stability. I want to change how I've been living as best as I can. I want to stop and just try to be as normal as possible in the screwed up world. And Frank always said he wanted Robbie to take care of us."

"Everyone is going to think that you're just marrying Robbie because of what Frank wanted."

"Yeah, I'm sure. But I love Robbie. He's my friend. And I'll tell you. I'm going to try to make it work. He'll be good to me. I know that."

"What about Dean?" Jenny asked.

"Dean will never marry me or take that chance with me. I gladly would have given Dean the chance to make my life normal. But I want a commitment. One he can't give. Won't give."

"What is wrong with him and Henry." Jenny snapped. "My God. Commitment? Most men would love to have a commitment with a woman. They both have a chance and neither will take it. Well, perhaps Robbie may be a fresh start and a new direction on a road you should take."

"Perhaps you're right."

Dean lifted the keyboard from his lap and laid it on his desk. Jenny was wrong. Robbie wasn't the right direction Ellen should take. If she would just bide her time, Dean would give her all the commitment she needed. And like it or not, he walked from his office to tell Ellen that.

Out of the kitchen into the diningroom, Dean approached the open front door. As he stepped to the screen door he saw Robbie walking.

"Hey El." Robbie stepped to the porch railing laying his hands on it, then resting his chin on his hands. He looked innocently through the tops of his eyes at Ellen. "Can I steal you for a while?"

Ellen looked at Jenny. "We're kind of talking Robbie."

Jenny waved her hand out. "Oh, I should be going anyhow. I have a class to plan for tomorrow." She stood up. "Great talking to you Ellen."

"Same here."

"Night." Jenny stepped by Ellen and off the porch. She waved one more time before leaving.

Ellen saw Robbie raise his head some. "What's wrong." Robbie stared behind her and Ellen turned to see Dean in the doorway.

"Dean?" Robbie asked. "Do you mind if I steal El for an hour. I wanna take a walk with her."

Dean couldn't answer. He felt the words, but they were thick in his throat. He wanted to tell him, 'no Robbie, I'd rather you not. I need to talk to her.' But he didn't. Dean shook his head and so much as gave his blessing.

"Thanks." Robbie smiled, extending his hand to Ellen and taking hers.

Ellen looked back once more to Dean as she walked hand in hand with Robbie away from the porch. Dean still said nothing. He just watched them fade away.

^^^

"Smaller." Danny stated to Henry. Though every light was on in Henry's house they had two extra table lights on in the diningroom as they

worked. Electrical wires and such spread out all over the place.

“Smaller?”

“Smaller.”

“How much smaller does it have to be?” Henry asked. “This is small. I can’t go much smaller. Can I?” He held up something about the size of a match book.

“It has to be able to be concealed.” Danny told him of the box. “Something like that can be seen or lost. Then we’re screwed.”

“What if we just put the tracking device in something else.” Henry suggested. “Like James Bond would do with a pen.”

“Still we can lose it. It has to be smaller. Robbie wants these to be able to track our men when they go out incase something happens to them. I’m working on the tracker itself, you’re supposed to be working on the tracking. If you can’t do it . . .”

“I never said I can’t do it.”

“You’re acting like you can’t do it.”

“I can do it I just need to think and right now I’m not thinking.” Henry scratched his head. “And doing this for Robbie makes it worse.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s marrying Ellen.”

“What!” Danny spoke loud and then laughed. “When did all this go down?”

“Today.” Henry said as he sulked. “El proposed to him. Gave some story about Frank wanting him to take care of El and the kids.”

“And Dean didn’t put his foot down?”

“Dean was as shocked as I was.” Henry said.

“Wow. Robbie and Ellen getting married.” Danny shook his head with a wide grin. “Gees, Henry sorry. I guess you can kiss any chance of an understanding with El, away huh?”

“No.” Henry answered quick. “I had an understanding with Robbie once. He owes me.”

“Me too.” Danny started working again.

“What do you mean Robbie owes you?”

“Oh yeah. I have two favor slips from him signed.” Danny nodded. “They can always come in handy.”

Henry dropped the screw driver. “I need a break. You need one?”

Danny nodded. “Social hall?”

“Where else?” Henry tossed his hands up and moved to the door.

“Bowling alley this time next year.”

“Joe won’t allow it.”

“Bet me.” Danny said.

“I’ll bet you.”

“Ten work hours.”

“Your on.”

Danny opened his hand and motioned it out. He saw how miserable of a mood Henry was in and Danny was going to do everything in his power to get him out of that bad mood. Even if it meant sending him into an irritated one.

Binghamton, Alabama

Early to bed. Early to rise. Makes a man healthy, wealthy and annoyed if he gets awoken from it. And that was exactly how George felt at the steady thumping at his door. He grumbled wanting to get some rest. Needing desperately to get some sleep. And though it was only nine at night. He really wanted to be slumbering. Patting down his hair that stood on edge, and wearing boxer shorts and a tee shirt, George made his way to the door. "This better be good." George said as he opened it looking at the soldier who stood there.

"Dr. Morris said to call for you. The Beginnings man is awake."

Like a bright spotlight coming on, George's face lit up. "Tell Dr. Morris to say nothing to him I'm on my way."

"Yes sir."

George slammed the door and excitedly clapped his hands. Like a kid George ran all the way to his room. This was a moment he had been waiting for. Frank's expression when he saw George.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Sitting with a cigarette in one hand, Joe reached across the bar and lifted a bottle. He poured a drink, set it down and winked at 'Sam' the mannequin. "Thanks Sam. I'll give you a tip next time."

Jason who was sitting next to Joe, grabbed Joe's glass and pulled it away from Joe. "One too many."

"Give me that. Hell that's only my second." Joe's eyes shifted across the social hall. He could see Johnny shooting pool. Joe shook his head when he also saw Bev. She sat in a chair doing nothing but watching Johnny.

Jason leaned to Joe. "Looks like the little vixen has her eyes on your Grandson?"

"Christ if they could be anymore on him he'd be wearing them."

Johnny motioned his head to Cole, then to the ball. "Eight ball off the bank, corner pocket." Johnny leaned over the pool table, revved back his stick and took his shot. "My game."

"You're an ass. I refuse to play with you anymore" Cole told him.

"Sore loser." Johnny joked, turned around to see Bev standing before him.

"Johnny." She spoke his name soft. "You have a great body."

Johnny bit his bottom lip, raised one eyebrow and handed her his pool stick. "Put this away for me. Thanks." He sniffed loudly, pulled up the waist of his baggy Levi's, turned away and walked toward Joe. A shitty grin graced his face. "Hey Pap."

"Johnny." Joe sipped his drink. "Don't look now, your slave is running this way."

Johnny smirked and mouthed the words. 'Watch.'

Bev slipped up to Johnny. "Hi Johnny. I was wondering if you're done."

If you'd like to . . .”

“Bev.” Johnny stated her name while pointing to his temple. “I distinctively remember someone . . . snapping at me this morning in distribution? Was that you?”

“I really apologize for that. Can I make it up to you. Have a drink or something?”

With such arrogance, Johnny shook his head. “Nah.”

“But . . .”

“Bev.” Johnny laid his finger on her mouth. “If I want to deal with you, I will. I’m talking to my grandfather now.”

“But . . .”

“Bev.” Johnny motioned his head backwards. “Why don’t you sit down. If I join you. You got a deal. If not. Oh well.”

“All right.” Bev smiled at Johnny and walked over to a table. She sat down, crossed her legs and stared at Johnny.

Johnny looked quickly at her then Joe. “I’m out of here.”

“You’re leaving her?” Joe asked with a snicker. “Johnny, you are an asshole.”

“Yep. But you love me.” Johnny grinned widely, grabbed hold of Joe and kissed him on the cheek. “Love you Pap. Night.” He gave a swift pat to Joe’s back, nudged into Jason and walked out the door.

Joe watched as Johnny left. He smiled and shook his head then turned serious when he saw Henry and Danny walk in. “Just the guy I wanted to see tonight.”

Jason looked. “Danny?”

“Henry.” Joe stood up. Henry didn’t look like he was in his usual mood. “Henry my boy.”

“Hey Joe.”

“What’s wrong?” Joe asked.

“Just thinking and Danny and I have been working on something for hours. I needed a break.”

“And I needed to talk to you. Got a minute?”

“Sure.” Henry shrugged.

“Care to walk outside?”

“O.K.” Henry saw Danny getting their drinks. “I’ll be right back Danny. As horrible as this sounds. Talk to Jason.”

Jason leaned down into his drink, calmly raised his hand with a shoot of the middle finger and he sipped.

They stepped out side, Henry and Joe. Both men walked slowly up the street, both had their hands in their front pockets.

“Henry.” Joe spoke serious. “Things have been bad.”

“What do you mean.”

“I try to put up this front, but . . . Frank has me down. Really down.”

“I understand that. Me too.”

“And, there’s a lot to deal with lately. A bunch of runs are going out. This suspect shit. Savage attacks more frequent. The society. Distribution. Too much work, not enough people to distribute it to. I have a lot of Frank on my mind along with a lot of everything else.”

“Well Joe, just tell me what you want me to do. O.K., anything you

need for me to take for you, I will. You know that. Just tell me, you don't even have to ask."

"I know." Joe laid his hand on Henry's back. "I do want you to take something for me."

"What's that?"

"The leadership position."

Henry stopped walking. "Joe I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm no leader Joe and you know it."

"Henry. You were voted on by this community to take the reigns. Your fairness is what decided that. You can be level headed when you need to be. And I need the break. I need to have a little pressure off of me, even for a little while."

"So you're not retiring fully."

"Well from the leadership position yes. I'm stepping down to your position. If you can't handle it or if there's trouble and you need me to take the wheel. I will. But for the time being, I'd rather not have full responsibility. I need some time to pass before I can think of resuming my position."

"It's a rash judgement Joe and you know it."

"Yep." Joe nodded. "It is. My oldest son died Henry. My kid. The same kid that started this whole place with me. I can't function right with him so on my mind. And I'll help you every step of the way. I will answer any questions you have and I will show you exactly how this place runs. O.K.?"

Henry reluctantly nodded his head. "You'll be back. I'm not keeping this position for ever. I'm too young to be old right now and this position will make me old."

"You'll do fine." Joe laid his hand on Henry's cheek. "I just want you to be the first to know so you aren't shocked when I make an announcement at the community meeting tomorrow."

"When . . . when will it be official?" Henry asked.

"Two weeks." Joe answered. "Now let's . . ."

Henry saw Joe's eyes shift. "What's wrong?"

"Robbie and Ellen."

Henry turned around to see Robbie and Ellen walking hand in hand toward the living section. "Aw Joe, why is that happening?"

"I don't know Henry. But I wanna talk to him so more. First, let's you and me have a drink."

"Sounds good."

"A silent celebration before your 'Joe' training."

"Oh Boy."

Joe laughed as he led Henry into the social hall. "Think of how much you and I will bond over the next couple of days."

Danny held up darts when he saw Joe and Henry return. "Henry. Wanna play. Maybe it will take our mind off our work."

"Yeah." Henry grabbed a drink and joined Danny.

Danny stopped in his move to the dart board. "Wanna take on the old guys?" He pointed to Joe and Jason who looked like to barflies at the bar.

"That's not even a challenge." Henry stated. "But, sure why not. Hey Joe! You guys wanna play us?"

Joe looked at Jason twitching his head at Henry and Danny. "Care to

take on the challenge of our Asian community.”

“Joe come on, that’s not even a challenge.”

“We’ll take it easy on them.” Joe grabbed his drink and stood up. “Let’s throw the first game then get them to bet something really big and kill them.”

Jason snickered, he liked that idea. And he thoroughly enjoyed the arrogant laughs of Danny and Henry as he totally missed the dart board on his first throw, knowing full well his mind was thinking up things he wanted from the wiry pair.

^^^

Very seriously, Dean stared in his cup of coffee as if answers would somehow float up to the surface of the cream he had added. His hands gripped the cup. Occasionally he would look to Jess who sat with him.

“Look at your home Dean. Look.” Jess spoke so serious. “My God, you have it all. A home, a woman, kids. This is the perfect Ozzie and Harriet set up. Why are you being so dumb about this.”

“I told you.”

“O.K.” Jess said. “You told me your reasons. What makes you so sure that Ellen is going to go through with the annulment after its said and done with?”

Dean chuckled in ridicule. “Jess, you’re new here. Trust me it’s the same old cycle. If you realized how many times I have gotten wrapped up in her and lost her to Frank, you wouldn’t say that.”

“But from what I understand, that hasn’t been the case recently. And I’m talking before I arrived and before all of this went down.”

“Why do you care?” Dean asked. “Why are you so concerned with this?”

“I’m concerned with Robbie. Dean, when everybody else treated me like an Alien because I was once a member of the society, Robbie did not. He saw who I was and he befriended me and trusted me. That means a lot. I want to be trusted. And You can say I’m indebted to him. He took me in, he shares his home with me. We’re friends. And I’m seeing my friend, no matter if this marriage is real or not, I’m seeing him getting involved.”

“It doesn’t mean anything when it comes to Frank. Trust me. Ellen chooses Frank.”

“Oh does she?” Jess asked with arrogance. “What about Henry? The third party. From the story Jenny gave me, Henry was a shoe in. Henry could have had Ellen had he not been so stupid. Wanna know why? Third party syndrome. No more pulls between you and Frank. Relationship settled with Henry. And how do you know, that this so called friendship between Ellen and Robbie can’t blossom? How do you know she just may not have that third party syndrom with Robbie. Or . . . Things may just actually work. There’s a chance on that. You know that.”

“I know that.” Dean said.

“Is that a chance you’re willing to take? Robbie will treat her like a queen . They never fight them two. Ever. And you may just end up losing a chance you’ve wanted for a very long time.”

“Yeah, but it’s not time for that chance, nor are the circumstances right.”

“Make them right. Make it the time. Do something about this. Whether Robbie believes it or not it will tear him and Frank apart if he marries Ellen. Real or not. Trust me, there is nothing worse than a woman coming between two brothers. I know.”

“Been there?” Dean asked.

“You can say that. Robbie loves Frank. It will kill him if he doesn’t have Frank as his brother.. Robbie will go on if he doesn’t have Ellen as his wife.”

“I think we’re worrying too much.”

“Do you?” Jess asked.

Both of them turned their heads to the window when they heard Ellen and Robbie’s voices nearing.

Ellen stepped to her porch. “I’ll talk to Joe, then I’ll talk to Rev. Bob about our marriage classes.”

“Sounds good.”

“Thanks for the walk, Robbie it was nice.”

“Well for visuals it works and . . .Well.” Robbie’s hand rested on Ellen’s hand. “I liked it. El, can I talk to you before you go in?”

“Sure.”

“Um . . .” Robbie ran his hand over the top of his head in nervousness. “O.K., I know why we’re doing this. You know why we’re doing this. Right?”

“Right.”

“Well. I know after Frank comes back we’re gonna annul this thing. But you and I get along really well. We do. And I promise, real or not, I’m gonna do real good with this. I’ll uh, I’ll treat you like I should.”

“Ah.” Ellen smiled. “Robbie, that’s sweet. Thank you.”

Robbie’s fingers played with Ellen’s hand. He stared at them. “And this is gonna sound stupid and you can yell at me for asking this. O.K.? But, this marriage . . . in this world, this may be the only time in my life I get to do this. Ever. I wanna know, and you can say no. But I would like to know that, if for the time being while we’re doing this, if not all of it can be an act. If . . . just for this opportunity for me, can we make it . . .” Robbie raised his eyes innocently. “A little real?”

“How real were thinking?” Ellen asked with some apprehensive.

“Well . . . this real.” Placing his hand on the front waist of her pants, Robbie pulled Ellen into him and kissed her. The hand that laid on hers glided up her arm to her neck and his other hand moved to her back. There they stood nearly face to face while Ellen was on that step. When he pulled from the kiss, he just stared for a moment. There were no words. Then Robbie started kissing Ellen again.

Heading out to talk to Ellen and Robbie, Dean and Jess stopped in the door and watched. They watched the long kiss, soft, on going between Ellen and Robbie. Heads turning from side to side in a slow intensity. They watched Robbie’s hands move on Ellen’s back to her hair, feeling her tenderly, holding her close, touching her face and not letting go.

Jess turned to Dean. "You were saying?"

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Binghamton, Alabama

George had to prepare. He wanted to look official when he arrived at the hospital to see Frank. The last thing he wanted Frank to see was a man who just climbed out of bed, half asleep. So George combed his hair and even shaved his five o'clock shadow. Fully dressed. In a nice shirt and dress slacks George walked into the hospital. Dr. Morris waited for him at the old nurses station.

"Doctor."

"President Hadly." Dr. Morris looked pleased.

"He's awake?" George asked with some excitement.

"Yes, sir he is. He's sitting up in bed. Feels fine and . . ." He saw George walk away. "Sir, there's something you should . . ." George didn't answer. ". . . know." Dr. Morris dropped his hands, shrugged his shoulder and hurried to catch up to George.

George took a deep breath. Placed on his smug face and walked into Frank's room.

Frank sat in bed, the back of the bed raised. He looked up to George, raising his dark eyes upon George's entrance.

George smiled. "Hello Frank." He stepped closer. But something was wrong. Where was it. That angry Slagel expression. That jump from the bed and want to kill George look. George slowly stepped closer.

"Oh my God." Frank gasped.

George grinned. "That's right." So smug George looked.

"You're the president. Sir, forgive me for not getting out of this bed and saluting. I'm . . . a little with out clothing, sir." Frank spoke staring at George.

"What?" George said shocked. "What . . . what did you just say?"

"I'm without clothing, Sir." Frank lifted his sheet.

George's body shuddered in confusion. He blinked, he spun and he saw Dr. Morris. "What's going on?"

"Frank, we'll be right back." Dr. Morris spoke to Frank.

"Yes sir." Frank responded.

Dr. Morris took George into the hall. "I see you talked to him."

"What . . ." George pointed to Frank's room and scratched his own head. "What in the world is going on."

"Seems someone is looking out for you. Frank's doing well. He's strong. A little confused. And . . . he has amnesia."

George gasped in laughter. "He what?" He covered his mouth. "Shit."

"Yep. We can't determine how much he has lost in his memory. We wanted to give him another day before bombarding him with questions. But he definitely knows he was in the United States Army."

"How long will he be like this?" George whispered as he looked into Frank's room.

"Could be days, weeks or forever."

George clenched his fist with excitement. "This is great. We wanted

Frank's training, Frank's mind, without Frank attitude.”

“Looks like you may have it.” Dr. Morris said.

“Excellent. Excellent. Excellent.” George gloated. “All right. Treat him good. Treat him with respect, but tell him, nothing. Let me work on that tonight. Got it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good job.” George gave a swift light punch to Dr. Morris' arm. He chuckled when Dr. Morris rubbed the spot. “See you in the morning.” Grinning George popped his head in Frank's room. “Son, I'll be back in the morning. We'll talk.”

Frank nodded. “Thank you sir.”

George snickered as he stepped back in the hall pointing to the room. “Did you hear that. Ha-ha!” He rubbed his hands together. “See you in the morning Doctor.” Smiling widely, George moved with a quick pace down the hall, doing skip of excitement as he did so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

September 10

Beginnings, Montana

O.K.! Joe thought, *What did I do?* Joe was a smart man, the slamming of his breakfast plate by Andrea was a less than subtle way to tell him she was upset. He peered through his glasses down to his eggs that scatter across his just tossed plate.

SLAM! SPLASH! Down went Joe's coffee. Another slam brought Andrea seated with her breakfast at the table.

Very serious, Joe folded his hands and looked at Andrea. "Something wrong?"

So high pitched Andrea spoke as she grabbed the salt and fanatically salted her eggs. "Well. If you must know."

"Yes."

"You."

"What did I do?" Joe asked.

Slam! Joe groaned and watched particles of salt spilled. "That's bad luck Andrea."

"So is not telling your wife everything."

"Excuse me."

"I was not sleeping last night Joe Slagel. I heard your little conversation with Henry."

"So." Joe started to eat.

"So? You're retiring. When were you planning on telling me this?"

"This is what you're upset about?" Joe asked.

"Yes."

"Just wanted to know." Joe continued to know.

"Joe Slagel! I am upset."

"For no reason. Andrea, I'm retiring. So what. Why are you pissed about this."

"This community will fall apart. Fall apart." Her hands flew about. "If you don't run it Joe, what are we gonna do?"

"Andrea, I won't let it fall apart. O.K.? I need a break. Drop it."

"Drop it?" Andrea spoke with attitude. "I hope to high heavens you did not just tell me drop it."

"I did."

"Joe!"

"Andrea. Drop it!" Joe pointed his fork. "And this goes no further than this house until I make my announcement tonight. Got that?" he waited for an answer. "Got it?"

"Yes."

"Good." Joe started to eat. "Goddamn it Andrea, all this marital arguing and now my eggs are cold"

Andrea really could care less if Joe's eggs were cold. Her 'so what' attitude showed as she ate her own breakfast, ignoring the annoyed glances from Joe along with his grumbling.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

George whistled a happy tune as he walked out of his temporary home. An apartment which was set on the first floor of an old house. It was a great early morning and what made it even greater for George was that he knew what he had to tell Frank when he saw him. All planned out in his head, George moved down the street toward the hospital. He stopped mid street when he saw them. His soldiers escorting the UWA soldier out of one building and taking them to another. Interrogations. George would have to be there at them But first. Frank. So with a smile on his face and a wave of instigation to the UWA soldiers, George moved on.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Rinsing the soap from his face as he took a shower, Hal thought he heard the close call of his name by Sgt. Ryder. He removed his head from the water and heard it again. Faint but there. "Elliott?" Hal called out. "In the shower."

"Captain." Sgt. Ryder's voice came loud into the bathroom. "Sir our South Dakota team is back. Early and back."

The pipes squeaked loudly as Hal turned off the water. His arm emerged from the shower curtain, grabbing a towel. "Thanks." He spoke as he wrapped the towel around his dripping body and flew out of the shower. Leaving a water trail, Hal fled from his apartment, sliding on his steps as he raced down them and out the door into the street.

It was true. The men were riding into town the second Hal hit the sidewalk. Holding his towel on him, Hal grinned proudly as Sgt. Doyle stopped his horse. "You have news Sergeant."

"We do." Sgt. Doyle said after he saluted.

"Excellent. Let me get dressed and meet me in my office." Hal received saluted from the trail of men that followed Sgt. Doyle into town.

Just as Hal was about to turn to go into his apartment building again. He felt a coolness against his backside. Swaying his head with a look of imitation he glared at Craig who lifted the back of his towel just slightly.

"Cute." Craig grinned.

With a grunt and without no words, prior to seeking out clothing, Hal decided in his anger to chase Craig down the street. Towel and all.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“Retrograde amnesia” Dr. Morris explained to George before George went into Frank’s room.

“Retro what?”

“Retrograde. That’s what Mr. Slagel has. A very common form of amnesia in which following blood loss or trauma the patient experiences memory loss of events that transpired prior to. This memory loss can be of a day, a year of ones entire life. Mr. Slagel seems not to remember anything after the plague began.”

“Is that possible?” George asked.

“Very much so. When I asked Frank what he remembered last, he told me he was guarding a post outside of Chicago. There was rioting and an explosion. He barely remembers walking up in a medical tent but nothing after that. Im thinking one head trauma is the marking for the other in the memory department.”

George snapped his finger. “That’s right. I forgot about hat. Frank had a severe concussion or something. He slept through the plague.”

“He remembers nothing about it. He knows a plague hit and that is it.”

“Well then I guess it’s time for me to fill him in.” George said happily, “Excuse me.” He walked into Frank’s room. “Frank.”

Frank looked up from his breakfast. “President Hadly.”

George held out his hand. “Please, you and I are beyond that. You call me George.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” George pulled up a chair. “Son, Dr. Morris says you’re having difficulty remembering anything that happened over the past seven years.”

“No sir. I can’t remember.”

“Well then that’s why I’m here. See Frank, you and I are very good friends. Good friends. And I want you to feel free to ask away. I’ll try to fill you in the best I can.” George saw Frank thinking, getting read to ask and George went through the scenario in his mind. He had to get the story straight and keep it straight. Though Frank wasn’t the smartest person in the world, to George. even pre-plague, Frank was smart enough to smell something foul. And George was determined to keep that odor from him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Diligently trying was what Dean saw Ellen doing when he came home mid morning to surprise her to spend time alone with her. He smiled as he quietly walked in, setting his stack of folders down on the end table and clenching the rose Andrea allowed him to pick from the Miquel rose bush at Greenhouse three. Ellen didn’t even hear him as Dean snuck in. She desperately was trying to reach something placed on the top of the livingroom closet. Dean couldn’t help her, with the exception of getting a chair. But he decided against it.

He walked directly up behind Ellen as she reached up. Over her shoulder he glanced and at the same time, around her front to her nose, he

placed the rose. “Hey.” He smiled.

Ellen looked down at the rose, then shifted her eyes to Dean. “What are you doing home?”

“Taking advantage of an empty house and a big empty closet with you.” Stepping forward into the large closet, Dean moved Ellen inside and closed the door.

“Dean.”

Dean grinned, laid both his hands on Ellen’s face, moved her against the wall of the closet and kissed her. He kept on kissing her.

Ellen had to pull back in order to break from his clinging lips. “Dean stop.”

“Why?” He tried to kiss her again.

“Just stop. All right.” She slid by him, opened up the closet and stepped out.

“El.” Dean followed her. “I thought we weren’t fighting.”

“We’re not.”

“So what’s the problem?” Dean asked. “We’re alone. I left work to be alone with you.” He stepped to her. “When was the last time I did that?”

Ellen shifted her eyes and saw the stack of work on the table. “Yes, I see where your mind was.” she held up the rose and gave a brief smile. “Thanks for this. It’s nice.” She walked into the kitchen.

Dean’s hand went through his hair and down his face. He moved to the kitchen. “El, what’s the problem. Two nights ago you kick me out. Last night, I try . . .” He moved closer to her. “I try to scoot up next to you in bed and you moved to the edge of the bed. Come on.”

Ellen took a deep breath and walked to the sink. She placed the rose in a glass and filled it with water. “Dean, O.K., here it is. I’m marrying Robbie. Do you think it’s right that we . . . well, you know. It’s a little inappropriate. Right?” She turned off the faucet to hear Dean’s laughter. She spun around to face him.

“El. All right.” Dean caught his breath and smiled. “Enough. Games over. You’re cute.” He kissed her quickly, then shook his head with a laugh again. “You’re right. I was wrong. You’re not gonna marry Robbie. I’ll marry you.”

Ellen stared very seriously at Dean for a second. “Fuck you Dean. Fuck you.” She barged from the kitchen and stopped. “Marry you? And you had nerve to laugh at me.” She moved to the livingroom.

“El!” Dean raced after her. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.” She flung open the front door. “I’m marrying Robbie. And if he changes his mind tomorrow, I’m still not marrying you.” She ran out of the house.

Dean stood baffled in his empty home. His hand raised and dropped. “What did I say?”

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Bowman, North Dakota

With a look of serious and a cigarette clenched between his lips. Hal

stared at the UWA patch wedged between his index and middle fingers. “How close to central border?” Hal asked.

Sgt. Doyle cleared his throat before answering. “Ten miles sir. We went over and checked. The trucks definitely moved south.”

Hal laid down the patch. “So they were alive when they took our men. And you know as well as I do they probably moved more east. What else do you have? You said you found something else?”

“I did.” Sgt. Doyle laid the canvass bag on Hal’s desk. “I found this buried in the brush of the woods.”

Hal stood up, laid his cigarette down and opened the canvass bag. “Did you remove the things?”

“No sir. You don’t have to. Look for your self.”

On top of the bag was a white tee shirt. Blood stained. Hal removed it some to see the bullet hole in the shoulder. He looked at the collar of the shirt. No manufacturer tag. It was a hand made tee shirt. Well made. He shuffled the shirt some to expose the combat boots. Huge. He pulled one out and looked at the soles. New. He placed the boot back in the bag and then Hal saw the green color. Army green. Military work pants He didn’t pull those out he merely zipped up the bag. “Well,.” Hal breathed out. “I don’t think we need to ask who this clothing belongs to.” Hal sat back down. “All of this is Beginnings’ clothing. And I think we know this is the Beginnings man’s.” Hal set the bag on the floor.

Sgt. Ryder looked to Hal. “Is that enough?”

“Yes.” Hal nodded. “It’s plenty. First thing tomorrow we return these clothes to the man’s home along with a note I’ll write tonight.”

“Then it’s time?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Yes.” Hal answered. “This should show Beginnings we are serious. Our intentions are good. And it’s time that we join forces.” Hal folded his hands and brought them to his mouth. His mind immediately went to the letter he knew he would have to send by messenger along with the clothing. Clothing that Hal did not look at fully. Clothing that he should have. Because had Hal just pulled the military pants out of the bag entirely, he would have seen--like routinely done in the old world military--A name stitched above the back pocket of the pants. The name Slagel.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

At the same instant, Robbie, Joe and Dean all looked to Henry.

Henry felt the stares and looked up. “What?”

Joe held out his hand. “I just said we’re discussing me as a suspect. No comment?”

“No Joe go on.”

Dean noticed Henry’s unusual demeanor. Serious. “Henry, um . . . about this point you get irritating.”

“About this point . . .” Henry spoke very calmly. “I’m going to ask you Dean to refrain from saying anything. I’m not in a good mood.”

Dean gave him an odd look. “And you don’t think any of us are gonna

take advantage of your bad mood. Henry, you take advantage of ours.”

Again, staying calm, Henry spoke deeply and with a slight edge. “I’m asking you not to. O.K.?”

Joe interjected. “O.K. Let’s get to me as a suspect. My theory is . . .”

“Joe.” Henry interrupted. “Come on. This is stupid and a waste of time. You as a suspect?” He opened his notebook. “I think we should concentrate on the ones we have., Andrea, Rev. Bob, Jason, Bev, Cole . . .”

“And you.” Robbie pointed. “Let’s not forget you.”

“Joe.” Henry said.

Robbie laughed.

“Robert.” Joe scolded softly.

“What?” Robbie rocked in his chair. “We’re supposed to tip toe around Henry’s mood? Like I care. Every other meeting he comes in here yip yapping his mouth, driving us all insane, so now he’s not in the mood and we have to shelter his feelings. Right.”

“Robert.”

“I’m leaving.” Henry stood up.

Robbie waved his hand at him. “Sit your skinny ass down Henry. And get out of the mood.”

“Get off my back.”

“I’m not on your fuckin back.” Robbie yelled. “If I was on your fuckin back you’d know it.”

“Robbie.” Henry said strongly. “You of all people right now are the last person I want to speak to, let alone sit in a meeting with.”

“Too bad.”

“Fuck you.”

Robbie jumped up. “Fuck me? What the fuck did I do to you?”

“Robbie!” Henry yelled stern. “Sit down and don’t jump up at me. Your arrogance is the last thing I want to deal with.”

“I haven’t done shit to you.” Robbie bit his lip. “Don’t take that tone with me again. I’m warning you.”

“Don’t warn me.”

“Boys.” Joe called out cautiously shifting his eyes between the two standing men.

Robbie breathed deeply through his nostrils trying to calm himself. “What is your problem Henry.”

“You wanna know. You! I’m pissed because you’re marrying Ellen. It’s wrong.”

“Like I care what you think. What anyone thinks.”

“Well you should.” Henry stated.

“Bite me.”

Henry snickered in disbelief at Robbie. “Can you be any more of an asshole?”

“Yeah when I come over and nail your ass.”

“Try it.”

On those instigating words Robbie sailed forward and Henry, in a defensive anger, leaped at him too. Dean seeing the two men much bigger than him, jumped from the way of their entanglement. The second Robbie grabbed hold of Henry was the second Henry nailed him. Robbie’s returned the punch just as fast.

Joe sprang up. “Knock it off.” He flew to the two men, grabbing them before anymore harmful fists could be thrown. Clenching tightly to Robbie’s tee shirt he pulled him back, then Joe laid a flush hand to Henry’s chest shoving him some too. “What is this shit? Huh? You!” Joe pointed to Henry. “Sit down. And you!” He pointed to Robbie. “Take a walk. Cool down. We’ll do this another time.”

Robbie’s face was red. “I didn’t fuckin start this shit!”

“Take a walk!” Joe ordered. “Now!”

Running the back of his hand over the corner of his mouth, Robbie glared at Henry, grunted and stormed by the filing cabinet pulling a Frank by slamming his fist into as he passed it.

“Goddamn it!” Joe yelled as his office door closed. “It’s a family thing!” Taking a second to calm down, Joe returned to his desk. He looked at Henry who sat in the chair looking like a scolded child.

Since the outrage of the moment was over, Dean so stunned had a hint of laughter to his tone. “Well.” He cleared his throat seeing Joe stare so fatherly and angry at Henry. “I think I’ll uh . . .” He gathered up his notes that fell to the floor when he jumped up. “Leave.” Dean pointed to the door. “Joe let me know when we are doing this again.”

Joe only lifted his hand in acknowledgment and Dean left. When he did, Joe opened up his bottom drawer, pulled out a bottle of moonshine and slammed it on the desk. “Take a drink.”

“No Joe I don’t . . .”

“Take a goddamn drink!”

Nervous, Henry grabbed the bottle, took a drink, cringed loudly and set it down.

“Now.” The scold tone was there is Joe’s voice. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m . . .” Henry rubbed his eyes and huffed out a breath. “I am really sorry. This Robbie and Ellen thing is on my mind but Joe, it isn’t on my mind as much as this leadership thing.”

“Is this the reason for the bad mood.”

“Yeah.” Henry told him. “I won’t be able to handle it. I know it. Two, three problems happen at the same time and I’ll lose it.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes, Joe, I will.” Henry nodded. “I’ve done nothing but think about it since last night. What if I make a wrong decision. What if I screw up and Beginnings gets in trouble. What if . . .”

“What if. What if.” Joe mocked. “I don’t want to hear the shit. You got that? I don’t. Did I or did I not tell you I would help you.”

“Yes.”

“And then I will. I’m not letting you do this blind Henry.” Joe explained. “And I’m certainly going to help you even after I’m retired. So don’t let it stress you out. How far away will I be if there is a problem.”

“Not very?”

“Exactly.” Joe pulled out a cigarette. “Now, why don’t you and I start right now. O.K., tell me where all this pressure seems to be coming from about being a leader and I’ll see if I can help you through it.” He leaned forward with his elbows on the desk in a listening mode.

“Thanks Joe.” Henry said with such relief and he sat up straight. “I

think it all started when I was in the fourth grade. See I was chosen to be our art project group leader . . .”

Joe’s head fell forward to the desk.

^ ^ ^ ^

It had to be the sight of Ellen that set Dean’s mind off. More so it was the sight of Ellen talking to Reverend Bob, and Dean knew what she was talking about. Ellen smiled. Not good. And Dean failed to take her seriously. Bad move. He rummaged through his mind what needed to be said to her, yet every time since the disagreement hours earlier that Dean tried to talk to her about it, she switched the subject. When he asked why she did that, Ellen told him that she wouldn’t fight with him about anything and her and Robbie’s marriage was off limits to Dean.

It bothered him, but Dean had to wonder if he had placed himself in that position. He made his own bed and he knew it. And it was time to change that. Dean started to realize that had he just swallowed his pride, he wouldn’t have choked like he thought he was going to.

Robbie.

Ellen wouldn’t listen, maybe Robbie would. An option Dean was going to exercise.

After making it all the way into town, Dean made it all the way back up to the line of utility buildings. All the way to the end to Frank’s office, where he knew Robbie was at.

“Come in.” Robbie called out after Dean’s knock.

Dean opened the door. “Hey. Busy?”

“Nah, come on in.”

Dean walked in closing the door. “How’s the uh . . . lip?”

Robbie pulled at his lip. “Sore. Can you believe Henry?”

“No.” Dean walked up to the desk and sat down before Robbie. “You sure you aren’t busy?”

“Going over attack maps of where we were hit so I know where it’s safe for a run. Why? What’s up?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Sure.” Robbie set down the map he held and grabbed a cigarette. “Shoot.”

“It’s about Ellen.”

“O.K.” He lit his cigarette. “What about her.”

“Robbie.” Dean closed his eyes. “I love her. I have loved her for a really long time. We have a family together. A history. I guess . . . I guess what I’m trying to say is, I want to marry her.”

“You had a chance. You turned her down.”

“Yes, I know. I was wrong. And I’m coming to you hoping that you can help out. I want to ask you not to marry Ellen.”

Robbie stared at Dean for a long time. “I can’t do that.”

“Robbie come on. Yes you can.”

“O.K. I can. But I won’t.” Robbie said. “I want to do this.”

“It won’t be real. You know as well as I do as soon as Frank gets home

it . . .”

“It will be over yes.” Robbie stated calmly. “But at least I would have had it.”

“What?” Dean was confused.

“Dean, you’ve had Ellen a really long time. Yes. What have I had. Who have I had. No one. And it doesn’t look like it will happen unless we find a colony of about a hundred women.” Robbie folded his hands and leaned on his desk. “This is my only chance to have this and I don’t want to let it go.”

“So you’ll take my chance.”

“You had your chance.”

“Robbie I am asking you not to do this.”

“Dean, I’m telling you I am.”

Dean shook his head and stood up. “What about Frank?”

“What about him?”

“How is he going to react to you being married to Ellen?”

“A lot better than he’ll react to her being married to you.”

“You think?” Dean asked. “I don’t. You think he’ll share her with his brother? No. And he’ll be pissed. Really pissed. Ask yourself how are you going to be in a community this small where you’re at odds with you brother.”

“Won’t happen.”

“You are convinced of that.” Dean said. “Think about it.” Dean walked to the door and stopped. “And while you’re at it, think about this. I love her. I’m leaving Beginnings and I don’t know if I’ll even make it back. You. You’ll still be in Beginnings able to pick up the pieces. You’ll be spending time with the kids and Ellen while Frank and I are gone. You’ll be here. Your chance at this? This is my chance too Robbie. In my time frame I was never married to her. This is my chance to have that in my memory and it could be the last chance I ever have. Don’t take that from me. I am asking you to think about it. Please. Don’t take that from me.” In the moment of Robbie’s silence, Dean left the office.

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Binghamton, Alabama

“So you see Frank.” George explained to Frank who was now sitting in a chair. “Your father was killed by these people in Beginnings. Killed him in cold blood because he was trying to start up this world again with me. And these Beginnings’ people are the one who shot at you while you were on your way here. They’ve . . .” George sounded so emotional. “They’ve joined forces with another group and they are stopping the freedom of this country. Stopping us from growing. From protecting ourselves. My God we have forces growing overseas now. How long will it be before they want to claim this land to grow food? And if we’re a country divided, they walk right in.”

Frank looked so serious as he ran his hand across his goatee. “They killed my father.”

“Shot him yes.” George nodded.

“The only surviving member of my family was shot.” Frank closed his eyes. “What . . . what exactly do I do for you?”

“You train my men, because you’re the best. You train them to fight, to

shoot and to act. In this world Frank, you're pretty tough. A tough guy to bring down. In fact you're one of my top men in my military now."

"Really. Am I still a sergeant in this regiment?"

"Um . . . no." George shook his head. "You're a colonel."

Frank whistled. "Wow." He slowly stood up and walked to the window.

"You are one of the most dedicated men to my cause." George stood also and walked behind Frank. "You love your country. And you want with all your heart to bring it back."

"I can see me thinking that way." Frank stared out the window. "Where am I now?"

"A new camp we set up. Um . . . you and I. We designed it, in fact we're just getting it situated now."

"I suppose that's why I'm here?"

"Yes." George stood side by side with Frank. "You see we just started building the army a little over a year ago. So many men to train, not enough qualified men to train them. So the best forces move out trying to secure our country back. You train those ones. While the rest, well they are pretty pitiful."

"I've never trained a man pitifully." Frank snapped.

"Not you. Others have. So we decided these men here are going to be the elite force. Instead of you concentrating on building and training many armies, you decided to train the elite force here."

"How many men do I have to train here?"

"Three hundred and fifty."

"A staff? Do I have a staff?" Frank asked. "I'll need to meet with them and train them."

"Yes." George spoke fast. "And an office. Not situated yet, but getting there."

"Then I'd like to get started right way. No need to wait."

"Absolutely. As soon as Dr. Morris gives his O.K., we'll begin."

"Excellent." Frank turned from the window. "I'll get these men trained right for you George."

"You're the man to do it. This is going to be a major focus. We've started our labs here and we want this to be a major branch. You'll be in charge here after I leave."

"Thank you." Frank said.

"I'll let you rest. We'll visit some more tonight." George moved to the door. "And Frank. The men are very excited about meeting their new CO. You."

Frank gave a partial smile and a nod as George left the room. Frank refaced the window, folded his arms with a stern look and stared back out.

George smiled as he walked from the hospital room. Things were better and seemingly easier than he ever anticipated with Frank. They were working for George and at that moment, George felt as if he held it all in the palm of his hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Beginnings, Montana

In a quiet moment as if they were the only two in the social hall, Henry and Ellen huddled in a corner.

"El, tell me I can do this." Henry whispered.

"You can do this."

Slowly Henry breathed through his nostrils, looking over Ellen's head and to the front of the room where Joe and Andrea waited. "I'm a little scared. This is a big responsibility."

"You can handle it. I have every faith in you." Ellen laid her hand on his chest.

"You'll be there if I need you right."

"Always Henry."

Smiling a little, Henry leaned down to Ellen and kissed her softly. But his lips hadn't touched hers long before Robbie's voice interrupted.

"I take it I didn't miss anything?" Robbie asked.

Henry pulled back, closed his eyes and shook his head.

Robbie extended his hand. "Henry, I'm sorry we fought this morning."

Henry shook his hand. "Yeah, me too. I'm sorry too. And I'd better get going up there. They're ready to start." He laid his hand on Ellen's shoulder. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck." Her hand grazed his as he moved away. "Robbie? You guys fought? Is that where . . ." She touched his lips. "Frank will kill you if he finds out Henry nailed you."

"Yeah well I would have killed Henry. He was in a fucked up mood."

Ellen looked back to see Henry sitting at the table. "He's stressed Robbie. With Joe announcing the retirement tonight."

"Still." Robbie touched his lip. "It's still swollen."

"Does it hurt?"

"Nah I mean yeah. You can kiss it and make it better."

"I can, can I?" Ellen smiled at him and tip toed up to him, kissing softly his bottom lip. "There. Better."

Robbie grinned. "Much. Let's sit down."

Ellen followed Robbie to the seats. Most people were already seated while others chose to stand.

Ellen wasn't seated long when Dean sat on the other side of her.

"El." Dean whispered.

"Hey Dean."

"I'd like to talk to you after the meeting. I got Jenny to watch the kids and maybe you and I can be, well, alone. Can you?"

Ellen looked to Robbie. "I don't know. I don't think. No."

"El."

"Dean. What do you want to talk about.?" She asked.

"Us."

"Then no. O.K.? No." Ellen crossed her legs and looked away from Dean to Joe who stood at the podium.

Dean sat back in his chair. He may have missed the ball, but he hadn't struck out.

Joe gripped the edges of the podium as silence hushed over the room. "O.K." he sniffed once. "There's something I need to tell all of you this evening. I've led this community since we founded it over seven years ago. And I have loved every single minute of it. All of you are very important to me. Your lives . . . Your survival. I know I'm gruff. But . . ." Joe reached up and took off his glasses. He rubbed his eyes. "Right now I'm uh, I'm going through a pretty bad time. I know all of you can't see it, I don't let you. But if the truth be known. I'm pretty much dying here. My son . . . my son is gone. And a part of me just needs to deal with that right now. So . . . in order to do so, I have to release some of my responsibility. I want to work my division of distribution and runs. And . . . and serve on council. Two weeks from today, Henry will take over the leadership position of this community."

In a room where a pin could have been heard dropping, a sudden rumble of voices erupted.

Joe held up his hand. "I know this is a shock. But I need some time. I really do. I can't lead you properly if I can't lead you clearly."

Jenny raised her hand and then her voice. "Will it be permanent Joe?"

Joe shrugged. "Let's see how I do. I'm hoping to return." He smiled at Henry. "If Henry gives the position back up." Joe cringed a little, questions came flying at him. He couldn't make heads or tails out of them. "Lets . . . let's let Henry say something. But before he does, let me just tell you, thank you for making my work her something I lived for. Henry?"

Filled with nervousness, Henry switched places at the podium with Joe. "I believe . . ." Henry's words echoed and he closed his eyes. "I believe this is a sad day for Beginnings. No, in two weeks it will be even sadder. Joe is like our father. We look up to him. We trust him. We depend on him. I was reviewing some of the responsibilities that I would have." Henry whistled. "I served on council and hadn't a clue to what all Joe did. Crops? Recycling? Metal, paper . . . if it is a division, Joe over saw it. Now when I was in the ninth grade I had this shop teacher. His name was Mr. Dithers. Like the cartoon. Anyhow, I really liked him and he kind of took me under his wing. He was this good teacher. And he made me see, though I looked different then the other kids. I wasn't. Like a father. And he was in charge of after school activities. Well, January after Christmas break, I came back. Mr. Dithers did not. His wife had died and he needed some time. The substitute, yeah, he was good and I learned how to make a lot. He was young and he had Mr. Dithers when he was in school. But he wasn't Mr. Dithers. No one was or would be. But you know what? Two months later, Mr. Dithers came back. He used a part of his sabbatical to get his head straight. And when he did, he was better than ever. And I think, no I know, I'm just the substitute teacher here. Joe won't be far. He'll still help me out." Henry smiled at Joe. "It's gonna be rough while he's gone. Adjustment always is. But I want you to know, I'll do the best I can until Joe comes back. I think I'll do a good job because I learned from the best. And I'll encourage Joe to do what he needs to do in order to return as leader. Because let's face it, this place just isn't going to be the same without Joe running us." Henry stepped back from the podium, faced Joe and applauded him. When he did a loud burst of cheers began, and the community stood in ovation for Joe.

To Johnny Slagel it was the coolest thing. Something no one even noticed was there. But Johnny did. Popcorn. Johnny labeled Danny Hoi ‘the man’ for bringing it back. Danny stole the dried corn chicken feed and popped it. And now Johnny sat in the social hall, most of the crowd had weeded out. He had his legs propped up on the table as he tossed popcorn in the air and caught it with his mouth. He felt he burst kernel smooth against his tongue then Johnny almost choked when it fell into his throat because something else distracted him. A hand gently glided up his upper thigh and to his groin region. Johnny coughed, set down his legs and looked up. Bev was there. “Fuck.” Johnny stood up. ‘You almost killed me.’ he smacked himself in the chest and reached down to grab his drink. He took a long sip.

“I’m sorry.” Bev moved closer to him. “Let me make it up to you. Are you busy?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” Bev smiled trickling her hands down his chest. “Wanna go to my place.”

“Um . . .” Johnny placed his hands on his hips and looked around. “Tell you what. You go on, If I’m not there in ten minutes, start with out me.” Johnny started walking away and Bev followed him. “Bev, did I start something with you by complimenting you on your legs?”

“If you want to know, yes. I think that’s the first time I really noticed you. You’re so cute Johnny and strong.”

“Yeah.” Johnny grinned. “But I’m not really interested in you. So find someone else.”

“I always get what I want. I want you.”

Johnny laughed. “Guess what, it’s not happening.” Arrogantly, Johnny walked away.

Bev folded her arms and inhaled deeply. She spoke under her breath. “Wanna bet.”

He didn’t have the kids, Jenny did, and Dean spent most of his free time at the social hall that night, talking and watching Ellen. Waiting for an opportunity that just wasn’t coming. Ellen alone. Sipping a drink, something Dean rarely did, he stood up from the table and decided to wait no more. Perhaps he got his courage from the bit of whiskey he consumed. Whatever the reason, Dean decided that the ‘getting closer’ he saw Ellen and Robbie do, and ‘marriage’ was all going to stop, if it was the last thing he did.

“El.” Dean called her name softly as he approached her and Robbie.

“Hi Dean.” Ellen smiled as her hand laid on top of Robbie’s hand which rested on her leg. Robbie and Ellen sat close.

“I want to talk to you alone.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“I think you know.” Dean answered.

“If it’s about us. We’re not. Anything else, I’d be happy to.”

“We have to discuss us.”

“No we don’t.” Ellen shook her head.

“El, I have things I want to say to you.”

“You had your chance.”

“And you’re being ridiculous.” Dean told her. “I have to say something to you. Are you going to listen to me?”

“I’m sitting with Robbie.” Ellen glanced at Robbie.

“Then I’ll say it in front of Robbie.”

“Dean. I don’t think . . .”

“El, I want you to listen to me. O.K.?”

“Dean.” Ellen took a firm stand. “Now is not the time.”

“Now is the time!”

“Bullshit! We had time!”

“So make some more now.” Dean shouted back.

“I refuse to talk to you right now.”

“Oh yeah?” Dean snapped. “I refuse to have you ignore me.”

“Watch me.” Ellen turned away from him.

“No, El. Watch me.” Crash! With a fury, Dean sailed his drink glass against the side of the bar, the crashing glass caused an immediate hush across the room. “Now you will listen to what I have to say.” Dean spun his views. “And you Robbie, will take your damn hand off of her leg while I talk to her. Now!”

Robbie hid his snicker and withdrew his hand. He held both hands up. “Floors yours”

“What is this?” Dean asked with emotions. “Huh! Some sort of game to you. What the hell El? What the hell do I have to do to get you to talk to me. I’m not playing anymore. This shit has gone on long enough. And I am not about to stand around and let you marry Robbie out of some sort of honor to Frank. I won’t. I love you! *I* love you., I have loved you forever. And let me tell you something El. You either tell this man you won’t marry him or I swear to God I will do everything in my power to stop it. You hear me? If you think for one second I am going to chance losing you again, then you are thinking wrong!” Dean’s voice lowered. “I’m sorry Robbie. I am. I like you. You’re a great guy. But El and I we have a life. We have a family and we have a history. And damn it, the long road that we have taken is not going to be a dead end. I wished to God you would see that Robbie I do.” Dean moved closer to Ellen, his voice at a whisper. “I didn’t take you serious El when you said you were marrying him. I’m taking you serious now and . . . I’m scared.” He laid his hand on her face. “I don’t want to lose you. I want you to be my wife. I want to live the rest of my life with you. I always have. I said the time wasn’t right, the circumstances weren’t right. I was wrong. Any time to marry you is the right time. Marry me El. Marry me.” His lips moved closer to hers. “Tell me what you need me to do and I’ll do it. If you want me to get on one knee and beg you I will. I’ll do anything it takes, just tell me you won’t marry Robbie, you’ll marry me.”

So quiet Ellen was, so heavy her breathing too. Her eyes pulled from the lock Dean’s eyes had with hers. She shifted her glances to Robbie, then back to Dean. But Ellen said nothing.

How long had Dean waited in the ringing silent social hall for an answer. He waited and only received a stare. And then Dean realized he waited long enough. “Sorry.” He slid his hand from her face, stepped back and turned around. Slowly he made his way across the hall that still had many people.

Ellen and Robbie had locked their views on each other. They're expressions spoke the words neither one of them did. Robbie kissed Ellen on the cheek, smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

"Dean." Ellen stood from the bar stool.. "Wait."

Dean stopped near the door. He turned slowly around to see Ellen walking to him.

Small steps Ellen took, inching her way quietly to him through everyone that watched and waited with anticipation. "I'll . . ." Ellen moved right to Dean. "I'll marry you."

At that second every ounce of tension dropped from Dean's body and he exhaled loudly with a grin. His knees bent down in his relief and he grabbed hold of Ellen, lifting her some from her feet and he embraced her. They were the entertainment for the evening. Dean's victory was the people in the social halls. They clapped and cheered loudly. Dean felt Ellen's hands graze across his hair and to his face as he set her down. He kissed her. "Thank you." Dean delivered another kiss and he held her again. With Ellen tightly with in his arms, their faces pressed, Dean opened his eyes and raised them to Robbie mouthing the words 'thank you' while his eyes smiled in gratitude to him.

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Bowman, North Dakota

There was a little bit of static to the radio that evening as Hal listened alone in the police station. A small light lit the table he had a sheet of paper on. He stopped writing to listen to the transmissions, then he'd write again. He didn't get far into the letter. The date, the addressing to the Commander and Chief of Beginnings Montana. And just as Hal began to write the words, *Dear Chief* he heard the familiar sound of the chief over the radio. Hal paused.

"Well what is tracking showing?" The chief asked.

"Tracking is showing nothing."

"Well then we have to go with what tracking is showing."

"But I hear hooting."

"Are you absolutely sure someone isn't messing with you?"

"Positive."

"Maybe tracking is down. I'll get a team up there, we'll down the perimeter get the spot lights on. And let me get Danny out of bed to double check the system." The chief instructed.

"Wait."

"Wait?"

"Aw . . . never mind."

"What."

"Listen." There in the back ground was the faint sound of laughter.

"Forget it chief., Denny and Josh are pulling their teenage antics again."

"Christ. Tell that little son of a bitch to get his ass home right now before I chase him down and give him a reason to run away . . ."

Run away . . .

Dear Dad . . .

Hal's mind went back to a time he held a pen in his twelve year old hand. He looked to Robbie, eight who stood with a blue book bag. Tears streamed down his face.

"Robbie knock it off. Quit crying."

"I can't. I don't want to leave."

"We have to. We either leave or Dad kills us."

"But . . . but . . ."

"But nothing. Remember when you broke Dad's fishing rod? Huh? Was he happy? No. Did he yell. Yes. Well imagine how much he's gonna yell when he finds out we put a baseball bat through the television. I don't want to be around to hear it. Do you?"

"No." Robbie sniffled.

"It's better this way. Trust me. We'll be fine. I'm close to being a teenager. Now let me write this before dad get's home."

Dear Dad, I'm sorry to say but we had to leave home. Please don't worry about us, we'll be fine. We'll call when we're old in ten years. I have twenty-eight dollars and forty three cents, that should hold us over for a while. I'll take good care of Robbie. But we just can't live here anymore. Frank said he was going to kill us if we told on him about him breaking the television. The pressure is too much for us to live with. Goodbye. Hal and Robbie.

Hal carefully folded the note and placed it in an envelope. He set it on the key table by the door. "Let's go."

Gripping his blue book bag, Robbie grabbed Hal's hand and they walked from the house.

Hal chuckled a silent laugh as he ran his hand down his face thinking back. Remembering about how after six hours of being gone, his father was so grateful to find him the television no longer was an issue. Of course, the next time Hal tried the running away bit, it really didn't wash. Hal didn't know why he remembered that incident as he wrote the letter. Perhaps it was the sense of familiarity that called to him from Beginnings. A sense of knowing something was there and he just couldn't put his finger on it. He was filled with excitement and overwhelming feelings of wishful thinking as he began to the letter again, and it confused Hal, the feelings he had, because he just didn't know why they were there.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Looking wore out Lt. Merrick walked from the interrogation room to George who waited in the hall. "He's not breaking."

"How much physical abuse are you delivering?"

"Near death. He just keeps rambling."

"What is he rambling?"

"The same thing over and over."

“Yes.” George held back snapping. “Yes I know that. But what?”

“Some sort of chant. He keeps repeating it as if that’s what he is supposed to say.”

“Are you deciphering it. Maybe you’re missing something.”

“No sir.” Lt. Merrick shook his head. “Would you like to hear?”

“Yes.” George stepped through the door and into the interrogation room. He looked at the large black man tied to a chair. His face, swollen and bloodied. George moved closer to Link, listening to the muffled words the seeped through the beaten mouth.

Link kept his head up, staring outward as if right through George. “I pledge allegiance to my country and for the alliance in which I stand. I will fight for my God, for my home, and for my land. And for my brothers who have lost their lives. I will defend with my honor and soul, all that I believe in. And I will fight for the freedom under which we all should live.” Link coughed blood. “My . . . my name is Charles Link. I am a private first class in the United Western Alliance Army. I serve with pride and I serve with honor under the command of Captain Hal Slagel. I pledge allegiance . . .”

Pummeled. So struck by the name delivered, George nearly lost his balance. Link’s chanting repeated. “No.” George shook his head. “No.”

“ . . . pride and I serve with honor under the command of Captain Hal Slagel”

‘Captain Hal Slagel . . . Captain Hal Slagel . . . Captain Hal Slagel . .

.’

George turned white as a sheet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

September 11

Beginnings. Montana

The tender brush of lips against her own and the overwhelming smell of tooth paste woke Ellen from her slumber. Why she felt so tired, she didn't know. Hoping it was a dream, she grumbled and rolled onto her side.

Dean snickered. "El, come on. Get up."

"Oh God." Ellen pulled the covers over her head. "It's cold in here."

"You left the window open all night. Wanna get up. First day back to work."

Another grumble and Ellen pulled the covers down some from her head, she opened her eyes. The room was dark. "Dean? What time is it?"

"Five."

"Wake me in an hour."

"El." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Come on, let's have breakfast together before we get distracted with the hecticness of the morning. Let's be alone this morning."

"We were alone last night."

"For all of two minutes. Then Jenny brings back the kids and you disappear with Robbie. Please?"

Ellen sat up. "O.K." She ran her fingers through her morning hair. "Do I have time to take a shower?"

"No. I have breakfast ready. And we have to talk."

Ellen hesitated in her stand from the bed. "About what?" She looked at him suspiciously.

"The marriage."

"I knew it." She snapped. "Fuck. You're changing your mind." Ellen was barely a morning person as it was, and she easily got set off.

"Huh? No."

"Oh. Well what do we have to talk about?"

"How about when we're doing it?" Dean raised his eyebrow.

"Oh." Ellen stumbled out of bed. "Um . . . damn it's cold in here." She rubbed her arms speaking groggy. "Tomorrow?"

"What? That soon? What about the marriage classes?"

"We don't need them." Ellen grabbed her sweat pants. "We were married before."

"Yeah, but I wasn't married to you before. Remember my time was rippled."

"Yeah so was mine, remember, only your were dead." Ellen seemed perturbed as she sat on the bed.. "Dean, can we not talk anymore until I had some coffee. We'll pick a day."

"O.K., I'll go get breakfast on the table." Dean kissed her quickly and hurried from the bedroom.

Ellen looked at the comforter, how cozy, warm looking it seemed. Grabbing the edge of it to warm herself, Ellen plopped sideways back down to the bed and fell asleep.

If Robbie would have to name the single most best thing about having Jess as a roommate, it had to be that there was always coffee made in the morning. Whether Jess had to go to work or he just came back from shift, coffee was made. Robbie often wondered what he would do about his fist kick of Java if Jess ever worked a noon till midnight shift. So Robbie never scheduled him for that. Just because.

“Morning Jess.” Robbie tossed on his shirt as he walked into the kitchen and immediately to the coffee pot.

“Hey Robbie, morning.” Jess read from a sheet of paper. “Want some toast?”

Robbie walked in the diningroom and stole of piece of Jess’ toast. “Thanks.” Robbie sat down. “What uh, are you reading.”

Jess snickered. “Check this out.” He slid it to Robbie.

Robbie started t laugh as he read it out loud. “*Beginnings’ Times, not a dinosaur reference*. What is this?”

“Danny Hoi’s attempt at starting a newspaper again. It’s an introduction looking for people to write it. Denny and Josh are gonna be paper boys Yeah he stole the copy machine from the modular homes sale office and has it in his house.”

“He’s bound and determined to make this the new old world.” Robbie sipped.

“So . . . how are you?” Jess asked with concern.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Robbie I’m talking about how you’re doing. Especially after last night in the social hall. With Ellen marrying Dean.”

“Easy come. Easy go.”

“Robbie, come on.” Jess tried to get him to talk. “It has to bother you.”

“To be honest. At first it did. You know. I could have stopped El from saying yes. But . . . that would be wrong. For as much as we know, Dean is leaving. It’s just a matter of when. And her and I, we talked last night for a really, really long time. A long time and we uh . . . we situated some things.”

“Good. I’m glad. Now can I have my newspaper back.”

Robbie handed him the sheet, stopped and looked at it again. “I think I’m gonna talk to Danny about this position.”

“Which one?” Jess leaned in, looked and laughed. “Story teller? Robbie, he wants shorts stories. He wants to run a segment of one every day.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ve read you reports, basically, you um . . . suck. You can’t write a simple sentence.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” Robbie laughed. “So, what’s your point.” Robbie saw Jess’ expression. “Kidding. No, I have a bunch of short stories my brother Hal wrote. He used to send them to me when I was in the service. It was with all the stuff I kept.”

“No shit. Your brother was a writer?”

“He became obsessive about it. Wrote thrillers, but was always so dramatic.” Robbie shrugged. “I think it would be nice because they’re good.”

“Could I read them some time?” Jess asked. “They say you get to know

about the writer by reading their stuff. I think it would be interesting to learn about your brother.”

“Then you shall. And it’s a too bad you couldn’t know him personally. Hal was one of a kind.”

“Nice guy?”

Robbie laughed. “No, Hal was pretty much . . . a dick.”

Shocked, Jess was speechless. “O.K.” He took back the piece of paper and began to read again.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

George ordered the UWA soldier, Private Charles Link to be moved from his comrades and placed separately. A prisoner of war, but one that would not be interrogated any further. He didn’t reveal anything he wasn’t supposed to, but he revealed more valuable of information than he thought.

George wrote the name down a dozen times. Captain Hal Slagel. To George it figured. Beginnings was a pain in the ass ran by Joe Slagel, it would only prove Murphy’s Law for the UWA to be run by Hal Slagel. At this point, George wouldn’t be surprised to learn the Savages were run by Jimmy Slagel. It was the family from hell George thought. Another Slagel to battle, only this one had to take top priority a far as bringing down. His well trained forces were making a dent in George’s, even if small, they were making a dent.

But the thought of Hal Slagel didn’t make him cringe entirely. Actually it made George smile. Because he was certain, at this point, he knew something Beginnings did not, and that was always a bonus.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

That flutter that builds within your gut built within Hal’s as he stood on the edge of town watching his messenger ride out. In three to four hours the messenger would be arriving at Beginnings and delivering the message. Hopefully to Hal, barring any unforeseen circumstances, he would hear back before evening. The slight dust cloud rose up beneath the horse’s feet as the rider moved north. And Hal moved back to Bowman with high hopes of accomplishment.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Are you O.K.?” Joe asked as he sat at his desk and looked at Robbie across from him.

“Oh yeah. I’m fine.” Robbie took a sip of his coffee, gasped at the enjoyment of the gulp and set it down on Joe’s desk. “Let’s finish this, I want to get ready for the surveillance.”

“O.K. What do you have.”

“Some old. Same old.” Robbie read off a clipboard. “No unusual phone calls. No unusual visits to communications. He works his shift, goes home. Yesterday he went to the social hall for a drink after his shift in Mechanics and he sat in the chapel for his break. John Matoose is being a good boy.” Robbie laid the clipboard down on the table. “So tell me something. How are we justifying his being here still. Why haven’t we thrown him out.”

“One, we have to show the community what he’s done wrong. Two, we do that, suspicion starts to arise about someone else working for George. Three, we haven’t drained him yet. He still knows more about George than we do. My main focus is not to start a community up roar and that will happen once people learn one person is working for George. Fingers start pointing.”

“Valid point.” Robbie stood up. “All right. I’m heading out. I’ll be going more east today and circling my way back in.”

“You feel up to it?” Joe asked. “I can get Johnny.”

“No Johnny doesn’t look. I’ll do it. No problem.” Robbie stole one of his father’s cigarette’s and moved to the door. “Hey Dad, here’s something I was thinking about.”

“What’s that.”

“Well, reading about John and his knowledge of the scientists. We knew of only what, sixty or so. So where did they get all these people from?”

“Do you have an answer or are you just wanting to make me more nuts with something else to ponder.”

“No.” Robbie shook his head. “Actually I have an answer if . . . if Jason is the inside person.”

“Go on.”

“What if Jason went back in time and not only warned George of our attack on the cryo lab for information, but his warning . . .”

“Made George safeguard and freeze more assets.” Joe leaned back and rocked. “Good thinking. Keep that in mind when we go full force into this investigation.”

“I will.” Robbie opened the door. “See you in a hour or two.”

“Be careful.”

“Nothing ever happens exciting. I’ll be careful.” Robbie gave a thumbs up and walked out.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

In something no one in Beginnings would ever think they would see Frank wear, Frank sported a Caceres Society uniform. Camouflage pants. Black tee shirt. He walked around the compound with George. “Big.” Frank commented.

“Yes, one of the biggest reserve centers in the country. The squad bay

alone houses most of our men. And the hospital is so close by incase of any injuries.”

“Seem like there’s a lot of training area.” Frank’s hand motioned about. “Are the men concentrating right now on reconditioning the property or are you wanting to move ahead with training.”

“I’d like to divide it half and half right now.” George answered. “First thing I need is well trained men to guard these perimeters.”

“I can do that.” Frank folded his arms. “I’m taking it these fences are not protected electronically.”

“No. You can say . . .”

“Frank!” A male voice called in the distance, sounding so happy. “Frank!”

Frank’s eyebrow raised in oddity as he spun to the calling voice. He saw the small man in the distance running his way. “Shit.” Frank’s eyes widened. “Oh my God!”

“Frank.” Short in a Dean way, the dark haired man in his early thirties caught up to Frank out of breath. He grabbed on to Frank’s arms. “It’s you.”

“Soldier.” George was firm. “Salute your CO. This is Colonel Slagel.”

“Colonel. Oh shit.” His hand ran down his own face with a wide grin of excitement. “I can’t believe it’s you. No wait, this set up. A colonel. Hell, I can believe you’re a part of it.”

“Soldier!” George called out again. “Frank, you know this man?”

“Yes sir.” Frank said. “Sir this is Richie Martin. Richie, this is the president, did you know that? You’re not acting like you know that.”

“Sorry.” Richie extended his hand to George. “Sir, pleasure to meet you.” Then Richie’s views went back to Frank. “You of all people. God it’s like seeing family alive.”

“Yeah it is.” Frank grinned. “It’s good to see you. Man, wait till . . . wait till we get a chance to sit down and talk. Right now I’m getting the grand tour.”

“Find me Frank. I’m in squad bay two.”

“You got it.” Frank nodded and watch Richie dart off. He returned to George. “Sorry, it’s just weird. Have I run into anyone I’ve known before?” Frank asked George.

“This is a first. Who is that man?”

“Richie?” Frank pointed back. “Get this, an old drinking buddy of mine from when I was stationed in Indiana. We’ve kept in contact though.”

“When’s the last time you saw him Frank?”

“Real time or my time. Because it doesn’t seem that long ago to me. But he aged.”

“We all have.”

“Tell me about it.” Frank shook his head. “When I looked in the mirror, I couldn’t believe myself. However, I like the facial hair I decided to grow.” Frank rubbed his goatee. “Makes me look mean. I take it it’s not against regulations to have it.”

“Nope. In fact you started that rule about allowing facial hair.”

“Oh yeah?” Frank nodded, impressed with himself. “So, when do I see my office.”

“Right now. It’s in the main building.” George started walking with Frank. “You’ll have to excuse all the construction noise while you train. We’re

renovating a building for a lab.”

“Oh. Hey George, Richie, what does he do?”

“Why?”

“Well, I was thinking, in a world like this how often do we run into a familiar face.”

“Not very.”

“Any chance I can put him on my staff. Even as my secretary or my footwork man?”

“We’ll see what we can do.” George walked through the door Frank opened. “It’s down the hall.”

“Thank you.” Staying close to George but letting him lead, Frank followed him down the corridor taking in the view of everything as he did.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“In every division.” Joe explained to Henry in his office. “You’re going to have your problems. Agriculture is a big concern in the late summer. Any call offs from there have to be replaced. Fields need tended to.”

“Where do we get them from.”

“Security, You will work it if needed. About now you start switching them over to food preservation.. Look who did it the year before, and ask Cole how they did. Fast is the name of the game in preservation, only put the fast workers there. Others move to the greenhouses.”

“I see. What about workers for distribution?” Henry asked.

“I’ll still be handling that. That’s my division and . . .” Joe looked up to the knock on the door. “Yeah.”

Perky as usual, Danny poked his head in the door. “Wanted to see me chief.”

“Um . . .” Joe shifted his eyes to Henry. “Nope. Henry did. Come in.”

“Me Joe?” Henry panicked. “I didn’t want to . . .” He shut up when Joe cleared his throat. “I did. Danny come in.”

Danny shut the door. “What’s up?”

Henry saw that Joe wanted him to deal with it. “Well Danny, with me leading the community in two weeks, Mechanics may suffer some. I’ll still work it as much as I can, but . . . well, you understand. So, what I needed to know from you is, would you be interested in heading up the mechanics division.”

“No shit?” Danny grinned. “Yeah, I’m an excellent employee motivator. In fact I used to be called Mr. Employee motivator guy.” Danny nodded. “Just tell me what I do.”

“Good.” Henry nodded so seriously. “I’ll start making time each day to teach you.”

“Thanks.” Danny walked back to the door. “Oh, almost forgot. Hey Joe. Since I’m starting this newspaper again and since your retiring, any chance I can get you to write an editorial once a week. You have that grumpy feel about you.”

“Bye Danny.” Joe waved.

“See you.” Danny walked out, then popped his head back in. “Oh if

you guys are looking for me I'm with the modular homes. And Joe, you move in a week. Just thought you'd like to know."

"A week? That's fast."

"What can I say." Danny shrugged. "They call me Mr. Quick." He grinned, shut the door, opened it back up again and again popped his head in. "But for the record, I'm not known for that in bed." The door closed.

Joe stood for a moment with his mouth open. "Did I need to hear that. I didn't need to hear that. Let's get back to work."

^^^

Looking bored and sounding bored, Robbie leaned against the door of the chopper as he flew, eyes as always, peered out. "This is Eagle one." He did a ho-hum breath. "Flying east about sixty miles of Beginnings. I'm turning this around and bringing it back. No sign of Mathias' men. Not-O, Nothing, zilch. No Neville nominations happening . . . Oh shit!" Robbie sat up. "Shit." He grinned.

Joe's voice came over the radio. "What's going on?"

"Shit I have a group of Mathias' men chasing a man across a field." Robbie looked to the field below, the grass moved and through it Robbie could see a frightened man with a knapsack running. Eight society soldiers tailed close behind.

"Can you do anything about the situation?" Joe asked.

"Roger that Chief. The bird is flying. Charge the trumpets, Eagle one to the rescue! I'll get back to you." Lowering his headset microphone. Robbie tilted the helicopter and picked up speed. He saw the man look up to him in a run and Robbie flew away on to circle around from the front of the man. With his hands steady on the wheel and his views focused on the society soldiers, Robbie opened fired and with precision, took the society soldiers out with ease. He smiled. "Hey Chief, it's eagle one. Crisis over."

"Already?"

"What can I say. I'm the man."

"Speaking of men. What about the one that was being chased?"

Robbie looked out his window. "He um . . . he stopped running. He looks a little confused. Hard to tell. Shall I land and check him out?"

"Yeah do that." Joe said. "We need all the bodies we can get. If the society was chasing him he must be an able body."

"Roger that Chief. This is Eagle One over." Robbie began to circle around the area looking for more Society soldiers and a decent place to land.

^^^

Dan didn't mind filling in for Robbie as Robbie put it, the main security guy. Dan didn't mind at all. He had to admit to himself that he became a little frightened when Joe announced his retirement. Somehow he thought Robbie would end up being leader and that would mean he would probably be asked to be the new head of security. Dan thought about how honored he would be, filling in the Slagel reigns, but he also was quick to think of what he would say for his decline. Honored to run security. Yes. Ready. No. For one Dan wasn't strategically fast. He figured that was an inborn thing that Frank and

Robbie had. And the second thing that played a deciding factor was Dan knew those evenings after his shift of getting high off the weed he grew in his backyard would have to end if he was constantly on call. And another deciding reason was the exact same reason Dan was thinking about it as he drove. The pesky survivors at the front and back gates. Showing up at odd times like vacationers. Dan hated the thought of the front gate especially. The tunnel there bothered him. It always brought out that little bit of claustrophobia he had.

Stopping the jeep about two tenths of a mile from the front gate, Dan could see the figure of a man standing there. He caught glimpse of a golden color coming from his head and the rich blue color clothing he wore. "Odd." Dan spoke out loud walking to him and also seeing a horse in the background. The closer to the front gate Dan got, the odder he thought it was. Especially when he saw the man up close. He looked to Dan like a cross between a biker and a soldier from an old John Wayne cowboy and Indians movie.

Dan raised his radio to his lips. "Chief. We got a live one here."

"What's going on?" Joe asked.

"Hold on, let me check this out." Dan lowered the radio.

"Sir." The man saluted. "My Name is Private Willy Conrad from the United Western Alliance Army sir. I've come in peace and I bring a note from our commander to yours. I also bring something that belongs to you, sir." He held up the bag.

"What's in there?" Dan asked.

"I am under orders sir to give this directly to your commander and chief . . . sir."

"Oh brother." Whistling out softly, Dan brought the radio to his mouth. "I think I have a friend of Ellen's out here."

Joe, so annoyed, swiped away Andrea's hand as she tried to wipe his mouth with a napkin. "Andrea please. Sit." Joe grabbed his radio and picked at his lunch as he sat at his desk. "Dan, what the hell are you talking about?"

"O.K., well I have this guy, he says he's a soldier with the wait . . . thanks, United western Alliance."

"What?" Joe asked in shock. "What the hell is that."

"I guess we'll find out and he has his horse and a note from his commander. He also is dressed like Ellen described those calvary guys."

"You gotta be shittin me?" Joe pulled the radio from his mouth.

Andrea whispered at Joe. "Joe. Eat. Now."

"Christ Andrea, I'm busy. Dan?"

"Chief." Dan said. "He has this bag he said belongs to us."

"What's in it?" Joe questioned.

"Says he can only give it directly to you. Chief he seems friendly enough."

"All right. Escort him in. Remove any and all weapons he may have on him and bring him directly to my office."

"Got it." There was static and Dan came back. "Uh chief, what about his horse."

"I don't care what you do with the horse damn it, just bring me this man."

"Got it."

Joe set down the radio and rubbed his eyes. "Right in the middle of my lunch too." Joe saw Andrea stand up and collect his meal, wrapping it up. "What are you doing? I'm eating."

"Oh Joe you can't. You have visitors coming. If I had brought enough then I'd say eat. But sweetheart that would be rude."

"Rude?" Joe's hand followed the plate that left him, he grabbed a small piece of chicken off the plate as it was taken away by Andrea who hummed something.

It was lucky for Joe that he didn't have any food in his mouth when Willy Conrad and Dan stepped in his office, because Joe would have choked. His eyes widened the same as Andrea's when the well dressed soldier walk in.

Willy saluted. "Sir, are you the Commander and Chief of Beginnings?"

"Yes." Joe coughed. "Yes."

"Private Willy Conrad. Very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise." Joe was still stunned as he stood up staring at the young man.

Dan held up a sword. "Check this out Joe." Dan extended it in Samurai fashion and mumbled something that sounded foreign.

"Dan!" Joe scolded. "Quit that. You'll poke someone's eyes out." Joe looked back to the soldier. "Private you're with the who?"

"Untied Western Alliance Army sir. We're freedom fighters. Sir." He lifted the bag and the letter. "I am under direct orders to see that you personally get these."

"Thank you." Joe took them and grumbled at Andrea who peeked. He set the bag and the letter on the table. Joe's curiosity got him first. He unzipped the bag. He knew as soon as his hand pulled out the shirt. "Frank's. Private, Where did you get this from?"

"Sir in a search for our own men we discovered that. We have the location sir. I for one am not aware of that, only my commander."

Joe grabbed the letter. It was sealed with wax and he broke the seal, slowly opening the note up. Joe raised his half square glasses holding them and he began to read to himself. *'To the Commander and Chief of Beginnings Montana. Dear Chief. It appears that we wage war in the same battle. A fight for freedom and a fight against the Society which tries to bring us down. I believe it is time that we consider joining forces in this one cause. My messenger will await your response and then we can begin this new union if you so choose. Sincerely, Captain Hal Slagel. United Western Alliance Army'*

The glasses flew from Joe's face and out of his hand when he immediately trembled out of control and inhaled a gasp so loud it sent him flying to his chair and grabbing for his chest. Joe turned white. He breathed hard, unable to speak. The letter stayed clenched in his hand and it shook as violently as Joe did.

Andrea and Dan raced to him.

"Joe." Dan called out.

Andrea grabbed Joe's wrist and held it. "His pulse is out of control." She glared at the UWA soldier. "What is in this letter." She grabbed Joe's hand and moved the letter into her view. "Sweet Jesus." She gasped.

"Andrea." Joe breathed her name heavily. "Dear God Andrea. Can it

be?”

“Sir.” Willy stepped forward. “Are you all right. Sir, I’m sorry we upset you.”

“No.” Joe closed his eyes. He held up one hand, taking a few moments to control his emotions. Though he still trembled some, Joe reached for his glasses and nervously placed them on his face. With a very deep breath he clenched Andrea’s hand and brought the letter into his focus again. Was he wrong. Did he read wrong? Did his eyes play tricks on him? Joe knew for certain they did not when he read the signature again. Captain Hal Slagel. And each time his eyes read it, Joe’s heart beat stronger and stronger.

^ ^ ^ ^

Johnny was never known for lacking the Slagel trait of being unabashed, and he proved that the second Henry walked into the lab were he, Dean and Ellen worked. His high pitched uncontrollable laughter stole Dean and Ellen’s attention away from a sample they reviewed.

At first Dean raised an eyebrow and curled his top lip in oddity at Johnny’s laughter. Then he turned to see what Johnny was laughing at. And Dean too, started to laugh.

Ellen tossed her hands up and spun to see also. “I give up, what’s so funny.” She saw Henry walking in the lab. “Why are you guys laughing at poor Henry?”

Johnny ran his hand down his face catching his breath. “Henry, what’s up with the white button down shirt and tie?”

“Hey.” Henry ran his hand down his tie. “Joe said it’s the leader uniform. I have to dress like this. And don’t make fun of me, it’s not very nice.”

Ellen moved closer to Henry. “Well I think you look very nice.” She took off her lab coat. “Ready?”

“Whoa.” Dean called out and rushed to stop her. “Where are you going. It’s not time to leave.”

“Yeah it is.” Ellen played with the collar of Dean’s lab jacket. “You heard Robbie on the radio, he has a new survivor. Containment calls and I want Henry to walk with me. There’s so much prestige in that now.” Ellen held on to Henry’s arm. “I’ve bore the leader’s child. Wow.”

Johnny snickered. “You also laid the leader’s son. Man El, you’re the prestige gal.”

“I am.” she kissed Dean who grumbled. “I’ll check back in an hour.”

Dean watched her leave. ‘I’m bringing you files to look at. You aren’t pulling a Frank today and hiding in your office.’

Ellen’s fingers were still waving when she walked into the corridor with Henry. They saw Joe walking in. He looked straight ahead. There was a bit of sweat on his brow and he looked as if he had seen a ghost. “Hi Joe.”

“Ellen. Henry.” Joe kept walking by them.

“Joe?” Ellen called out. “What’s wrong?”

“Um . . .” He scratched his head that held the letter. “Nothing. Is Dean in there.”

“Yeah.” Ellen answered.

“Thanks.” Joe walked in the lab.
Ellen and Henry both shrugged and walked from the clinic.

“Dean.” So serious yet calm Joe called his name.
“Hi Joe.” Dean was still smiling over some rip on Henry remark Johnny had just made.

“Hey Pap.”
“Johnny, can I have a minute alone with Dean please?”
“Sure.” Johnny stood up and walked to the lab’s door. “Everything O.K. Pap?”

Joe nodded and waited until Johnny left. He walked over and shut the door.

“Did I do something Joe?” Dean asked.
“No, you’re about to.” Joe met Dean at the counter. “Dean, I need your honest, expert scientific opinion.”

“Go on.”
“You’ve studied the DNA of us. You’ve been working with Jess about his family. With all that you know about the virus and DNA hereditary factors. Is this possible.” He laid the letter flat on the counter.

Dean’s eyes shifted as he read. Suddenly he lifted his head. “Holy shit.”
“Exactly.”

Dean read again. “Holy shit.”
“You’ve said that.”

“Oh shit.” Dean flew over to the closet and ran inside.
“Dean . . . the mad scientist strikes again.”

“One second Joe.” Dean’s faint voice and rummaging was heard. “I know it’s here . . . Yep, got it.” He came out of the closet with a large bound manuscript. “I was about to pull this out to work with Jess. It’s my notes on the survivors.” He opened it up to the Slagel family. He chuckled.

“What’s so funny.”
“Nothing. See . . . Robbie’s in here.” Dean pointed “I ran tests on Robbie.”

“Yeah so.”
“Look at the date.” Dean went to show Joe the date and stopped “Never mind it would be right to you.”

“Is this a time machine thing?”
“Yes. See, I wrote down because of the mutation factor in the gene, it was possible not probable that more Slagels could be alive.” Dean grinned then turned serious. “You don’t think it’s a trick do you?”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “This United Western Alliance. No. Not with our infection patient saying he was with the Alliance. And the messenger that came today was dressed exactly like Ellen described. Very Calvary like.”

“Wow.” Dean took the letter again. “So what you want to know from me is, can this be your son or is it a similar name.”

“Exactly.”
“It’s possible Joe. It’s worth everything you are to look into it.”

“Thanks Dean.” Joe patted him on the back and took the letter back.
“I’m disappearing for a couple hours. Maybe more. I need you to tell Henry there was a problem um . . .” Joe took a second to think. “Tell everyone there

was a problem in recycling. No one is there right now. I'm not to be disturbed. Tell Robbie that too when he comes back. Andrea and Dan know because they were there when I got this letter. You know now. No one else, not even Robbie is to know. No one. If this is not my son I want no hopes to get up on Robbie or Ellen's part. I'd rather have it be a surprise. I'll radio you as soon as I know something. Help buy me some time Dean."

"Wait." Dean tried to stop him. "Where exactly are you going Joe?"

"Well I'm taking a jeep and me and this messenger are going on a little ride back to his home. Alone. I have to do this alone." Joe raised the letter. "And if this Captain wants a response, by God he's gonna get one. And if he ends up being my son, then he's getting a bigger response than he ever thought he'd get. Wish me luck."

"Good luck Joe. My prayers are with you." Dean said with such hope.

Joe stopped mid walk. "Thank you." He smiled a closed mouth smile to Dean, then Joe, clenching the letter left.

^^^

Leaving the horse behind, there was a mixture of expression on Joe's face as he drove through the front gates of Beginnings with the UWA messenger in his jeep. Worry, seriousness and anxiousness. There wasn't an emotion Joe was feeling that wasn't justified. He kept his focus forward, listened to the directions Willy gave him. Joe's hands kept gripping and releasing the steering wheel trying to dry the sweat that collected there. He couldn't help it. He was nervous. He swore if his heart beat any stronger he would have a heart attack eventually. Joe didn't care if he dropped dead, as long as he dropped dead knowing and seeing for himself that another one of his sons had lived.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank jingled the keys in his hand as he sat behind a huge oak desk in the CO office of the Binghamton base. As he stood up, ready to try the unknown keys out of boredom, he heard the knock on his door. "Come in."

"Colonel Sir." Lt. Merrick stepped inside. "You wanted to see me sir."

"Uh . . ." Frank fluttered his lips. "I don't know. Did I? Who the hell are you?"

"Lt. Merrick sir."

Frank held out his hands. "O.K."

"I'm the executive officer here sir."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "Then I did want to see you Lieutenant. Shouldn't you have stood at attention until I said at ease?"

"Yes sir."

"Then?" Frank motioned his head and watched Lt. Merrick stand at attention and Frank just stared and stared. "O.K. At ease. What I wanted you for is, I want every single man here rounded up tomorrow morning at zero five

hundred hours out front on the drill deck. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"I will review with them what I want prior to chow. Then I need you to notify my staff that their training will begin will me at zero seven hundred."

"Training?" Lt. Merrick asked.

"Training. When's the last time you trained?"

"About six months ago."

"Should do it everyday." Frank stated and walked to him. "And it should be regimented and rough. Makes a man strong." Frank's hand gave a slap to an unsuspecting Lt. Merrick's back sending him a foot forward. "Sorry. Let's go."

"Where to?" Lt. Merrick asked, seeing Frank walk out of his office.

"Um . . . Armory. We have an armory division. Don't we?"

"Yes."

"Then I need you to take me there. Can't train men properly without knowing what we have, can I?"

"No sir." Lt. Merrick shook his head.

"Lead the way."

Lt. Merrick stepped before Frank.

"Oh and Lieutenant. Got a task for you."

"What's that Colonel?"

Frank tossed him the keys. "Find out what each of these unlock and label them for me please. Thanks."

Lt. Merrick looked at the huge pile of keys. "Sir, there has to be thirty keys here."

"Is there a problem?"

"No, Sir."

"Armory."

"Yes sir."

Frank gave a smirk as he closed his office door and followed Lt. Merrick to Armory.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal finished eating his apple, never getting too close to the core. Perhaps it was a waste, but somehow that story his father told him when he was a child stuck with him. Even though Hal knew it was impossible to grow an apple tree in his stomach if he ate a seed, Hal never really wanted to chance it. So he tossed the apple remains into his office trash can and stood up to look out his window. He was supposed to be reviewing maps and reports from the scouts. But Hal couldn't. To him this was a landmark day. And excitement over waiting to hear from Beginnings grew. Even though he knew it was going to be a while before his messenger returned. So taking a brake hoping to get his wandering thoughts from his mind so he could get back to his work. Hal leaned against his window and stared out at the training men in the distance.

“Up ahead Chief.” Willy pointed then stood up in the moving jeep.

“What are you doing?” Joe asked.

“Signaling.” Willy took off his yellow bandana and waved it high as the jeep neared closer to Bowman.

“Captain.” Sgt. Ryder, without knocking, walked into Hal’s office.

Hal turned from the window. “What is it?”

“Private Conrad has returned . Tower has spotted them.” Sgt. Ryder had a look of excitement and out of breath about him.

“Did he run into trouble. This is way too soon.”

“Doesn’t appear so. Seems he is arriving by jeep. We believe he brings the commander and Chief of Beginnings with him.

Immediately Hal became nervous. “Shit. Do I look presentable?”

“Yes.” Sgt. Ryder answered. “I’d button my shirt all the way.”

Hal began to button it. “Tell all men to give the Beginnings man, whether he is the chief or not, the utmost respect. All activity will stop as he passes. You here me. Instruct them immediately.”

“Right away.” Sgt. Ryder opened up the door. “I’ll bring him right up.”

“Thank you.” As soon as his office door closed, Hal clenched his fist and grinned. “Yes!” He hurried about his office, cleaning it up, hiding the trash and trying to make it look presentable.

Joe’s foot hit the break some as he rode into town. Men who worked on a house, stopped and saluted him. Men who stood on the road, did the same. In the distance Joe could see an abundance of training men. They all stopped, dropped in formation immediately and held a salute until the jeep rode by. “Holy hell.” Joe commented.

“Sgt. Ryder.” Willy pointed.

“Excuse me?” Joe looked at him then followed the point. He saw Sgt. Ryder standing at attention on the side walk.

“He’ll take you to the Captain.”

Joe pulled the jeep over and stepped from it.

Straightening his salute, Sgt. Ryder spoke deep. “Sgt. Elliot Ryder, United Western Alliance. Welcome to Bowman sir.” He extended a rigid hand to Joe.

Joe shook it. “Joe Slagel, nice to meet you.”

Sgt. Ryder’s grip released. “Sir? What did you say your name was?”

“Joe Slagel.”

“The Chief of Beginnings?”

“Um . . . yeah. Is this where the Captain is?” Joe pointed to the building.

Sgt Ryder couldn’t take his eyes off of Joe. A little shorter, but the hair line was the same, the jaw. The teeth. The nose. “Oh shit.” Sgt. Ryder’s eyes widened. “Sorry.”

“What’s wrong.”

“Nothing sir. Um . . .” Sgt. Ryder opened the door. “Go on up, first door on your right.”

Joe entered the building slowly. The city hall look was dim. He moved to the steps and Joe could feel his body shake with anticipation. His heart fluttered in his stomach and he literally felt weak. How far up the top of the steps seemed. How long of a journey. And then Joe reached the top. The door was there, closed and the name ‘Captain Hal Slagel’ went through him like a bolt of electricity. “Please Dear God.” Joe closed his eyes as he reached for the door.

Hal was nervous, but he was bound and determined to be professional. To look the part of the leader. He heard the jeep pull up but he couldn’t see the Chief. Standing at his window with his hands behind his back, Hal heard the single knock on the door. “Come in.” He heard the click of the door handle. Hal took a deep breath, drew up his confident, cool look and turned around. The gasp that escaped was nearly a scream when he saw his father, just as shocked, standing at his office door. “Oh my God.” He felt as if his insides had fallen from his being and were laying on the floor. Hal could not move.

Joe’s mouth opened, but nothing but a stutter came out as he took a step into the room. “This isn’t real.” Joe moved closer to him. “This isn’t . . . Hal.” Joe spoke his name long and whispering. He closed his eyes as his hand laid upon the cheek of his long lost son. “Hal.” With gratefulness Joe’s eyes shut tighter and his hand gripped firmer to Hal’s face. He let out an emotional releasing breath when Hal’s hand laid on his.

A strong man, emotionally and physically, yet that one simple touch from his father nearly brought Hal to his knees. They buckled on him and Hal grabbed hold of his father. “Dad.”

The embrace at that moment was magnetic, powerful and electric. Both Slagel men clenched tightly to the other in a hold that was seven years overdue. Joe pulled away some, laying his hands on Hal’s cheeks. “Oh my God.” His hands moved around Hal’s face and tears formed in Joe eyes. “Oh my God.”

Hal tried. He kept his lips closed tightly together, but somehow they quivered with his emotions. That quiver reddened his face and vibrated his body as he touched Joe. Hal close his eyes trying his hardest to stop the crying that just wanted to come. But the reunion and the shock proved too much for the both of them. They returned to the tight embrace, inner feelings flooded to the surface and they found themselves locked and lost in a moment that neither knew they had waited for. A moment that could never be recaptured again. Father and son, a family, reunited . . . at last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bowman, North Dakota

What if he was wrong? What if the captain gets angry at him for not doing his job. Taking a chance, Sgt. Ryder walked to Hal's office. The door was slightly opened. He knocked once. "Captain, is everything . . ." He paused in his speaking and opening of the door when he saw the two men embracing. Sgt. Ryder was right. Like he was watching an old movie. His heart skipped a beat for Hal and his eyes even glossed with a mist. "Excuse me. I apologize." He began to step back.

"Elliott." Hal called to him. "Wait." He wiped his eyes and hoped his face wasn't too red. But it was. "Wait. I need you to meet . . . meet my father Elliott. This is my father." Hal proudly pointed.

"Mr. Slagel." Sgt. Ryder gripped Joe's hand again, this time with pride. "You have raised one fantastic son. It's an honor to not only meet the man who runs Beginnings but meet the man who taught our leader so well."

Hal, snickered a blush and waved his hand in an embarrassing 'go on' fashion. "Dad, Elliot is my right hand man. Sort of like that . . . who *is* your right hand man in Beginnings?"

"Supposed to be a man named Henry . . ."

"Henry?" Hal looked to Sgt. Ryder. "Oh yes. Whiny guy."

Joe looked at Hal oddly. "How do you know?"

"We monitor your radio transmissions. We haven't communicated because well, we didn't want you to think we weren't a serious organization."

Joe shook his head. "You're a serious organization all right. Goddamn Hal. You did all this?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to talk about that now. We will. Elliott have Craig bring us something to drink. Dad, are you still a coffee drinker?"

"You bet." Joe said.

"Coffee Elliott and tell Craig to behave himself. My Father is here." Hal said that like a kid showing off his dad on parents day at school.

"Be right back." Sgt. Ryder smiled.

"Elliott." Hal called out. "Make sure you do return. We have a lot to talk about with my father."

Sgt. Ryder smiled at the enthusiasm Hal showed, he paused on his leaving. "Mr. Slagel. I just want to tell you, since we have been monitoring your radio transmissions, we've been really entertained. A little jealous of you guys. You seem to have a good time there."

"Well you'll have to come there Elliott, meet some of our finest and then see how amused you are." Joe said sarcastic and watched Sgt. Ryder leave. "Hal? If you've been monitoring transmissions, I'm on that radio all the time. How did you not know it was me?"

"I thought it. You know." Hal pulled a chair out for Joe. "But then every guy who listened said someone sounded like someone they knew. I chalked it up to my imagination." Hal slid a chair near Joe's. "But dad. I have to know. Don't think I'm off my rocker, just bear with me. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Is this Eagle one, this Robbie or Robert . . . is he . . . is he my baby brother?"

Joe smiled. "Unfortunately yes."

Hal shrieked and jumped from his seat. "Let's go."

"What?" Joe stood up. "Where?"

"I'm leaving Sgt. Ryder in charge. I have to see him. I have to see Robbie. God Dad." Hal spoke rapid and fast. "I have been thinking about you guys non stop. Now I know why. It was you, it was really you."

"Easy." Joe followed him. "We'll get there. But I need to slow down or else you won't be seeing me much longer. My heart can't take this. I need to just take this all in before we race around and get all emotional again." Joe grabbed his chest. "My son is alive." He gripped Hal's shoulder. "And look at what you've done. This is a hell of a community you got going. Can you show me it before we leave?"

"Aw." Hal cringed. "It's no big deal. I'll show you later."

"Hal."

"O.K. I'll give you the grand tour." Hal held the door opened for Joe.

"Thank you."

"Then we leave." Hal moved quickly with Joe towards the steps. "Tell me Dad, is Robbie still the same?"

"Unfortunately . . . yes." Laying his hand on Hal's back, Joe moved with his son looking just as proud to be seen with him as Hal was to be seen with Joe.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie sounded more like a children's book than anything else, asking everyone, "Where's my father? Have you seen my father." Not out of concern, missing, or needing Joe, but out of the search for the possibility of getting away with a really long unscheduled break.

But Robbie figured he'd might as well get part of his job out of the way first, processing the new survivor he found out running about. Walking the male survivor to Joe's office, because that was where the processing was done, Robbie slowed in his walk when he saw Dan outside Joe's office, oddly enough feeding a horse. "Dan?"

"Robbie. Hi." Dan said nervous.

"Who's horse?"

"Who's horse?" Dan repeated.

"Yeah, who's horse?"

"Joe's."

"My Dad's?"

"Yeah wanted to start riding. Go figure. Gas conservation idea he had for getting around the community."

"Not for all of us I hope." Robbie commented.

"I think that's where he's steering." Dan said.

"No way am I riding a fuckin horse." Robbie opened Joe's office door. "This way." He told the thin man with dark hair. "Have a seat." Robbie shut the door. "Let me just get some things." He walked to the back of the office to the examining room and came back out with a clipboard. He sat down at Joe's desk.

“O.K. you seem like a calm guy.”

“I am. I’m usually not quiet. Right now I’m still shaken up over what all went down.”

“What were you doing in the area?” Robbie questioned.

“Trying to find this mysterious community I heard about. See . . .” He fiddled with his hands. “I was traveling with this man. We’ve basically been scouting the country side looking for this place we heard others were searching for. With thought it was mythical. You know sometimes people make up places to convince themselves that something better is out there. Him and I were camping. We woke up to find the soldiers raiding our camp sight. They killed Tony and I took off. That’s when you found me. Thank you.”

“You’re lucky. I usually don’t go that far east.” Robbie grabbed a pencil. “O.K., we need this for record before you go to containment. You remember that place I told you about.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Basics. What is your name?” Robbie asked.

“Jeremy. Jeremy Lyons.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Joe couldn’t help it. With his coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other he kept looking behind him as he walked with Hal and Sgt. Ryder through town.

“Dad, something wrong?”

“Why . . .” Joe looked back again. “Why is that man following us?”

“Damn it.” Hal bit his lip, looked behind him and shouted. “Craig! Go!”

“I see you have them here as well.” Joe commented.

“He annoys me.” Hal said.

Sgt. Ryder interjected. “He lets him annoy him.”

“It’s a Slagel thing. He can’t help it.” Joe said.

Hal stopped at the police station and opened the door. “This is where we monitor your transmissions.” As he stepped in the monitor stood up. “Corporal meet my father.”

“Your father? For real?” The corporal extended his hand to Joe.

“Yep.” Hal stated. “And the Chief of Beginnings. And you can take a break.”

“Thank you.” The corporal left the office.

Joe checked out the radio. “So you do have radio communications?”

“Yes.” Hal answered. “We just stayed silent. Now we can use them, which eases my mind if Elliott gets into trouble here.”

Sgt. Ryder looked confident. “We shouldn’t have any problems. Hell, if we do how long would it take for Captain Slagel to get back?”

“We can fly him here in twenty minutes. Fifteen tops.” Joe told him. “Thanks Elliott for taking the reigns so I can spend time with my son. We need him there for a while.”

“The Captain is good enough to be there and give orders here.” Sgt.

Ryder said. "I'm very happy his family is alive. And, you giving him a truck to go back and forth will help us as well. Plus sir, we do want to know more about the place we keep sending our sick men to."

"That's right." Joe snapped his finger. "We have one of your men. He's doing very well. Had tetanus. But I do have to tell you something Hal. You think Beginnings is this big deal. We haven't the man power you have at all. You may not be all that impressed."

"We are impressed." Hal corrected. "We used to watch your community. We weren't sure if you were part of the society or not. And . . . we may have the manpower, but you have the technology. We're soldiers in this battle maintaining the front lines."

"Which is?" Joe asked.

"Basically we drew a line. The Dakotas, Kansas straight down is the front line. We've been doing good. Took out five, six camps so far."

Joe whistled. "So what do you need us for? Aside that your family is there."

"Survival. We're rationing now. I have the man power you need to farm your fields. You have the food we need. We can help each other in more ways than you realize. I have to concentrate on training these men to fight the society. With Beginnings helping, I can build the army we need to eventually bring the society down."

"A common goal." Joe said. "And we have more than enough food. We waste so much between what we grow in the field and greenhouse. I can use the manpower for the fields and preservation right now. The more men we have the less we will waste. Can you give up some men within the next week or so?"

"Absolutely. Name the number."

Sgt. Ryder leaned toward Hal whispering loud enough for Joe to hear. "Tell him about your contract."

Hal nudged him away. "Shh."

"Contact?" Joe asked. "What Hal, you wrote a contract to present to Beginnings?"

"Well yeah." Hal shrugged. "It's pretty detailed. Explaining how we can scratch each other's back."

"God, that is so like you." Joe laughed as he shook his head. "You realize we don't need a contract now." Joe didn't get an answer. "Hal?"

"Yeah."

"Good." Joe turned to Sgt. Ryder. "So tell me. Is my son still over the top and dramatic?"

"Yes." Sgt. Ryder answered. "No. Yes. Dramatic yes, But uh . . ." He snickered. "Never without flare."

Joe grabbed on to Hal's uniform. "The Horse Soldiers?"

Hal grinned. "You got it. And . . ." He clapped his hands together. "Let me go pack. I can't wait to see my little brother." Hal rushed to the door. "Elliot, keep my father company and tell him nothing bad about me."

Sgt. Ryder gave Hal a thumbs up as he left. "I've never seen him so excited."

"Well I just have a feeling that excitement is going to be nothing compared to when he sees Robbie." Joe smiled. "Those two back together again." The smile dropped from Joe's face. "Oh Christ I'm in trouble."

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen had a slight smile to her face as she sat in her small office of containment alone. “I don’t know Frank.” She shrugged. “You can’t be threatened by this. Well Hon . . . what did you expect. I know. I know. You think? Yeah right . . . ha!” Ellen turned serious. “It’s the right thing to do. For you and for me. I feel a little guilty.” She held her fingers close together. “Just a little. But I love Dean and you know that. It’ll work out. I promise.” She leaned in to her desk more. “I miss you so much. God how I miss you. I miss fighting with you. Touching you. Telling you I love you. This is the longest we have been apart and my heart is broke. Come back to me Frank. Come back to me soon.” Ellen reached out her hand and lifted the picture of Frank she had setting against the pencil holder. It was the picture she classified as the best one Frank had ever taken. A couple years old, when Jonas was around taking pictures still, him and Robbie. And it was an odd one of Frank. He smiled. Genuinely smiled. Frank always posed in each picture like he was going to kill the world. So handsome she thought Frank looked as she ran her index finger across his face.

“El.” Robbie walked in, knocked on the door and shut it. “Where’s my father?”

“Where’s my survivor?”

“In the security office up front.”

“In that case. I haven’t a clue where Joe is.” She noticed the frazzled look on Robbie’s face. “What’s the matter. What happened.”

“O.K., get this.” Robbie held up his hands. “I lost a jeep.”

“You what?”

“I lost a jeep. I don’t know how. I go to get one to bring the new guy here and there’s one less jeep at the garage charging.”

“You’re kidding?” Ellen stood up. “Did you check the new reqs.”

“Yep and the old ones. I even looked on Frank’s desk and my Dad’s. Nothing. And you know my dad put me in charge of them just this morning.”

“Oh man Robbie. Wait. This is Beginnings. How hard is it to find a jeep? Just make a radio call for the number.”

“Yeah right.” Robbie fluttered his lips. “And then what? Have my Dad hear. You’ll know what he’ll do. Shit, and Frank isn’t even here to blame it on.”

“You know what you should do. Talk to Henry. He’s the leader in training.”

“I thought of that.” Robbie ran his hand over the top of his head. “So I talked to him. He said I’d better find the jeep before Joe gets real mad. Some leader. Shit.”

“Calm down. Just say a prayer to St. Anthony. Your dad said your mom always said it worked.”

“I’ll do that. How’s it go? Tony, Tony please come down . . .”

Ellen nodded. “Something’s lost and can’t be found. That’s the one.”

“Got it.” Robbie snapped. “I’ll get your survivor. Thanks El and if you see my Dad.”

Ellen zipped up her mouth. “But . . . we can always blame it on Dean. You know how he never signs reqs.”

“Good idea.” Robbie grinned. “See ya.” Robbie started to whisper as he walked out. “Tony, Tony please come down, something’s lost . . .”

Ellen snickered as she leaned in her doorway listening to Robbie repeat the prayer over and over. She shut her office door, returned to her desk and put on her ‘official’ containment stern face.

^^^

Hal seemed so amazed as he rode in the jeep with Joe. He held on with a wide smile on his face. “It’s been so long Dad since I rode in a jeep.”

“Well get used to it. I think I can issue two trucks to you guys. It’ll make for easy back and forth access to Beginnings.” Joe grabbed his phone and started to dial.

“So that’s why we don’t know everything. You talk on phones.”

Joe showed Hal the phone. “Henry did this . . . Dean?” Joe spoke his name.

“Joe shit. I’ve been waiting.” Dean spoke with excitement. “Well?”

“I’m on my way back home.”

“Well?”

“With my son.” Joe pulled the phone away from his ear, Dean’s excitement probably had more to do with the fact he was going to get to do more research. “Dean, listen to me. I need a favor. I want this to be a surprise so . . . get Robbie up to my office have him wait there and not move. And then hold Missy Jane at the clinic in the back until I radio we are there.”

“Got it.” Dean answered. “How far away are you?”

“Half hour tops. See you soon.”

“Oh Joe.” Dean called out. “I’m happy for you. I am.”

“Thanks.”

“Could you make mention that I want to run some tests on him.”

“Bye Dean.” Joe hung up the call.

“Dad? Who’s Missy Jane.”

“Don’t worry about. Just a friend I want to introduce you to.”

“Is she . . . is she a bearable woman.”

Joe looked quickly to his son wondering what kind of question that was. “Well, she can be a little intolerable. Sorry.”

“Typical.” Hal slouched in his seat and stared ahead.

Joe snickered at his son’s dismay and continued to drive on.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“Sorry to pull you Frank.” George told Frank as they walked into Frank’s small house on base. “But Dr. Morris said one more day of rest then you can get things started.”

“I just hate doing nothing.”

“Well you always are the do-it guy. But . . . I want you the healthy guy so give your lungs one more day to rest.”

“See I don’t get that. I was shot. How did I end up with pneumonia.”

“Laid in a stream for three days.”

“You’re kidding?” Frank asked surprised.

“Left you for dead, those Beginnings people did.”

“Bastards.”

George nodded. “Well, we’ve gotten some of your clothes here. Relax and enjoy your new home. There’s food and beverages if you get hungry.”

“Thank you George. I appreciate it.” Frank walked over and sat on his sofa. “I think I’ll just rest here.”

“You do that.” George laid a hand on Frank’s shoulder, turned around and moved to the door. “Have a good day Frank.”

“I will.” Frank folded his hands and tapped his fingers as he listened to George leave. “Oh this is dumb.” He tapped some more. “I need a cigarette.” Frank looked at his watch, stood up, walked to the door and opened it. He looked out, saw George’s figure fading as it moved to the right, then Frank walked out side, shut the door and went left.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Hal sat straight in his seat when they approached the front gate of Beginnings. “Dad, I’m nervous about entering these walls.”

“Why . . . hold on.” Joe spoke in the radio, “Down the front Steve. Thanks.” He set the radio down. “Why are you nervous about coming to Beginnings.”

“Because in the world out there. This is utopia.”

Joe laughed loudly. “You haven’t met and mingled with the residents yet. Until you do, then tell me if it’s your utopia or the equivalent of sitting in the Gong Show studio audience for two weeks straight.”

Hal laughed as the jeep stopped. He saw a man open the gate. He let out his nervous breath slow and quietly.

Dan approached the jeep. “Is this him Joe?” Dan pointed. “Hey, Dan Everett, Beginnings security.” He shook Hal’s hand. “Hal right? Wow, you look your dad. Hey Joe?”

“Yes Dan?” Joe just wanted to drive through.

“Um, he’s a Slagel right? What’s up with . . .” Dan grabbed a hold of his own long ponytail.

Joe looked at Hal’s hair. “We’re getting the warm welcomes out of the way first. He’s staying with us. We’ll see what happens before he leaves.”

As the jeep started to drive through the gate and into the tunnel. Hal panicked. It wasn’t about entering Beginnings, it was about his hair. Hal fiddled with his pony tail always so neat and thought in fear about how in his youth his father used to deal with his long hair.

^^^

Ellen was the professional containment person sitting with Jeremy Lyons in her office. “It’s all part of the process. Joe usually explains this but

right now he's missing. That's good, because so is a jeep. Anyhow . . ." She slid him a paper. "These are some of the rules you have to follow while your in containment. Can you still read?"

Jeremy was about to be upset about that, but stopped. "A little. Will you help if I have problems?"

"Of course." Ellen folded her hands and smiled. She heard the knock at her door. "Yes?"

Dean poked his head in. "Sorry to interrupt. I brought a substitute."

"Substitute what?" Ellen asked.

"Containment worker." Dean pulled Jason in. "Take her desk Jason."

"Ellen. Move." Jason in his calm fashion walked over to Ellen, placed his hand on her arm and helped her stand. "Thank you." He said as he quickly took her seat.

"What?" Ellen looked at Jason then Dean. "What's going on?"

"I need you now at the clinic." Dean told her. "It's something medically important I need to talk to you about."

"O.K." Ellen moved with hesitation to the door. "Jeremy I'll be back. Thanks Jason and don't lie to him."

Jason snickered as he stared at Jeremy and lifted his hand in a wave.

Ellen walked in the hall with Dean. "This better be good, I'm in the middle of processing."

"I know. And it *is* good. Trust me." Dean hurried her along. "I think you'll find it absolutely fascinating."

^^^

Hal couldn't believe it when they emerged through the front tunnel and the vision of the small town came immediately into his focus. "Whoa." He lifted some in the seat of the moving jeep. He could see people move around. It was much bigger than he expected it to be. "We're going to your office?" He asked Joe.

"Yep." Joe turned the wheel taking McGruff Street--as Danny named it--to the utility building. "See that long metal structure?"

"Yes."

"That's where some of the offices are. I'm not going to explain a whole lot, you have all week to learn." He pulled the jeep up and parked it in front of his office. "Now before you walk in there. Let me see if your brother has arrived as instructed."

Hal nodded. He looked pale, worried about seeing Robbie, again.

Robbie rummaged in his mind on how to explain the missing jeep. He sat in Joe's desk, rocking in his chair, tossing a ball up and nearly hitting the ceiling. "*I could . . . tell him Dean borrowed it and lost it.*" Robbie thought, then shrugged and tossed the ball again. "*Maybe he won't notice it's gone. Hell, he already knows it's gone. Why else has he called me*" Robbie knew what he had to do. The moment Joe walked in the office and that would be soon by the sound of the jeep, Robbie would start rambling. He heard the footstep on the

single step and Robbie cleared his throat.

“Robert.” Joe said his name as he walked in.

“Dad, hey. You know what? I was really thinking here lately. Do you think it’s possible that . . .”

“Robert. Stop and what are you doing sitting at my desk?” Joe asked as he stood with the door partially open.

“Getting a feel for it.” Robbie rocked in the chair. “Yeah, you know I was the one that should have been picked for leader. Not Henry. Hey, I’m more like you right. After all I’m the son that looks like you right?”

“What about Hal.”

“Dad.” Robbie scoffed and laughed. “Hal was the ugly Slagel. Man you don’t want to say he looked like you.” Robbie was arrogant as he balanced his chair. “You want the pretty son to resemble you. Me.”

“Is that so. Hal not attractive.”

“Not from what I remember. No.”

“See what you think now.” Joe opened the door wider.

Hal stepped inside. No sooner had he walked in the door, a loud *BANG* rang out in the office. Robbie in his rocking of Joe’s chair took one look at Hal and rocked completely backwards and onto the floor.

“I think you’ll find it absolutely fascinating.” Dean’s words, spoken to her earlier, echoed in Ellen’s mind as she sat in a chair in Andrea’s office. Her elbow on the desk, her head leaning on her hand as she stared dumbfounded at Dean pacing before her and rambling about. *“I think you’ll find it absolutely fascinating.”* Ellen couldn’t help but wonder, what in the world would make Dean think that.

“And then there is the intracellular toxin. That is the toxin produced in the bacterial cell. Contrary and not to be confused with the extracellular toxin which is a toxin produced and excreted by microorganisms.”

“Dean.”

“Wait. This is amusing. A toxin-antitoxin. I still have to chuckle at that. You would think they could come up with a better name for an immunization against Diphtheria. What do you think?”

“I think you lost it.” Ellen stood up.

“No I haven’t. Sit down. We haven’t even touched the dermonecrotic toxin . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen stood firm. “Why are we discussing toxins.”

“When’s the last time we did?”

“Uh . . .” Ellen fluttered her lips. “I don’t know.”

“Then it’s time to discuss them again. I need you to sit down and be patient.”

“No Dean. Toxins, Drosophila, spirochetes. What the hell Dean.? You’re keeping me here for a reason.”

“O.K. I am.”

“Then don’t bore me to death. Unless you tell me you plan having sex with me right now, then I have to get back to containment.”

Dean grinned and took off his lab jacket.

“Dean I’m joking.”

“I’m not.” He stepped forward to Ellen leading her back to the desk.

“Dean stop.”

“No. It’ll be fun.” Dean began to kiss her ignoring her mumbling gripes through his lips. He backed her down to the desk pressing his body to hers.

“Dean come in.” Joe’s voice called on the radio.

Dean stopped kissing Ellen and lifted himself.

“See Dean.” Ellen commented. “He knew what we were doing in here.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s like God. Knows all, sees all.”

Dean grumbled and grabbed the radio. “Yeah Joe.”

“We’re here. Heading to the front door.”

“Thanks.” Dean grabbed Ellen’s hand. “Let’s go,”

“What’s going on?”

Dean opened Andrea’s office door for Ellen. “I had you here for a reason. We had to wait for Joe.”

“O.K.” Ellen stepped into the hall.

“El, your calvary exists. And the commander of the calvary is with Joe now.”

“Oh shit. No way?” Ellen smiled and looked at the double glass door. She saw Joe and Robbie and another man walk in. The sun poked in brightly behind them and made them into almost shadows. “Wait a second.” Ellen took a step, her words became breathy as she focused in on the third man.

Dean didn’t realize what his whisper would do. Seeing Ellen’s disbelief, he placed his mouth close to her ear. “Hal Slagel is alive.”

Dean’s words were an earthquake to Ellen. They trembled through her body and shook her stand. Her legs weakened, she swayed and began to drop to the floor.

Dean grabbed her, lifting her back up.

“Hal.” Ellen spoke his name, but it barely came out.

Hal saw her. He looked to Joe then Robbie then back down the hall. “Ellen!” He called out loudly.

“Oh my God.” Ellen recouped her strength and with the energy of his call, she raced down the corridor as fast as she could, leaping up at Hal, slamming her body into his and wrapping her arms around him as she shrieked.

Clenching Ellen tightly, Hal lifted her feet from the floor. “Ellen. Oh my God.”

“Look at you. Hal.” Ellen’s hands grabbed his face as she still stayed in his lifting embrace. She exhaled emotionally. “God you look at you.” She laughed and cried with excitement. “Robbie. Joe. It’s Hal.”

Hal’s head swayed back and forth. “I can’t believe this.”

“Hal!” Speaking his name quickly, Ellen held onto his cheeks as she stared at him. “Shit. Your men saved my life. They saved my life Hal. They brought me home.”

“That was you?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Ellen kissed him. “Thank you.” She kissed him again, plastering his face with small, quick kisses over and over.

Hal shifted his eyes to his father. “I’m sorry Dad. But it’s been a really, really long time.”

“Sorry for what?” Joe asked.

“Sorry for this.” Hal, laying his large hands on Ellen’s cheeks, pulled her from him, stopping the kisses. Then Hal brought Ellen’s face back to his,

pressed his lips hard to hers and widened them smoothly in a long kiss.

“Hey!” Robbie yelled out. “Dad.”

“Hal.” Joe called him. Hal ignored him.

Dean, walking down the hall to them, tossed his hands in the air in defeat. “Joe, it’s a Slagel thing with her, isn’t it.”

Holding his hand to Dean in an ‘I’ll take care of this’ fashion, Joe tapped a kissing Hal on the shoulder. “Son.” Joe cleared his throat. “Hal knock it off . . . Hal . . . Hal! Knock it the hell off! Christ!” Joe ran his hand over his own forehead.

Hal pulled from the kiss. “Sorry. Aside from the fact that she’s a woman and a nice one too.” Hal raised an eyebrow at Joe’s grunt. “She’s Ellen. I could get away with it.”

Joe mumbled under his breath. “Yeah, well she has that reputation around here.”

“What?” Hal still held Ellen.

“Put her down. Put her down and meet . . . meet Ellen’s past and future husband.”

Hal slid Ellen to the floor. “Where?”

Joe pulled Dean into focus. “Dean Hayes, meet my son Hal.”

Hal adjusted his views lower. “Oh.” He extended his hand to Dean. “Nice to meet you . . . El.” Hal whispered to her. “You’re marrying this guy?”

“Again. Yes.” Ellen nodded.

“But he’s so . . . so . . . little.” Hal commented.

Again Dean tossed his hands in the air. “I give up.”

Ellen snickered. “Little yes, But not where it counts.”

“Christ.” Joe griped. “Did we need that comment? No. Dean, thanks for your help. Ellen go back to work.”

“Joe. No!” Ellen yelled “I want to hang out with Hal.” She grabbed his hand. “This is so great.”

“Yes, well, it’s not like you won’t see him again. Go. And find me Henry.” Joe shooed her away.

Ellen tsked. “All right. Joe, where is he staying? Can he stay with Dean and I? Dean you don’t mind, do you?” Dean opened his mouth, but Ellen kept on rambling. “Hal, Dean and I have the best house in Beginnings. And we have children. You have to meet them. You do. Joe can he stay with us? I want him to stay with us. I can have Josh clean . . .”

“Ellen!” Joe snapped. “Christ, Yes. Go. Get me Henry.”

“You know.” Hal smiled. “I can’t wait to meet this Henry.”

“Yes you can.” Robbie said. “Trust me.”

“I can?” Hal looked confused, then wiped that look off his face. “You know I have this mental picture of him in my mind from hearing his voice. Is he like fifty, short, stocky and black?”

“Um.” Robbie thought. “Hal, that’s pretty good. You pegged him.”

“Thanks.” Hal grinned.

“Robert.” Joe scolded. “And Ellen. Go.”

“I’m leaving.” She kissed Dean then tip toed up to Hal and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s good to have you here. Welcome back.” She moved to the glass doors and stopped. “I know for sure now, Beginnings just isn’t gonna be the same again.”

Dean chuckled softly as he looked up to the three Slagel men standing

by him. All three resembled each other. And Hal, though lost for a while, proved to Dean he too had that Slagel connection with Ellen. And why not, they were in a sense a family. And as he stared at them once again, he knew Ellen's last statement before she left the clinic didn't even need to be said. With Hal's arrival, Beginnings never being the same again, was a given.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Binghamton Alabama

For as much as the news of Hal entering Beginnings floored everyone there, so did the news floor George. “No.” He spoke on the phone. “When did he arrive there? Shit. I thought they wouldn’t find this out. Have you met him? I see.” George drew up a thinking look. “All right. I’m gonna have to head back to Quantico since my top man is there. If this is a joining of forces, I’m gonna have to move ahead with this plan. Are you ready?” George nodded. “Thank you. But . . . no. I take no chances with you. You’ll only do what I instruct you to do. No further. If they find you out they may kill you on the spot and then what? Huh? No. No chances. Just do what I tell you to do and no more . . . I know you want to help. But be patient please. And I have to go. I have to instruct my new CO on what needs to be done.” George snickered. “Isn’t that hysterical? I’ll call you back. Be careful. Yes. Bye.”

George’s inside person always brought a smile to his face. So unknown this person was, so brilliant on George’s part. But for as much as he wanted to smile in his aftermath of his call, he couldn’t. He had other things on his mind. The fact that Hal and Joe found each other. But that didn’t weigh as heavy as the scary portion of that thought. The UWA and Beginnings becoming one.

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Beginnings, Montana

Hal stopped walking in awe as him, Joe and Robbie entered the living section. “This is amazing.” He looked at all the houses. “Everyone lives here like a little town. So lived in.” He look at the street sign. “Frank Street? That’s really nice.” Hal smiled. “This is so nice.”

Joe gave him a double pat on the back. “You know Beginnings has enough land to expand this living section to easily house your people. But I have a feeling you want to expand your people. So I have a few thoughts we’ll discuss another time”

“Sounds good..” Hal said as they moved to Joe’s house. “Dad, is this your house. Look, flowers.”

“Yeah.” Joe grumbled. “Anyhow, let’s go in.” He opened the door. Joe grunted when Robbie snuck in first, then Hal.

Hal sniffed. “Wow is that brownies?”

“Halberd!” Andrea shrieked his name with excitement as she darted from the kitchen.

Hal immediately looked with a weirdness at Robbie to the woman who now plastered him with kisses.

“Meet our new mom, Andrea.” Robbie snickered.

Hal whispered. “Dad’s still doing the same thing?”

“Oh Hal!” Andrea caught her breath. “You poor boy, lost out there in this world while your father lives here. Are you all right sweetheart? Look at you.” she stepped back. “So handsome. Oh Joe he’s handsome.”

Joe sort of cringed.

Hal flashed a gloating grin. "I like this mom. No mom ever thought I was handsome."

"That's because you're not." Robbie said.

"One hour." Hal said. "One hour I'm back and you're starting?"

"Yeah."

"O.K." Hal shrugged. "Just checking. Get ready though."

"I'm the master Hal. I'm worse now. Wait, that's not what I meant."

Joe shook his head. "Can we just sit down and talk what we need to talk about. Andrea? Are you staying?"

"Oh no sweetheart. Not me." She laid her hand on Joe cheek. "Got to get to Gemma's, a few of us gals are cooking for a community dinner for Hal tonight. Danny's reprogramming a few of the SUTs again for waiters." She kissed Joe. "See you. Robbie, take my brownies out of the oven in ten minutes sweetie."

"Sure thing Mom." Robbie gave a thumbs up.

"And don't eat them" Andrea instructed as she walked to the door. "They're for tonight."

Robbie responded with an innocent smile and another thumbs up as Andrea left.

Grabbing the large ashtray because he knew it was going to be a smoke fest, Joe set it on the coffee table and sat on the sofa. Robbie sat in the chair and Hal sat next to Joe.

Hal took in the view of the house. "This is great. Your wife is nice Dad. Robbie hasn't scared her away."

Joe lit a cigarette. "Where's she gonna go? Now let's . . ."

"Joe!" Henry came barreling through the front door. "Whoops forgot to knock." Henry walked out, knocked then barreled through again. "Joe!"

Joe held up his hand. "Hal meet Henry."

Hal turned around on the couch and looked. "Henry?" Hal turned to Robbie. "I thought you said he was fifty, stocky, and black."

"No that's what *you* said he looked like. I merely agreed. He looks that way to me.

Henry flipped Robbie off then shook hands with Hal. "Nice to meet you. Wow do you look like Joe."

"Thanks. You look a lot different than I thought."

Joe only looked up from his seat on the couch. "Henry is one half of our Asian community."

"Joe." Henry tsked. "I'm Japanese, so technically I'm not . . ."

"Henry. I don't want to hear it. I'm always hearing it." Joe bitched. "Anyhow. We're gonna be busy for . . . Robbie? Where are you going?"

Robbie pointed backwards. "To check the brownies. I don't want them to burn."

Joe groaned. "Back to you Henry. I need you to take the wheel for a while. I'm gonna be busy with Hal, catching up."

"Sure thing Joe. I have to get back to fixing generator two. It's making this noise." Henry shrugged. "I'll just beat on it again."

Joe winced. "You do that."

"Worked before." Henry raised his hand. "Hal, nice to meet you. Hope we can get along better than Robbie and I."

“I’m positive of that Henry.” Hal winked. “I’m the nice Slagel brother. Always have been.”

Henry snickered amongst the Joe moans. He waved once more then left.

Joe waited until Robbie returned and sat down. “All right Hal. I’ve waited long enough. Where the hell have you been for seven years?”

Hal whistled and let out a long breath. “It’s a difficult story.”

“Try me.” Joe told him.

“Wait.” Robbie interrupted. “When I spoke to you. When Dad talked to you. You were sick.”

“Yes I was.” Hal nodded. “I had the plague.”

A ‘what’ came from both Robbie and Joe.

“I had the plague. Like everyone else. I was on border patrol outside of Honolulu when I started getting worse. I dropped about eight hours after I talked to you Dad.”

Joe closed his eyes and blinked. “Then you didn’t have the plague. No one we knew beat it.”

“Ah.” Hal held up his hand. “No one you knew. I knew thirty-seven guys that beat it. Elliott Ryder was one of them. Him and I lost contact when he left the Islands alone. We met up again about nine months ago. We were all at the same med station.”

“What?” Joe was lost. “We had the top scientist working on it. He didn’t beat it until last year.”

“He was using modern medicine, wasn’t he. He used the resources science gave him.”

Joe nodded. “Yes he did.”

“Well that’s why he didn’t get a reaction. He needed to go back to basics. Back to nature.”

“And that’s exactly how he ended up beating it.” Robbie said. “Using all natural stuff. But how did you . . .”

“Not me.” Hal answered. “I was out of it like I said. Had all the symptoms, bad too. There was this Korean doctor who was working the med station I was at. He was a homeopathy specialist. He tried these herbs on us. He said it was his cure. It sort of was. It took me three weeks to come around, but I did. I remember reading his notes on how in his tents he had over two thousand patients, including himself. The herbs worked on fifty of us and everyone else died. Eventually thirteen more died in the next three weeks, They weren’t strong enough to fight the symptoms I guess.”

Joe was astounded. “Wait until Dean hears this. So this doctor, what happened to him?”

“Died of the plague. His medication prolonged him for a week but that was all. It didn’t work on everyone. Just some. I guess it was our gene make up.”

“Dean is going to be fascinated by this.” Joe commented. “Be prepared for a lot of questions and tests.”

“And . . .” Robbie added. “Be prepared to jerk off in a cup.”

“Robert!” Joe yelled. “Then what Hal?”

“Then . . . Then . . . jerk off?” Hal shuddered in confusion. “Then we searched the islands all of us, for survivors. All men, the herb didn’t work on any women at all. Not even to prolong their life. We started thinking that the

female species was wiped out.”

Joe raised his eyebrows. “Pretty much they were. Dean estimates one percent of the population remained, maybe less. But he estimates eighty percent of the survivors are men. The virus was gender prejudice. Males survived. Females didn’t. We’re still having an uneven ratio when it comes to births. Three to one. So go on. I’m sorry. You searched the island?”

“Yes.” Hal answered. “Four of our group where Islanders, so we searched for their families and for survivors.”

“All the islands?” Joe asked.

“No it would have been too much. Just the bigger ones. Anyhow we were this group and we devised a plan. We grabbed a map of the main land, charted out a course based on where all of our families were, and we were going to break down into five groups and we were going to travel the country looking. So we got a boat, stocked it with food, a lot of food and headed to the main land. At this point there were close to sixty of us.”

“You arrived in the main land when?” Joe questioned.

“Let’s see.” Hal thought. “It had to be August. We devised a central meeting place. And a time we would all meet. I didn’t figure for some to return. I knew I would. So we split up. Each group going separate ways.”

Joe tossed his hands up. “Hal, I’m a little miffed. I spent my life beating it into your head about the contingency plan.. Why in God’s name didn’t you follow it? If you would have you would have seen we went to Ashtonville.”

“Yeah.” Robbie added. “And I made sure dad left word there where we went.”

“I did.” Hal was insistent. “I remembered the contingency plan. But when I got to Gaithersburg, I figured since there was no note, no one but me survived.”

“What the hell are you . . .” Joe saw through the corner of his eyes, Robbie standing up. “Robert.”

“Getting the brownies Dad.” Robbie hurried into the kitchen. There was some clanking as he took the brownies from the oven. He came back feeling guilty. “All right. When I went with Miquel for a final weapons run around late July, we stopped at Gaithersburg to check on the note. I figured it had been months and Hal was sick so I uh . . . I took the note for a souvenir. I have it Hal if you want to see it.”

Hal’s moth dropped open. “I wandered the country thinking my family was dead and you took the note? Dad! He wasn’t supposed to take the note! Robbie you asshole.”

“Hey.” Robbie pointed at him. “I resent that.”

“Dad.”

“I know.” Joe held up his hand. “What’s done is done. Robbie’s done a lot of things through these years he shouldn’t have. I won’t get into it. Anyhow. You went home. No note. What then.”

“Well we searched out the other families. Picked up survivors. Food and such and eventually made it to the meeting place. We were the first one there and in another month or two thirty five out of the original sixty had made it back. But we all picked up people and we were about two hundred strong. Big community. Ten women I think.” Hal nodded. “So at that point we knew survival was an option. I moved us all to Mexico where there are a lot of natural rain forests. We planted we harvested and we lived there up until about fourteen

months ago,”

“Then what happen?” Joe asked.

“We got hit. Big time. Soldiers in these uniforms raided our town, shooting any of us who fought. I made my escape, me and about twenty other men. The rest. Dead or taken.”

“The society.” Joe said.

“Exactly. Which I didn’t know. I thought it was another country finishing us off. I mean what do we know. Another four months go by. It’s winter and this man arrives with about four soldiers. He tells us the United States is rebuilding and they need strong people to work and fight. He told us the president had lived. They had a truck, food for us. Why wouldn’t we believe him. So I went. I was in Tennessee with the society.”

Robbie was shocked. “You worked for the society.”

“Yep.” Hal nodded. “And I’m not proud of it. I started noticing that some men were like zombies. Doing exactly as instructed. Those who were disruptive were never heard from again. Then one day they told us we were making a sweep. Looking for survivors. When they said we were to shoot anyone who fought, I knew it was not my game. I mean the world died. Why kill anyone else. So I started to talk to men and one night we left. Figuring we can feed ourselves, we don’t need them. I gathered close to fifty and we went west. That’s where the society was least active from what I knew. And that’s where the Alliance all began. Us fifty decided we would fight what the society was trying to do, world wide take over. And through the next couple months we began a society of our own. People were joining. Defectors. Those zombie type soldier we would take and train ourselves. The more people that joined the more regimented we became. Taking on a gimmick so we could stick in their minds when we hit them. The world had been reduced to animals. Technology eliminated to most. We grew more so recently in the past four months to our size. And the bigger we got the more difficult we knew surviving would get. So we really started to pay attention to Beginnings at that point.”

“Do you have any women?” Joe asked. “We have eighteen.”

Hal whistled. “Eighteen out of a hundred and some? Wow. We have thirteen. But we weren’t concentrating on finding women for reproduction. We want the country back and we needed soldiers. When we found out through Sgt. Ryder what the society does with women, we sheltered them.”

“What does the society do with women?” Joe asked.

“Lobotomizes them and farms them. They are shells of women reproducing manufactured embryos. It’s like something out of a horror film as Sgt. Ryder put it.”

Joe swallowed harshly. “I didn’t know that. So you shelter your women. You mean protect them?”

“Always.” Hal said. “They’re near extinction. Our women have lived rough lives. Attacked, raped. They have a hatred for men I can not explain, but it is understood. They deserve to be treated special. They don’t work, they stay in this huge house and when they come out, the men stay in. They call a lot of shots on how they get treated. None of them are very nice though. But . . . I guess I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. I’m sure you have the same problem.”

Joe was surprised. “Our women for the most part are nice. You don’t require your women to pull their own weight?”

“No.” Hal shook his head. “They wouldn’t do it even if I asked them too. They’re far too spoiled. Don’t tell me you make your women work dad.”

“Hell yeah.” Joe said proudly. “Christ, if I made them stop they’d bitch. Our women are very important. But pampered?” He fluttered his lips. “They are protected by our walls, they don’t need a house to protect them from our men. Rape is against the law here. You get shot for raping a woman. We screen our people carefully before we let them in. Then they go through an entire processing before living in this community. And Robbie could you imagine what the men here would say, if let’s say Jenny wanted to take a walk and we made all men go inside.”

Robbie laughed. “They’d stay out just to irritate her.”

Hal was shocked. “That isn’t right. There aren’t that many women. How can you not treat them special? That’s wrong. Anything they want they should be given. They’re women. They’re few.”

“Yeah, and they get away with a ton around here.” Joe told him. “But I’m not making them stay in a goddamn huge house. They need their freedom.”

“I don’t make our women stay in a house.” Hal corrected. “They want it that way.”

Robbie laughed again. “Wait a second.” He held up his hand. “You have thirteen women living in the house alone. They have no contact with the male community at all?”

“No.” Hal interrupted Robbie. “Once a month they present list to me of men they want to . . . well service them. And I’ll tell you. It’s like pulling teeth to get those men to agree to have sex, I mean, I’m sorry Dad, relations with these women.”

Robbie’s laughter increased. “Oh my God! Once a month. A selected few? Our women look like whores com . . .”

“Robert.” Joe cringed.

“Whores?” Hal questioned. “Please don’t tell me you made your women into whores?”

Joe huffed at Robbie. “See what you started. You have to start him on a righteous movement. You know all his life he argued the opposite way. No Hal, we didn’t make them into whores. The women have a share program here. They’re called understandings. They have one primary relationship and then one or two secondary. It works here. Very little competition or tension. It works.”

“Wow.” Hal blinked several times.

“Yeah.” Robbie noticed the look on his brothers face. “Our men get it. A lot of them. You have thirteen women locked together . . . oh wait.” Robbie snickered. “Wait. Bet me they turned into lesbians.”

“Robert!” Joe yelled.

“They did!” Robbie pointed. “Look at his face. In a world with limited women, Hal has a group of lesbians.” Robbie’s high pitch laughing grew out of control. “Oh my god.”

Joe rubbed his face watching Hal’s irritation. “Robert knock it off!”

“O.K.” Robbie stopped laughing. “Sorry Hal.”

Hal swayed his head. “They just hate men Robbie. They do.”

“Well keep them away from our women. No wait. Let’s get them together and watch them fight.”

“Robert.” Joe grew tired of yelling at him. “Enough of the women. Sorry about him Hal.”

“No problem dad. I missed him.” Hal winked at Robbie. “I’m just amazed that your men all get along and share women.”

“It’s a rarity that a problem occurs.” Joe explained. “Except between Frank and Dean them two just fight and fight over Ellen like . . .” Joe saw Hal’s expression drop. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you just say Frank?” Hal asked. “My brother Frank?”

“You don’t know.” Joe said. “Yes, Frank.”

“Wait.” Robbie again, spoke up. “You didn’t know? How can you not know? You sent his cloths back her. Didn’t you look at the pants. Gees.” Robbie stood up and aimed his rear-end at Hal as he pointed to above his own back pocket. “How can you miss the name.” Robbie sat back down.

“I . . . I didn’t look at the clothes fully. They belonged here. Frank is . . . Shit.” Hal yelled. “Frank’s the man we were searching for? He’s the man the society now has?”

“Yes.” Joe nodded. “They have Frank. He’s alive and well and we’re gonna get him back.”

“Do you know where?” Hal asked.

“We will. George, he called Dean.” Joe explained. “See there’s someone else in Beginnings working for George. We don’t know who it is. George has used Dean’s kids as a bargaining tool. Either Dean leaves and joins him or something happens to one of Dean’s kids. So, Dean’s going to leave. But not without us tracking him. Dean agreed and in that agreement to go with George, it was decided he’d be at the same place as Frank.”

“So when you track Dean, you’ve found Frank.” Hal stated.

“Yes.” Joe answered.

“Then you tell me where they are and I will send every one of my men to that camp. We will ride in and get them back.”

“We can’t do that.” Joe told him. “I won’t let you do that. What? Your gonna go and send every man you have to go after your brother? Christ Hal, you said it yourself. The purpose of your army is to get our country back. It’s selfish to use that for your brother. No. I won’t let you. We’re sending a scout after Dean. He will surveillance the area and get as much information as he can. We will then sneak attack in and take them back. Synchronizing the attack with the protection of Dean and Ellen’s children. That way this inside person can’t touch them. If they do, we’re ready for them and we’ll get them. Otherwise, if we make a big move, George will see it coming and by not knowing who the inside person is, we may not see it coming if they go after one of the kids. It’s better this way. He has the upper hand as long as we don’t know who his person is. And I’m sure you know how big the society is.”

“I know exactly how big the society is.” Hal said. “That’s why we only man this side of the country. We have to wait until we’re bigger to go over there. But Dad. You have to let me go with you. You have to let me be a part of this sneak attack. I want to. Please.”

Joe thought about it, but not for very long. “I would be honored if you’d go.” He heard Robbie whine. “Robbie, you have to stay here. You have Ellen and the kids to watch. And this community. Besides you get the glory of staging the whole thing.”

Robbie nodded with an arrogant smile. “Yeah I do. Hal, you have to remember. In order to keep up the plan we have to act as if we believe Frank’s dead. Aside from us, there are only two others that know. Dean and Ellen, and

they're playing along. Not even Frank's own son knows."

"What?" Another shock to Hal. "Johnny? Johnny lived too. How old is he now. Twelve."

"Nineteen." Joe told him. "And a spitting image of Frank. Wait until you see him."

"No." Robbie stopped Joe. "A spitting image of how Frank used to look."

Hal was confused. "What? Was he burned in a fire or something?"

"No." Joe shook his head with a laugh. "Your brother has pretty much gone through a metamorphosis if a human being can. Bigger, meaner looking, scarred. Cold. He looks scary at times." Joe shuddered. "But don't tell him I told you that. He thinks he's quite handsome." He smiled, "But I have to say, Frank is Beginnings hero. He is the strongest man I have ever met in my entire life. Always was, but now . . ." Joe whistled.

Robbie interjected. "I saw him toss a savage so hard the head of the savage actually severed from the body."

"And what about . . ." Joe added. "That guy Don last year in containment? Frank rammed his face into that wall with such a force, I didn't think a human face could make such a hole."

Hal closed his eyes. "And he shoots each man in the head to make sure they're dead, doesn't he?" He saw Joe and Robbie agree. "He sounds rather sick."

"He is." Joe had a hint of pride to his voice. "That's why we're safe with him around. He fears nothing and goes after anything that's a threat. Ask anyone. I'm sure they'll have a story to tell you. If you want to know who your big brother is now. Ask around."

"I will." Hal leaned back on the couch. The shock had to set in. "So many in our family lived."

"We're cool." Robbie commented. "What can I say."

Hal needed to get things straight. "O.K., so you have to get Frank back. You're fighting the society and savages. You are trying to find the inside person working for George. And now what about this new group of enemies. Tell me about them. I know nothing."

Joe looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"This . . . Mathias group. I've sent out . . ." Hal stopped talking when Robbie laughed. "What?"

"Mathias? You listened to our radio transmission and you thought Mathias was real. Oh shit."

Hal began to see red. "What are you talking about? I sent men out looking. You guys talked like they were . . . Robbie quit laughing."

"I can't help it." Robbie tried to stop. "Sorry. Mathias is a code name for George. We got it from the movie Omega Man. We all want to be Neville. Did you hear that too? It's like the big competition. Shit." Robbie taunted. "And you sent men out looking for him. Wait until I tell . . ." Robbie saw the seriousness on Hal's face. "No one." Robbie held up his hand. "This goes no further than this room." Robbie snuck out another snicker then went silent.

"O.K.!" Joe slapped his own thighs then stood up. "Hal? Hal?" he snapped his finger in front of Hal. Hal kept staring at Robbie. "Hal, we all want to kill him at times. But right now. You have your nephew to see again." He moved away from the sofa.

Without taking his views off of Robbie, Hal stood up. "I lied. I didn't miss you."

"Yes you did."

"No." Hal shook his head violently. "I didn't. I really don't think I did. Especially since you failed to grow up."

"Yes you did. You missed me. How could you not. I'm your baby brother. Hal? I'm lovable." Robbie tilted his head and held out his arms.

"Robbie. I didn't miss you." Hal insisted. "Let's go dad." He walked to Joe.

"I would have missed you if I knew you were alive. I missed you Hal. Hal? I missed you. Hal?" Robbie was ignored as Hal joined Joe. "Hal?" Robbie stood up calling as Joe and Hal walked to the door. "It's great to have you . . ." The door slammed. "Here." Robbie chuckled in amusement at himself. He then decided he was in the mood for one of Andrea's brownies. Just one. He went into the kitchen to steal one, Andrea would never know.

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With Andrea busy making a dinner and Jason out at the quantum lab, Dean had no other choice. He had to be the one to exam Bev's neck to check the final healing and conditions for skin grafting. So leaving word with Patrick that if Ellen shows up to get him for their meeting with Reverend Bob, do not tell her he's examining Bev, Dean walked to room two.

He cringed when he stepped inside setting the chart at the end of the table near the feet of Bev's nude body. "I'm looking at your neck. You didn't need to get undressed."

"Yes I did. I heard you were examining me."

Dean could have left, but instead of wasting the time and having to make her get dressed and return, Dean just wanted to get the examination over with. So he walked to Bev who laid back some, her left leg opening and closing slightly. He grabbed hold of her shoulder and pushed her to a sitting position. Dean, stood behind her and lifted her hair.

"Hey Patrick." Ellen walked up to him as he wrote in a chart. "Where's Dean, we have to see Reverend Bob."

"He's in room two with Bev." Patrick looked up. "Shit. I mean, did I say room two . . . Ellen?" Wincing, Patrick watched Ellen storm downed the hall, and then figuring what was Dean gonna do, fire him? Patrick went back to work.

Ellen hurried to room two, she opened the door without knocking. "Dean."

Dean walked from behind Bev. "Just finishing up. And we can go."

"Oh really?" Ellen tilted her head.

"What's that supposed to . . ." Dean remembered. Bev naked. "El." he chased her from the room. "Ellen."

"We have to be there. Are you done playing with your toy?"

"Ellen."

"Did you get excited Dean?"

“No. I didn’t even notice she was naked.”

Ellen stopped walking. “We have to go.”

“El, I am really getting tired of fighting with you over this.”

“And I’m getting tired of finding you in compromising positions with her.”

“El.” Dean tossed his hands up as he followed her out the clinic. “I was examining her.”

“Her neck Dean. Why was she naked?”

“O.K.! Enough!” Dean rushed to Ellen and physically stopped her. “Enough El. No more fighting over this. This is stupid and I want it to stop.”

“You want it to stop?”

“Yes.” Dean nodded.

“Is this the Dean ‘big’ stand?”

“If it needs to be.”

“Fine. Then hear the Ellen big stand.” She moved face to face with him. “Innocent or not, I catch you in one more compromising situation with her. You Dean, will become a Eunuch.” Flinging back her head Ellen folded her arms and stormed off to Reverend Bob’s.

^^^

“My God.” Hal’s mouth stayed open as he looked at Johnny before him in Joe’s office. “My God do you look like your father.”

Johnny ran his hand down his goatee. “I think it’s the facial hair.”

“Frank had a beard?” Hal turned to Joe. “Frank hated beards.”

Joe shrugged. “Says it makes him look mean. Go figure.”

“What is his obsession about looking mean.”

“He’s Frank.” Joe held out his hands. “When you talk to people you’ll get a good picture.”

“Amazing. Do you remember me Johnny?”

Johnny scratched his head. “Would you be mad if I told you barely.”

Hal chuckled and stood up laying his hands on Johnny’s shoulder. “Not at all.” He had to raise his eyes some to make eye contact. “Look how tall. A nephew.”

“One of many.” Johnny nodded. “My dad was like the father of the community. Even the kids El had with Dean, Dad called his own. Pap is their pap.”

“No kidding.” Hal smiled. “I have a big family?”

“And let’s not forget Nick?” Joe pointed. “So, Uncle Hal. You have one niece. And . . . Five? Nephews. Wait. Josh, Billy, Joey, Brian and Nick.”

“Pap.” Johnny said his name slowly and sad.

Joe let out a slow breath. “It’s still not sunk in yet.”

“What?” Hal looked confused. “What hasn’t sunk in?”

Johnny’s head lowered. “The society hit us with a plague last month. Dean cured it, but not before we lost lives. Brian died, he was only one.”

“Frank lost a son?”

Joe sadly nodded. “He was Frank’s pride and joy. How bad him and Ellen wanted him. Crushed him. That’s why Frank took Ellen beyond the wall. To get time alone to grieve.”

“Kidnaped her Pap. Dad kidnaped Ellen. Duct taped her and

everything. Ask her.”

Hal’s eyes shifted about. “And . . . you’re sure Frank was all right?”
Hal pointed to his own temple.

“Eh.” Joe waved his hand out. “That was Frank. And . . . here’s Jess. Your escort for this afternoon while Robbie and I finish our work.”

Hal spun to see. Jess walked in the office.

“Hal?” Jess smiled. “Wow, it is really nice to meet one of Robbie’s brother’s. I’m so happy for the both of you.” He shook Hal’s hand.

Joe sat down at his desk. “Jess here, is Robbie’s roommate.”

“Oh yeah?” Hal grinned. “How can you stand him?”

“Oh Robbie’s great. I see him differently than others do.”

Joe grumbled as he rummaged through his desk. “I bet.”

“Huh?” Jess questioned.

“Nothing.” Joe pulled out a requisition. “Fill this out Jess, before you take a jeep. Leave it in the bin at the garage. Keys are there.”

“Got it.” Jess took the requisition. “Ready Hal. I’m showing you the industrial section. Joe said something about you having some men to work there.”

Hal looked in question to Joe. “I did? I thought it was food preservation.”

“Plastics, metal, food. Same difference.” Joe waved his hand at him. “Get going, Andrea’s gonna want you back and that’s a ten mile ride out there.”

Jess who was usually more serious, was upbeat and chuckling. He opened the door for Hal. “After you. Wow, all of you Slagel’s are huge.”

“And handsome.” Hal added as he walked out.

“Of course.” Jess followed and shut the door.

Joe’s eyes looked above his glasses. “Oh brother.”

“Pap.” Johnny had an odd smile as he pointed. “Is he . . .”

“Clueless. Yes my sons are clueless.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Think about what I meant.” Joe peered up at Johnny. “And are you just gonna stand there or is your skinny ass getting back to work.”

“Man Pap you’re tough. I’m going.” Johnny walked to the door.

“And Johnny. Bev. Get a move on it, I mean it.”

“Patience Pap. Patience.” Johnny held up his hand, fingers spread and shifted it side to side.

“What? Is that some sort of new retarded hand shake? Why are you waving like that?”

“It’s not a wave. Just showing you my hand.”

“All right.” Joe took his glass off and leaned back. “I’ll bite. Why Johnny, are you showing me your hand?”

“Because soon Bev will be eating right out of it. Trust me.”

“Awfully sure of yourself.”

With arrogance Johnny nodded and opened the door. “I’m a Slagel.”

The door shut and Joe placed his glasses on and leaned into his desk. “Yeah you are. And what an arrogant, smug, cocky, egotistical bunch you all are.” Joe huffed out a breath. “Where do they get it from.”

In Reverend Bobs office, Dean and Ellen sat on the ‘marital’ couch as Reverend Bob called it. A red flower thing given to him by Danny Hoi. Danny had found it in the office of a church, he called it ‘Godly’ and Reverend Bob called it his own.

“El.” Dean spoke to her while they waited. “I won’t repeat this again.”

“Look at you being all forceful.”

“This is stupid. Now listen to me.”

Ellen began to sing. “*Just what makes that little old ant . . .*”

“Ellen, I hate . . .”

“*Think he could move that rubber tree plant . . .*”

“I hate that song.”

“*Every one knows an ANT.*” She placed her face close to Dean’s. “*CAN’T. Move a rubber tree plant.*”

“Ellen knock it off.” Dean grew irritated.

“Frank words!” Ellen looked away and sang different words to the melody. “*He’s got attitude! Little man attitude. He’s stands, four feet tall and wears geek shoes.*”

“You’re not gonna listen are you.”

“*So any time you’re feeling low, I want you to know, things . . .*”

Ellen’s paused.

“*. . . could be worse, yes they can.*” Dean shrugged as he sung the line.

Ellen giggled and looked at him. And they both sang Frank’s made up line together.

“*You could be another Dean attitude man.*”

Dean laughed. “God, Frank is weird.”

Ellen sat back on the couch. “Things aren’t the same without him here.”

“No. No one picks on me. Of course I can not wait to get him home to kill him.”

“For real?” Ellen asked. “Really kill him?”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded. “He stole you out of Beginnings.”

“It’s against the law here Dean.”

“You don’t think I can do it without it looking natural?”

“Yeah I guess you can.” Ellen nodded. “Just forewarn him, he’d think it was fun. Like a game.”

“He would. Wouldn’t he?” Dean swayed his head with a smile, then looked up when the office door opened and Reverend Bob walked in.

“Look how happy we look.” Reverend Bob grabbed a folder from his desk. “Just what I want to see.”

Ellen leaned into Dean whispering. “I’m not happy with you at this moment.”

Dean whispered back. “When are you ever?”

“O.K.” Rev. Bob spoke perky and walked to the front of his desk sitting on it. “Let’s get a relaxed feel shall we? Good. First let me say I’m glad you two decided to get married again. I didn’t perform the last ceremony, but I have an idea on this one. And I see no reason why you two should wait to get married. You have children.” He opened up the folder he held.

Dean’s eyes shifted to Reverend Bob’s left hand. It was wrapped in a bandage. “What happened to your hand?”

“Oh.” He held it up, a small spot of blood came from his palm onto the bandage. “I was opening the church relic box Danny brought back and the screw driver slipped.”

“I should take a look at it. When did we give you a shot for tetanus last?”

“I think that was two years ago when I stepped on that nail. Remember?”

Dean nodded. “Yes. Sorry. Just curious.”

“No big Deal.” Rev. Bob waved his injured hand and began to read the wedding plans and arrangement to Dean and Ellen.

^^^

Binghamton Alabama

“I’m trusting your opinion Dr. Morris.” George said to him.

“I realize that and I don’t know how much more I can convince you. I had all that information you gave me about his life. I tried tripping him up. He’s clueless. I believe this may be permanent Mr. President. Frank may not have the mental capacity to return to normal. His brain, I’ve notice is a bit slow intellectually. What you see is what you get with him. His memory is gone.”

“Excellent.” George smiled and he walked to his door. “Frank come in.”

Frank walked inside, nodded in acknowledgment to Dr. Morris. “You wanted to see me George.”

“Yes Frank. I was going over with Dr. Morris your condition. He thinks you’re doing just fine.”

“I am.”

“Yes I know. And the reason I was checking is because I have to leave for a couple weeks. I’ll be back, but important business further east calls me. Dr. Morris. Could you . . .”

“Certainly.” Dr. Morris walked to the office door. “Frank, if you need anything find me.”

“Thank you sir.”

George waited until they were alone. “There’s problems with these Beginnings people again.”

“I don’t understand why you don’t let me prepare a ground troop to storm in.”

“It’s not that easy. The land is scientifically enhanced. They have a communications center we can’t chance losing. They have capabilities they aren’t aware of. We need Beginnings intact and if we storm in we can chance losing that.”

“I should know this huh? Forgive me I’m . . .” Frank pointed to his own head. “Not all there.”

“I completely understand. Now as I said I’m leaving. So your CO position takes full effect this evening. You don’t need a memory to run a regiment. You know how to do that and you know what you have to do to rain my men into the best soldiers they can be.”

“You want them tough and skilled, right?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.” Frank closed one eye and nodded.

“And one more thing Frank. We have these men here. Prisoners of war you can call them. They are part of this United Western Alliance as they call them selves. Responsible for killing close to a thousand of our men.”

“Mercenaries? Gorilla type.”

“Exactly. Interrogations are not going smoothly. We need information. You must check on that progress daily. Can I trust you with that?”

“Absolutely.” Frank said with certainty. “I’m your man. Before long, they’ll be talking.”

“Good.” George grinned. “That’s what I wanted to hear.” George looked at the confident look in Frank’s eyes. Eyes that were missing something. Memory perhaps. A life he forgot he had. But that worked in George’s favor. Frank still had the qualifications George needed from him. Skilled, obedient, strong, strategically smart. Plus one more thing, Frank’s loyalty to the Society.

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Beginnings, Montana

“Part of your job Danny as head of Mechanics is being trusted doing this.” Henry led him down the tunnels to the cryo-lab. “This is your job, no one else.”

“How often.”

“Every three to four hours.” Henry answered. “I’m usually up pretty late so if I can, I do the check in the middle of the night. If I can’t, Dean does. In emergencies where I can’t or he can’t, security does.” Henry stopped at the cryo-lab door. “Do you have that mask I gave you?”

“Yeah, but why.”

“This is Dean and Ellen’s work and it’s very scientific down here. They’re getting worse. They do shit down here they can’t do upstairs. I wished they would do it at the mobile, but I understand that’s too far.”

“What kind of science shit.”

“Gross scientific shit, I can’t figure out the meaning to.” Henry set down his tool bag and opened it. He pulled out a spray bottle.

“What’s that.”

“Smelly stuff I made. It helps. You don’t want to put on your mask?”

“Nah.” Danny shook his head. “I’m tough.”

“O.K.” Henry picked up his tool bag again and punch in his code to the cryo-lab. He opened the door and immediately started squirting. He grunted when he walked in and flipped on the light. “God, can’t they clean up in here?”

“Neat.” Danny looked around. It really was a mess. Folders and papers everywhere. Danny walked more around. On a counter petri dishes spread out, they grew something in them. He heard the metal banging and he looked to the noise. Across the small lab were six rabbit cages. The rabbits inside bounced high and banged off the cage, they squealed also. “Henry? When uh did Rabbits start sounding like pigs?”

“Since Dean and Ellen got a hold of them. Don’t ask me, I don’t know what they do to them.”

Danny chuckled as he followed Henry. “Where we going.”

“To a place that used to be my world. They took it over, moving more of their stuff back there. Like they need the . . . aw I told him to move that out of my view.” Henry paused in his walk to the back door, he shuddered at the large jar on the counter.

“Oh my God.” Danny neared the jar with a pink fluid inside.

“They put it there so I can see it.”

“Oh shit.” Danny peered closed to the joined small objects inside the jar. They were about three inches big each. Rabbits. Conjoined at the head. Facing each other, fur-less. Their eyes open as they floated.

“Siamese Rabbits. You would have thought Dean hit the lottery when they were born.” Henry pressed numbers into the keypad. “The mother died giving birth to them. Dean wasn’t even experimenting on her at the time. Everyone said he did something to her. Ellen says no.” The door buzzed to the back room and Henry opened it. “This way.”

Danny took one more look. “Did Dean kill them.”

“Oddly enough no. He tried to keep them alive, he did good for two weeks and they died. Never grew much, funny thing watching them try to move.” Henry shrugged. “So he kept them. That’s his version of formaldehyde.”

Danny followed Henry into the dimly lit back room. The fluorescent light gave some hint.

Henry pulled out his flashlight. “Never turn on a light in here because you never know what Dean and Ellen are growing or making. This way.”

“What are we doing here then.”

“What Dean has in this case is very important. I don’t know what’s in here, but this case gets top priority. There’s two more cases in the other room. We check those twice a day. But this one. All the time.” Henry walked behind the case and move it out a foot.. He removed the black cover some and squatted down. He turned on his flash light. “Temperature gauge is here. It’s marked if the temp goes up. See. Can’t go passed this line” Henry showed Danny. “It’s good. Just check the power. Make sure it’s running. It is and then.” Henry lifted the clipboard that hung on the back. “You mark the time, initial it and that’s it. Any power problems or temp rises let Dean know immediately. This case has a back up coolant that lasts five hours.”

“Hence the reason for the checks.”

“Exactly.” Henry stood up. “Then just move it back and cover it.”

“Henry?” Danny called as Henry grabbed for the cover. “Is this locked up?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Who has keys?”

“Dean and Ellen.”

“Did they lose them?” Danny asked.

“No why?” Henry pushed the case back.

“Look. Someone was trying to open this lock.”

“Shit.” Henry swallowed harshly as he shined his flashlight on the case and his fingers moved against the scraped metal by the lock. “Shit.” He closed his eyes and shook his head.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Beginnings, Montana

Paul had to often wonder if he was chosen for the job because he was a loner or because he was good at it. He debated on it being the latter because it seemed everyone had something to complain about every time he was the disk jockey at a Beginnings occasion. But if they didn't complain, it wouldn't be Beginnings. Hal seemed to like it though. He waltzed around with a certain cockiness to him, bobbing his head to the beat as he bounced around talking to everyone.

Johnny smelled the perfume first as Bev sat next to him. "Go away." He lifted his drink and not his eyes.

"Really Johnny, you should be nicer, if you want me." Bev trickled her fingers up his arm.

"Bev." Johnny finally looked at her. "Now see, you act like you got this thing for me."

"I do."

"So uh . . . why were you hitting on Dean this afternoon?"

Bev went silent.

"He's old." Johnny commented.

"He's the smarted man in Beginnings."

"He's with Ellen."

"I hate Ellen."

"So this going after Dean thing is a chick thing."

"No, there's a prestige in being with Dean." Bev told him. "A woman can have more than one man in these times Johnny. I want Dean too. I'll get him."

"See ya." Johnny stood up.

"Johnny." Bev grabbed his hand. "There are lots of men in this community that want me."

Johnny grinned in a sneaky manner. He walked behind Bev and leaned to her placing his lips near her ear whispering. "But I know you're game. You only want the ones that don't want you. Wanna know why? We're the only ones who really got it. Bye Bev." Johnny raised his eyebrows quickly, backed up, grabbed his drink and walked away.

"Frank." Jenny tilted her head and tucked her red hair as she talked to Hal. "Hal, do you remember me?"

"A little."

"Because you're looking at me like you remember me. Anyhow, Frank. Frank. What exactly is it that you want to know."

"Tell me what I missed knowing about him. What was he like here."

"Mean." Jenny stated. "Rough. Loud." Jenny whistled. "Boy was he loud. But . . . you have to give it to him. Not all men can dangle from a rope on a flying helicopter, swing down lift Ellen from the clutches of the SUTs and carry her off into safety. All with one hand mind you."

"Frank did that."

“And lots more.”

“Thanks Jenny for the story.”

“I have more.”

“Maybe another time. Thanks.” Hal moved on, he saw Dean holding a baby. “Dean?”

“Hi Hal.” Dean bounced Nick.

“Who’s kid?”

“Technically?” Dean snickered. “Sperm provided by Henry. But if you ask Frank, it’s his kid. I’m filling in for a while.”

Hal peeked at the baby. “He looks like Henry.”

“Certainly not Ellen.”

Hal’s views quickly moved to her. “Is this common practice in Beginnings to give birth to more than one man’s child.”

“No. It’s Ellen practice.” Dean told Hal. “But we’re all quite used to it by now.”

“Well you’re getting married to her.” Hal ran his hand over Nick’s head. “I’m sure all of that will change.”

Dean snickered. “Sorry.” He snickered again. His eyes moved to the bar.

Hal checked out where Dean peered. He saw his brother Robbie in what would be called a ‘dirty dance’ with Ellen by the bar. Slow and moving, Robbie paid more attention to Ellen’s neck than anything. “What is my brother doing?”

“Taking Frank’s place.”

“Excuse me.” Hal moved from Dean and to the bar. He tapped Robbie on the shoulder. “Little brother can I speak to you.”

“Sure.” Robbie smiled. “Excuse me El.” Robbie felt Hal’s pull. “Henry, don’t touch.” He pointed to Henry then walked with Hal. “Yes.”

“What are you doing?”

“Partying.”

“Ellen is getting married to Dean.”

“Yeah, so.”

“Should you be touching her like that?”

“Um . . . how else should I touch her?”

“Robbie, Dean has every right to get mad.”

Robbie laughed. “Why he’s used to it. It’s not like El and I . . .” Robbie dropped his voice to a whisper. “Haven’t had sex.”

“You slept with Ellen?”

“Ask her how many times.” Robbie said smug.

“What about Frank?”

“That would be incest. Kidding. Call it her family obligation.” Robbie saw the offended look Hal gave. “Lighten up Hal, God. I’m joking around with you. Exaggerating? Gees, you haven’t changed one bit. Get a grip. Loosen up. This is Beginnings.” Robbie swatted his brother’s arm and returned to the bar.

“I’m beginning to wonder if it’s Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Did I hear a bible reference?”

Hal turned to see Rev. Bob. “Sir?”

“Reverend Bob.” He shook Hal’s hand. “Nice to meet you. I hear your asking for Frank stories.”

“You have one?”

“Um . . . no. I never liked him much.”

Hal blinked in shock to hear that coming from a man of the cloth.

“Never liked him much.” Jason blew smoke from his mouth as he grabbed his drink talking to Hal. “Frank was the most arrogant person I knew. Loud too. I never had much tolerance for intellectually challenged individuals so you can say I never had much tolerance for Frank.”

Hal quietly slipped away.

His next stop wasn't much better. He was warned, but he didn't heed it. Joe stopped him before Hal approached Ellen and Henry, but Hal went anyhow.

“Oh that is so true.” Henry agreed cheerfully with Ellen. “And what about when he broke down that door and pulled me out of the flames. Brought me back to life.”

“And Hal.” Ellen commented. “Frank wanted no glory. Never does. Only laid.” She snickered. “He was such the nick of time guy.”

“Dramatic about it too.” Henry added.

“If he could cut it any closer he did.” Ellen went on.

“But he showed up. Charged in saved the day.”

“Like the calvary.” Ellen pointed to Hal. “Hey! That's you. Are we boring you Hal.”

“Um . . .” Hal was trying to catch up to who was saying what. Ellen and Henry talked so fast and so connected his head spun. “No, go on.” Hal knew that was a mistake as soon as he said it.

“Henry, what about the explosion in the lab. Could he have cut it any closer?”

“I forgot about that. Isn't that weird. He did cut it close El. It ended tragic.”

“Yeah it did.”

“What explosion?” Hal asked.

“The one in the cryo lab.” Ellen answered. “The floor dropped and Frank showed up pulling me out. But there was a second explosion.”

“Lucky for you.” Hal commented.

Henry agreed. “Yeah but not for Dean. He was killed.”

Hal looked at Dean. “Dean's alive.”

“Yeah.” Ellen nodded.

“So he died and your were able to bring him back. He wasn't injured that bad?” Hal asked.

Ellen shuddered. “Not injured bad? The back of his head was gone. He died all right and he was buried. Out in the under developed section. It was sad, wasn't it Henry?”

“Terrible El. Terrible. So sad. You were bad.”

“I was out of it. God.”

“Wait.” Hal held up his hand. “I'm confused. How did Dean lose the back of his head and get buried and now he's walking around? Are you people medically doing something weird.”

“No.” Ellen laughed. “We went back in time and stopped the explosion.”

“Actually.” Henry interjected. “We weren’t suppose to stop the explosion. We were only supposed to get Ellen out of there so she could get the vial with the antidote to save Joe, so he could get Frank, so Frank could save Dean. But Ellen blabbed it to herself.”

“I blabbed.” Ellen nodded.

“No explosion.”

“None.”

Hal’s head hurt from switching. “Time machine?”

“You don’t know?” Ellen asked. “Henry he doesn’t know.”

“Oh my God how could Joe not tell you.”

“A time machine.”

“Yes.” Henry nodded. “That’s how Robbie ended up here.”

“He came through the time machine?” Hal asked.

“No.” Henry snickered and nudged Ellen. “Robbie didn’t show up in time to come to Beginnings, so Frank went back in time to get information on the society but he made a phone call and that made Robbie go to Ellen early.”

“And marry me.” Ellen finished the story.

“You were married to Robbie?” Hal was getting more lost.

“For about ten years.” Ellen said. “But I don’t remember it because it never really happened in my mind. Henry’s mind though.”

“My mind.” Henry said. “See Frank hated the fact that Robbie was married to Ellen but loved the fact that Robbie was here. So, knowing he couldn’t stand being the town drunk or Ellen-less, we all went back in time stopped him from making the phone call but mailed a letter instead. Hence Robbie.”

“Hence Robbie.” Hal tossed his hands up. “I’m still confused. A time machine?”

“Henry he doesn’t believe us.” Ellen said. “You don’t believe us. I know. Jason will show it to you. If it wasn’t for the time machine, we wouldn’t know about the upcoming plague that passed and we wouldn’t have brought back Dean and we probably would have all died.”

“Except for us El.” Henry added. “We’re immune.”

“Yeah we are. What do you think Hal?”

“I think I uh . . .” Hal pointed to the end of the bar. “I need a drink. Excuse me.”

Ellen giggled. “He’s cute Henry.”

“And nice El. He’s so receptive to our stories. We have to talk to him more often.”

“Oh we do.”

“I’ll be back. I want to get Jason to explain the time machine thing to Hal so he can make sense out of our story later.”

“Good idea. You do that.”

Henry walked toward Jason and Ellen, smiling faced the bar. As she reached for her drink, she heard that annoying voice.

“For a woman who’s possessive about her man, you certainly leave him alone a lot.” Bev commented.

Ellen ignored her.

“I know you think I’m just trying to get to you. Think again. Maybe one morning Ellen you should stop by the clinic and see why Dean really leaves for work that early.” Bev reached around Ellen and grabbed a bottle pouring

herself a drink. She giggled. "If you don't believe me, how else do I know about that crooked appendix scar Dean has."

As Ellen spun around Bev walked away. Ellen eyes shifted to Dean across the room. Dean smiled and waved at her and Ellen flipped him off.

Joe saw it all as he approached a clueless Dean from behind. "Bev." He whispered in Dean's ear. "Perhaps we should suggest to Hal that he take her back to Bowman."

"Perhaps we should tell her she's going and drop her off somewhere."

"Sounds kind of heartless of you Dean."

"Yeah well." Dean turned and faced Joe. "If you think about it, it's the compassionate thing to do. At least she has a chance at living. She keeps up her antics here, someone will end up stopping her."

"O.K." Joe laid a swift hand on Dean's shoulder. "When's that wedding of yours Dean?"

"Five days. Why?"

"Just changing the subject." Joe lifted Nick from Dean's arms. "Let me steal him and take him to see Andrea."

Empty Dean felt as Joe snatched the baby and walked away quickly. Dean watched him take the baby to Andrea who handled the baby like a grandmother could. Then Dean couldn't help but notice Bev, walking and flaunting herself around. Dean wondered what she said to Ellen. He knew it had to be bad by the way Ellen kept flipping him off every time he looked at her. Knowing it couldn't possibly be anything true, Dean shrugged it off and did what everyone else seemed to do, seek out Beginnings' newest celebrate. Hal.

^^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

"Frank, you're the best. Thanks." Richie praised in a happy manner.

Frank tossed his burning cigarette on to the grass beyond his front door as they sat on the step. He coughed. "You're welcome."

"Wow, the CO's secretary." Richie swayed his head in amazement at the title Frank just gave him.

"We start at five tomorrow morning."

"I'll be there. Just tell me what you need me to do."

"Work with me." Frank told him. "Let me ask you this. How is your rapport with the men here?"

"Frank." Richie snickered. "You know me, they love me. Love me."

"Good, I'm gonna need that during training."

"Gonna get rough?" Richie asked.

"Somewhat yes." Frank peered out into the emptiness of the night.

"It's good to see ya Frank. It is." Richie spoke serious.

"It's good to see you too Richie." Frank laid his hand on Richie's back. "Real good." Frank's hand slid from Richie and he listened to Richie ramble about old times. Frank didn't mind, he liked hearing the stories. He really did. And knowing he shouldn't, Frank lit another cigarette, leaned back on the step

and enjoyed the familiar company.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

They sat like the old friends they were, in the late night, after the party was over on the livingroom floor of Ellen's home. Hal on his side, legs extended. Ellen sitting Indian style across from him. They both had coffee mugs on the coffee table and pieces of Andrea's brownies. They talked. And had been for hours.

Hal reached for his coffee, stopped mid-sentence and raised his eyes when Dean came from his office.

"Night El." Dean bent down to Ellen, ran his hand over her head and kissed her. "Love you."

"Dream of Bev."

Dean grunted and walked to the bedroom.

"See El." Hal pointed. "This is what I don't understand."

"What do you mean?"

"You say you love Frank."

"I do, more than life itself."

"But you're marrying Dean. It's not natural."

Ellen smiled. "Yeah, if you think about it. It is. See Dean and I have a relationship. We work as a couple. We click. Though right now we're clashing. But for the most part we work out. Frank and me, we're the best of friends and great lovers. But every single time we try to make a relationship work, we fail miserably. We make a better couple when we're not a couple? Does that make sense."

"No."

"It shouldn't. But bring him home for me Hal and you'll see."

"I'll bring him home."

"I believe that. I wish I could see Frank's face when he sees you."

"I'll tell you all about it."

"In great detail please." Ellen said. "You are the writer."

"Yes I am. Thanks for opening your home to me."

"Hal, I am so glad you decided to stay here. I have a surprise."

"You do." Hal sat up when Ellen did. "What?"

"Be right back." Ellen jumped up and went down the hall

Hal listened to her thumping feet as she ran, the opening of the door and Dean's voice

"El, the light."

"Shut up Dean."

Hal shook his head and smiled when the door closed and Ellen thumbed her way back. He looked up to her. "What do you have?"

"Ready?" Ellen looked as if she were up to something. "Check it out." From behind her back she pulled out a video tape. "The Hal movie."

"The Horse Soldiers." He stood up reaching for the tape.

"Yep. Wanna watch?"

“I’d love to but. El, it’s late I don’t want to keep you up.”

“Hal please.” Ellen took the tape off of him and placed it in the VCR. “We can only use the television for movies anyhow.” She grabbed Hal’s hand and brought him to couch, they sat down. “Let’s see how many of the words we remember.”

With the light out, they slouched down comfortably leaning towards each other in a way they had done many years before. Somehow the movie was a bit different to them as they viewed it with adult perception. But one thing was the same, the way they mumbled through the lines, saying the words with the actors, surprising themselves on how much they actually remembered of that movie.

^^^

Though George hated riding the train from hell, he rode it back to Quantico feeling a lot different. The conductor’s blowing of the whistle irritated him less. His mood was up. He was confident. At ease. And even though things were going his way with Frank, he knew that with in a couple weeks time, things would go even better. How could they not? He would have Dean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

September 12

Binghamton, Alabama

“Officer on deck!” Richie called out in the still dark early morning as Frank approached the rows and rows of men who stood outside waiting.

They all stood at attention.

“At ease.” Frank spoke loud. “Listen up! If you can not hear me, I suggest you pay attention. Because I have a big mouth and I will not talk any louder than this.” Frank paced in front of them. “I am your new CO. Colonel Frank Slagel And the training you are about to embark on will make you into what you need to be. I can be your best friend or I can be your worst enemy. It’s your choice. Over these next couple weeks of intense physical training I will get to know each and everyone of you personally. Make no bones about it, you’ll get used to seeing this mug.” Frank paused to fix the sloppily tucked in shirt of a soldier who stood in the front line. “You will not be training alone. The extreme physical parts that you will encounter will be totally understood by those higher in rank than you. They will do it before you do it.” Frank looked at the shocked looks on his ten man officer team. “How can we expect you to respect us when you’re doing all the work. Correct?” Frank finally stopped moving about. “What I make you do, I will do. There’s not a mile you will walk or run that I haven’t or won’t. It is your right gentlemen, If I ask something of you, to ask me to show you that I know how to do it. But let’s get one thing straight. I *will* know how to do it. And if I have to show you . . . you’ll pay for the show. Got that. Nowfor the next week or so, you shall resume your duties of putting this base in order. I will assign temporary squad leader positions to replace my officers until my officers have completed the training I require of them. As for now, enjoy your chow . . . dismissed.” Frank turned on heel and walked away.

Lt. Merrick saw the questionable glances given to him by the other officers. Telling them he’d handle it. He went after Frank. “Colonel Slagel.”

Frank stopped walking. “Yes.”

“You . . . you weren’t serious about making us train were you?”

“We went over this before you and I. Why would I lie? Now I suggest you and your buddies over there chow down and change them clothes. It’s gonna be a hot day.” Frank smiled when he saw the irritated look on Lt. Merrick’s face. “Buck up.” Frank gave a swat to his arm. “It’ll be fun. Think of your training as an adventure at an amusement park.” Frank leaned down to him. “You’re about to enter Frank’s world.” With a shitty grin, Frank turned around and left a speechless Lt. Merrick.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Hal and Josh were both at the house so there was no reason that Ellen couldn’t leave. She walked across the streets of Beginnings, the sun wasn’t up fully, yet Dean had left the house twenty minutes earlier. Perhaps Ellen

shouldn't have let Bev's words get to her. But they stayed with her all night, seeped into her dream and went with her to the clinic. Why *did* Dean go to the clinic so early. Knowing that she probably was wrong, Ellen just needed to go to the clinic and see for herself. Settle her mind once and for all. Taking a chance of Dean getting angry for her checking up on him, Ellen entered the quiet clinic and then walked into Dean's lab. The counter light was on. But no Dean. As she turned to leave she heard voices, muffled but close. Zooming her eyes to follow the sound Ellen spotted the door to the back room. With folded arms she approached the closed door and placed her ear near to it. The voices came from there. "No." she spoke out loud, grabbed the door handle and turned.

Ellen gasped, her shock filled voice carried into the room shocking Dean and Bev who were in there. On the floor on a make-sift bed, Dean laid on top of Bev. He was shirtless, and so was she. Ellen felt crushed, her hurt magnified in her voice. "You asshole." Ellen slammed the door and walked out. She stopped mid lab to catch her breath, to slow her fast beating heart.

"El." Dean's voice followed the opening of the door again.

Ellen started to leave.

"El, let me explain." Dean was putting on his shirt as he chased her.

"Explain what?" Ellen spun and faced him. "I knew it."

"Listen. It's . . . It's . . ." Dean ran his fingers through his hair.

"It's what Dean? Exactly as I thought?" Ellen tossed her hands in the air. "I feel like such a fool for even believing you. You lied to me Dean. You lied to me."

"Yeah so what El!" Dean yelled back. "How many times have you lied to me? Huh? How's it feel El? How does it feel?"

"How does this feel Dean?" With a tightly closed fist, Ellen pulled back giving it everything she had and delivering a hard blow to Dean's gut.

Dean's painful scream and a loud 'thump' woke Ellen from her deep dream filled state. She sat up straight in bed breathing heavy.

"El, you hit me." Dean looked so confused as he picked himself up from the floor. "God, what the hell were you dreaming about." He rubbed his shoulder. "You scared me out of bed."

"How could you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Cheat on me in my dream."

"What?" Dean ran his hand down his face.

"I hate you."

"El, you can't possibly be mad at me over something you dreamt. El?" Dean watched Ellen lay down and pull the covers over her head. "You are." He sat on the bed.

"Appendix scar." Ellen said from beneath the covers.

"What?"

Ellen sat up and flung the covers off. She was calmer. "She knows about your appendix scar. And she told me that tonight. I guess that's why I'm mad."

"How does she know that?"

"I don't know. But it's driving me nuts." Ellen laid back down. "Sorry I hit you."

Dean slipped in bed and laid next to her. "Sorry I cheated on you in your dream. Was I enjoying it?"

“Dean.” Ellen shook her head. “Can you uh . . . do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Can you not go to work early today?”

Dean inched closer to her, softening his voice. “Can you give me a good reason to stay in bed that extra hour.” He kissed her.

Ellen laughed.

“What?”

“An hour?” She laughed again. “O.K. sure Dean. Take your hour.”

Dean smirked. He’d show her. He ignored her insinuations that his lovemaking time would be short and he kissed her. He knew he’d take his hour one way or another even if it meant irritating Ellen with an exaggerated amount of foreplay.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

There was a certain snicker on Frank’s face as he watched the struggle of the ten officers, each of them trying to take that ten foot wall. So pitiful they looked to Frank as they made their mad dash run, ram into the wall, leap and miss for the edge and fall to the ground.

“Gentlemen. This is not a mountain here. It’s a fuckin’ wall. What’s the problem.”

Lt. Merrick huffed angry and out of breath as he approached Frank. “It’s ten feet tall.”

“Yeah, so.” Frank placed his hands on his hips looking down to Lt. Merrick. “What’s your point.”

“It’s not that easy lifting yourself over a ten foot wall.”

Frank laughed with a toss of his head.

“Colonel. If it’s so easy, you do it.”

The smile left Frank’s face. “You don’t think I can take that wall. What are you? Fuckin stupid? I’m six foot three.”

“Not with ease.” Lt. Merrick spoke with edge.

“You don’t think. Let me tell you something little man. I can take the wall with ease. It’s nothing. And when I show you that. You’ll pay.” Frank walked by the arrogant lieutenant and to the group of men trying at the wall. “Back it up. All of you!” Frank waited until the cleared. He stepped back from the wall, not nearly as far as the others did. He looked at it, shook his head in a scoff, took a two step run. On his third step, he leaped. His hands gripped to the edge and his boot connected center to the wall. Frank lifted himself up without a struggle and hurled himself over the top, landing on his feet on the other side.

“That is how that’s done.” Frank told the officers then looked so perturbed as he walked back to Lt. Merrick. “Now, what is your problem with that wall?” Frank lowered his face close to his. So red, his words so strong.

“Nothing.”

“Good. Now for being an asshole. Drop down and give me fifty.”

“Fifty what?”

“Push ups.”

Lt. Merrick looked at Frank as if Frank were ridiculous. “What are you nuts? I can’t do fifty push ups.”

“Then you will stay out here until you learn. And you will do a hundred.”

“You said fifty.”

“I changed my mind. Do it!” Frank pointed and back up. “Now!” He turned his back and walked to the other officers, smiling as he did so.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Johnny sat on one side of the clinic lab while Dean sat on the other. Johnny was engrossed with the microscope, Dean with papers. Yet they spoke as they worked.

“Johnny you have to get a move on with this Bev thing. If you can’t do it, let us know.”

“Patience Dean. Patience. Man, you and my Pap. If you want things to turn out right you have to do them right. I’m doing it the right way. But, if you must know. It isn’t gonna make a difference right now. She wants your little body. So watch out.”

Dean reviewed the paper he worked on. “Johnny, what do you know about my appendix scar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know I have one?”

“Yes.” Johnny hid his snicker. “And it’s crooked.”

“Thank you.” Dean began to write. “John . . . ny.”

“Why are you writing my name down.”

“If you must know, I’m making a list of everyone that I know who knows about my crooked scar.” Dean answered.

“Why?”

“Because Bev said something about it to Ellen.”

“She . . .” Johnny smiled. “Dean, if you wouldn’t go around dropping your pants in front of Bev, she wouldn’t blab about that scar.”

“What!” With shock, Dean looked up.

Johnny started to laugh. “Sorry El. I had to see his face.”

Dean turned around on his stool to see Ellen. “God can he be like Frank.” He stood up. “Hey El.” He brought the paper with him and handed it to her. “Here.”

“What’s this?” Ellen reviewed it.

“A list of names of those who know about my crooked scar. See any of these people could have mentioned it.”

“Why is Josephine on this list? How does she know.”

“I told her about it when I took her appendix out. Remember? You were there. So, this is for you.”

“Thanks.” she handed the list back. “You ready?”

“For what?”

“Clean up. Remember? Joe said if we don’t clean up that cryo-lab, he’s condemning it. He was there checking our case. He said he was entirely grossed out and to get our asses down there now.”

“Oh.” Dean nodded. “He was in here bitching about something. I was busy. O.K., we’ll hide the stuff.” He laid his hand on Ellen’s back as he led her out. “Bye Johnny.”

“Have fun. And if I see Bev . . .”

Dean was going to say something, but he let it go. He pulled the lab door closed as he stopped in the hall with Ellen. “Did Joe tell you.”

“Boy did he ever. He went off for about ten minutes. Especially about Peter and Bugs, the fused bunnies. I thought . . .”

“No, about why he was really down there.”

“No.” Ellen paused by the front doors. “Why?”

“Get this, to reprogram the keypad so it no longer takes a general security code. Someone tried to break into the Zappa case.”

“Oh my God Dean. Who?”

“They think whoever it is that’s working for George.”

“Reverend Bob had that wound.”

“Yeah I know. I told Joe.”

“Will he check it out.”

“One of us.” Dean opened the door for Ellen. “We have to watch that case El. That’s all our special work.”

“I know. No one can know what’s in there. Dean if they did . . .”

“I don’t want to think about it. Let’ just get down there and clean up.”

Shuddering at the thought, Dean placed his hand in Ellen’s and they quickly headed to the cryo-lab.

^^^

It fascinated Hal. Sitting on the hood of the jeep, he watched Frank’s men train in the security training area. With his feet rested on the bumper, Hal placed his elbows on his knees and ran his cupped hands under his chin as he watched. They did some sort of technique Hal wasn’t quite familiar with. But he knew he’d find out soon when the clipboard appeared under his nose. Hal looked up to Dan who presented it.

“Thought you’d like to see our schedule.”

“I would.” Hal smiled and took it. “Thanks. So you’re running training?”

“For Robbie. This is just practice.”

“What exactly are they . . .” Hal’s speech slowed down. “. . . practicing.” He checked out the schedule. “Neck snapping technique 12?”

“Yes.” Dan explained. “It’s where you have your enemy on the ground and you use your foot to turn the chin at just the right angle. It has to be done quickly or it only causes a severe sprain.”

“Technique 12?”

“One of Frank’s favorites.”

“So Frank came up with this? If this is technique 12, exactly how many neck breaking techniques did my brother come up with.”

“I believe twenty-seven.”

Hal mouthed the words, ‘twenty-seven’ and turned his head to the side in shock.

“So how long are you watching?” Dan asked.

“Well I was going to stay, but I think I’ll come back up for this one

here.” Hal pointed as he handed the schedule back to Dan. “It surprises me that Frank trains that.”

“Oh that’s a Robbie addition. He thought that would be . . . how did he put it. Neat?”

“So my little brother came up with the name.”

“Oh no.” Dan shook his head. “The name ‘learn with Mr. Kung Fu’ says it all. That’s a Danny Hoi thing. He teaches it. Hal, you picked a fun day to watch training. Frank always designated Thursdays as free for all days. Where the training is different.”

“Fun days.” Hal stated. And he thought about the activity training for the day. Neck breaking. Kung Fu. Killing with an assault weapon without using a bullet. Disemboweled in one easy movement. And when he reviewed the list in his mind, it was pretty clear to him. From what he learned of Frank lately, yes, his big brother would designate these things as ‘fun’.

^^^^

“Sorry I’m late.” Dean barreled into Joe’s office, stopping cold when he saw Henry behind Joe’s desk. “Henry, what are you doing there?”

“Joe said to sit here.” Henry answered.

Dean looked at Joe who sat in Henry’s spot. “Joe, doesn’t that bother you?”

“Yes, but sit down so we can do this thing. Did you clean up that pigsty?”

“You mean the lab?” Dean sat down. “Yeah, spic and span.”

Henry let out a long sigh. “Thanks for making him do that Joe. Did you see that jar.”

“Yes Henry I saw it.”

Robbie snickered. “What jar. What’s in the jar.”

Henry looked so disgusted. “Those siamese twin rabbits.”

“I thought they died.” Robbie said.

“They did.” Henry commented. “Dean has them in formaldehyde.”

“Cool.” Robbie nodded his head. “Can I see them Dean?”

“Sure.” With a shrug, Dean answered.

Joe felt less in control than when he sat behind the desk, but he didn’t sound it. “Can we please just do this, Thank you. Now, Reverend Bob is why were here. Henry, you spoke to Danny?”

“Yes Joe.” Henry nodded. “He did give Rev. Bob a relic box and it was locked. However Danny couldn’t confirm where he had it.”

“Good.” Joe jotted down on his paper. “We have to find that box and check it out. If he struggled with the lock there has to be signs of it.”

Robbie had a look of disagreement. “Yeah, but if he’s guilty, wouldn’t he cover his ass? I mean, I would.”

“You would.” Henry interjected.

“Shut up Henry.” Robbie continued. “Anyhow. It’s not concrete enough to eliminate him as the one going after Dean’s things.”

“Here’s the question on my mind.” Henry stated. “Why is he going after Dean’s case? What can be so important in there that he would go after it.”

Joe knew the answer to that question. It was simple and he couldn’t

share it with Henry. If it was George's person going after the case, then George's person was going after the virus that Dean threatened him with. "Embryos." Joe spoke up. "No one but Dean knows where those damn embryos are. After speaking to Hal and finding out how George farms his population, I'm gonna say it's the embryos."

"Joe." Henry looked astonished. "Oh my God, that is really good thinking."

"I'm smart Henry." Joe grumbled. "Blood. Dean?"

"Huh . . ." Dean was still stuck on Joe's last sarcastic comment. "Sorry. No blood at the lab. El and I checked. If Reverend Bob injured his hand at the lab we thought there would be some blood. It was bleeding pretty bad. But . . . nothing. Floor clean."

"When?" Joe asked sarcastically. "When is that floor clean?"

"Joe please." Dean scoffed.

"No Dean, I'm dead serious here. I'm terrified of what you two are doing in that lab. Files, our files are brought down there. Blood samples. You only let people in there when you need them to do something normal for you. And it smells Dean. What in Christ's name is that smell down there?"

"Smell?" Dean was confused. "What smell is down there?"

"Rotten. Sulphur. Dean, you name it, it stinks." Joe rambled.

"Oh." Dean shrugged. "Sorry. I must be used to it. Can we get back to Reverend Bob."

Joe grunted slightly. "All right. This recent incident has only told me we need to move. So we will. Henry, you have to lay low while this transition thing is happening. But the rest of us don't. I divided up our five suspects between the three of us. Bev. Now we have Johnny working on her. I'll keep working on Johnny and the little trailing reports I get on a daily basis will keep her on check for the investigation." Joe saw Henry raise his hand. "Yes Henry?"

"Who's trailing her?"

"I'd rather not reveal that to anyone. I have three little spies around here. They help out. Cole, now, I can handle Cole and even though Henry is laying low, he can help. Henry you need to befriend him. Especially since you'll now be working closely to him.

"Aw Joe." Henry whined. "He is such a pervert. I really don't like him."

"Tough. Be his pal. I'm definitely going to take Andrea. I'll pay more attention to what she says, keep my eyes out. Talk to her, probe her . . . Robert." Joe scolded at Robbie's snickering. ". . . and see what I can find out. Dean, you have Jason. Medically you have reasons to be around him, if you don't, find them."

"Got it." Dean agreed. "I have a feeling if he has anything, it's in his lab."

"I have to say you're right." Joe stated. "So maybe some interest in the time machine may not be a bad idea . . . Robbie. Reverend Bob is your man. You concentrate on him, check him out."

"Dad? Um, I can do that, but uh, what is my reason for getting close to him. All of you have reasons."

Joe grinned. "You my boy, are thinking of turning a new leaf. A Christian leaf."

"I'm what?" Robbie was nearly shocked from his chair. "How am I

supposed to explain that?"

"You're a bright boy. You'll figure it out. And speaking of bright boys." Joe stood up and laid the tablet on the desk. "You boys can finish up. I have to seek out my other son and save him from the clutches of the people in this community." He moved to the door. "With him wandering around here, it's actually frightening to think who can corner him." Joe shuddered as he left.

^^^

"Oh History can be fun and exciting." Trish told Hal so upbeat. "This is where it all begins you know."

"You don't say."

"I did say."

"Tell me how do you stop people from deleting things or adding things that aren't true."

"Password protected. Write protected. We change it daily, Joe and I. I myself place every single entry into the computer."

"Is it just for records then?" Hal asked.

"No, we have a viewing computer too, where you can view history. Sometimes I'll print it up. We have a book at the library."

"Could I see the system?"

"Oh sure."

"Thanks." Hal grinned and waited. He watched Trish sit back down behind her desk. "What are you doing?"

"Setting you up an appointment." She pulled out her purple appointment book. "When's good for you."

Hal was speechless. "I can't see it now?"

"Oh, no. Everyone must have an appointment." Trish flipped open the book. "How's tomorrow at ten sound."

"Um . . . good." Hal watched her write his name down. "Efficient how you run this."

"People get so perturbed with me because I make them schedule time."

"I don't understand why." Hal was serious. "This is one place you can't let get out of control. It could if it gets to crowded with people viewing history."

"Oh thank you. Tell that to the next person that complains." Trish looked up when the history door reopened. "And speaking of that person. You're late Danny Hoi. I'm going to have to reschedule."

Danny laughed at her. "Hey Hal. Trish what else do you have to do today."

"Nothing."

"Then you'll meet with me."

"You are so bossy." Trish tsked. "Hal, Danny is starting the Beginnings's Times."

"No to be confused with dinosaurs." Danny added. "A newspaper. Trish has to be involved because she is history. It's a new way to keep track. Hey!" Danny snapped his finger. "Robbie gave me some of your short stories you wrote years ago. Would you be interested in being the Bowman Correspondent for our paper?"

"Really?" Hal was honored.

“Yeah.” Danny answered. “You’ll have to write something everyday and you can radio it in to me or Trish. She’s my secretary.”

Trish shook her head. “Don’t ask me how I got roped into that. As if I’m not busy enough all day around here.”

Danny looked at the empty room and at Trish’s desk. The half eaten lunch, the cookies, the books she was reading, all signs of how busy she was. He flipped open the history appointment book. “Gosh you make me feel guilty for doing this to you Trish. Anyway. Hal? Will you.”

“Yes, I’d love that. Not much exciting happens in Bowman.”

“Make it up.” Danny told him. “We won’t know.”

Hal snickered. “How about I just see what I can do.”

“Sounds good.” Danny shrugged.

Trish sighed in disgust when the history door opened. “God, can people stop coming in here?”

Joe gave a stern look to her then to his son. “Hal, can I steal you? There’s a few things I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure Dad.” Hal lifted his hand and waved to Danny and Trish and left the office with Joe.

“Sorry you were in there with Trish for so long.”

“Trish?” Hal was surprised. “She’s a delightful woman Dad. Really, you need to come to Bowman and see our women, then you’ll truly appreciate what you have here.”

“You don’t say. Well, I don’t think you want me to meet these women of yours.”

“Why is that?” Hal asked.

“Because.” Joe explained. “If they’re like you describe, I won’t be as nice as you.”

On his father’s comment, Hal smiled.

^ ^ ^ ^

“So you see Reverend Bob.” Robbie spoke as he and the reverend waked around the tiny park center town, no bigger than the first floor of a home. Yet they strolled on the small path like many others did, like it was this huge park. “With my new mom so religious. I wanna make a good impression.”

“I must say Robbie. This surprises me. I’ve seen you at service twice.”

“Really?” Robbie was shocked. “I’m sure I was there more, you may not have seen me.”

“I doubt that.”

“Anyhow, I’ll be attend . . . attending service regularly. Maybe I can be your grown up altar boy.”

“This is non denominational Robbie.”

“Oh.” Robbie paused to think. “Assistant.”

Reverend Bob stopped walking. “If you are really serious about this. Stop by tonight and we’ll set up bible meeting times.”

“For what?” Robbie asked.

“To get you to learn the bible.”

“Oh I know the bible well.” Robbie lied. “So we can skip over that.”

“No we can’t. No one can read or learn the bible too much. You agree

with that don't you?"

"Absolutely." Robbie nodded, turned and winced.

"Good." Reverend Bob grabbed hold of Robbie's arm. "I can use a ministry assistant. No one really has ever expressed interest in that since Reverend Thomas went bad. And with the town growing and this new connection with your bother's town. It'll be great to teach you and have you aboard. Thanks Robbie."

"Yeah." Robbie was stunned as Reverend Bob walked away. "Ministry assistant. What the hell is that?" He scratched his head.

^^^

There was a nice number in containment. Eight. Two were ready to leave. One was in transition. Three were too new to consider leaving. And the last two were what Ellen called residents. Off their rocker too much to mingle, yet non-violent. Equivalent to mental patients in the old world.

Ellen sat at her desk doing her daily 'stupid' reports. Lying to get them done quicker because she just didn't want to think. She kept dropping her pencil and rubbing her hand that burned. A result of an experiment spillage she and Dean had when they cleaned. She knew she'd have to tell Dean their equivalent to BEN GAY that they were working on, just was to potent. Ellen swore she could feel it hitting her bone. Waiting for it to subside, hoping it would, she returned to her reports.

"Ellen!" A survivor named Moe burst into her office.

"What's up."

"That new guy Jerry."

"Jeremy." Ellen corrected.

"Yeah, him. He's choking really bad. He's blue."

Ellen's chair flew to the floor as she sprang up from her seat, grabbed her radio and followed Moe to the dingy area right next door.

Jeremy was turning blue, his thrashed about in a panic, stumbling and nearly falling. Handing her radio to Moe, Ellen raced to Jeremy, his tossing arms connected with the side of Ellen's face. It stung but with all her strength she tried to get behind him.

"Someone hold down his arms!" Ellen cried out, keeping her face close to Jeremy's back as she wrapped her arms around his front locking her wrist into his gut.

Two men interjected, grabbing hold of Jeremy.

"Moe, press channel . . ." Ellen brought her hands inward hard. "Two . . . that's Mark out front." Again, Ellen attempted the Heimlich maneuver. Nothing. "Tell him I need him." With a grunt Ellen tried again. "What was he eating. Someone tell me."

"A plum." A man answered.

Ellen felt Jeremy's legs weakened and the weight of his body fall into hers. Quickly she moved from behind him, grabbed hold of his arm as he fell to the floor. The force of his weight and fall brought her down with him. "Damn it." Ellen felt for a pulse. She saw no movement. No signs of breathing.. She straddled over his thighs and placed her locked hand above his belly button. She applied pressure. Nothing again. "Moe give me the radio."

As Moe handed it over, Mark the guard barreled in.

How long had Dean and Henry been in Joe's office? They had gotten off the track about suspects and onto childhood stories. But they laughed a lot and the laughter stopped when Ellen's panic call came over the radio.

"Dean. Dean where are you?"

Dean fumbled with Henry's radio that set on the desk. "Right here, what's wrong."

"I need you at the clinic. Andrea is taking care of an emergency, Jason is too far. I have a choking victim Dean. We're running to the clinic now."

Dean jumped from his seat. "What's his condition." He bolted to the door.

"He's unconscious, cyanotic and his pulse is nearly zilch. Shit. We've lost him"

There was static over the radio and both Dean and Henry fled from the office.

Jeremy's body made a crashing sound as Robbie and Mark dropped him on the already waiting Gurney by the clinic door. Melissa stood by. Ellen's hand stayed on Jeremy's throat. "Melissa, any luck with Andrea?"

"No." Melissa helped Ellen and Robbie wheel the cart. "She said a few more minutes."

"He doesn't have a few more minutes. Do you have a room prepped?"

"O.R. two." Melissa answered as they raced down the hall. "IV, surgical tray Trachea tube."

"Robbie I need you to tell Dean I am in O.R. two." Ellen instructed as she hit the O.R. doors. "Tell him I need him as soon as he gets here."

"Got it El. Good luck."

Ellen and Melissa crashed open the OR doors pushing the cart toward the center.

"Melissa we don't have time for a transfer. Wipe down his neck and drape him. Then hook him up." Ellen flew to the sink and washed up quickly. She shook the water from her hands and took no time to put on gloves. She grabbed the surgical tray in her run to the cart, sliding to a stop when she reached Jeremy.

"Ellen, there's no pulse." Melissa hooked up his heart monitor.

"Prepare for defibrillation. And get me one CC of P.C.R.S." Ellen grabbed the scalpel. "We're going in." Ellen's hands probed Jeremy's neck. "I can feel the plum pit. It's lodged in there good." Taking a deep breath Ellen felt for the cricoid and thyroid cartridge and she made small incision below where she knew the pit was lodged. The blood of the incision seeped across her fingers. "Small clamp. I see it." Ellen blind, laid the scalpel down and reached for another clamp. "Melissa get the tube ready this is lodged good." Sweating some from nervousness, Ellen braced the small pit. "His trachea is swollen, shit." She bit her bottom lip as she dislodged the pit and tossed it on the tray. Taking the tube from Melissa, Ellen placed it in the airway opening she made in Jeremy's neck. "Were in. Let's bring him back." Ellen looked up to the clock. "Four

minutes. Fuck it. Give me the P.C.R.S.” Ellen held out her hand and Melissa laid the readied syringe in it.

Out of breath Dean raced into the clinic, he saw Robbie. “Which room.”

“O.R. two.”

“Thanks”. Dean sped in that direction. His hair and coat flapping about, his tennis shoes making that squeak against the floor. Flush both his hands were upon the door as he flung it open, only to be greeted by the looks of Ellen and Melissa as they stood over Jeremy whose heart monitor beeped strong. Both Melissa and Ellen showed signs of performing surgery neither of them were physically prepared for. Blood covered their clothing, their hands as they did the wind down of the procedure.

Dean moved to the sink and washed up. He dried his hands and placed on gloves. He moved closely to the table, his eyes held a look of astonishment. “Ellen.” He spoke her name softly. “You did a cricothyroidotomy.”

Ellen looked frightened. She swallowed harshly. “I’m sorry Dean. The pit was lodged. I couldn’t get it out with the Heimlich. I may have panicked but I don’t think I did any damage to his larynx.”

“He was dead Dean. Dead.” Melissa spoke with some defensiveness to her tone. “Ellen saved him so don’t yell at her. She did good. His throat swelled up and it was really lodged. I saw.”

“No.” Dean closed his eyes and slightly smiled. “No.” He kissed Ellen. “My God did you do well.”

“I did?”

“She did?”

“Yes.” Dean answered.

Both women looked at each other.

Dean reviewed what Ellen had done and how she finished Jeremy up. “I’m very proud of you. I am.” He kissed her on the cheek. “And I’ll just leave you to finish.”

“Dean.” Ellen called to him as he started to leave. “Where are you going?”

“This is your baby. You’re doing really well. Finish it up and start a chart.”

“Will you check him later?” Ellen asked. “What if I screwed up?”

Dean winked at her. “I doubt it, but Andrea or I will review. Find me when you’re done.” Dean opened the O.R. doors. “And ladies. Good job.” He took off his gloves, tossed them in the trash and left.

Ellen let out a loud ‘whew’ when Dean was gone. “I thought he was mad.”

“Me too.” Melissa said. “I mean you cut into a person without a doctor here.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I wouldn’t have let you take the blame alone Ellen.”

“Thanks.” Ellen smiled. “O.K., now that the nervousness is over. Let’s finish him up. I think I need a drink.”

“You don’t drink anymore.”

“Then you’ll have one for me.”

Melissa nodded. "After this. You bet."

^^^

The contract was neatly handwritten. Joe expected no less from his son, Hal. Sitting at his desk, flipping through each anally laid out page of negotiation, Joe would peer up to his son who slumped in the chair across from him. "I can not believe you wrote up a contract to present to Beginnings."

"I told you I didn't want to show that to you."

Another flip of a page from Joe. "I can't believe you wrote up a contract for Beginnings."

"Dad. How was I supposed to know you were running the show."

"A contract." Joe closed his mouth and tilted his head. "I see it's binding for two years and can be renegotiated at either parties decision."

"Dad."

"Hal." Joe laid down the contract. "Bottom line. You have the manpower and you can come up with the resources to provide and survive. But! You don't want to expend your energy on it because you feel you should concentrate that energy elsewhere, like . . ." Joe bobbed his head in a nonchalant. "Getting back the country. Cleaning up the mess. Stopping the society. And basically playing cowboys and Indians in a post-apocalyptic world. Correct?"

"Um . . . yes. With building of the forces to eventually make this country free again."

"Yeah, yeah." Joe waved his hand and put on his glasses. "Building your forces how?"

"Like I have been. Defectors, survivors, and we know how to make those Zombie type soldiers semi-normal again. We regiment them and retrain them. It takes about two weeks."

"We can do that in about thirty seconds. How many you looking at getting."

"As many as we can. As many as it takes to break the society and clean up the animals like the savages."

"In order to build forces like that, you have to feed them, cloth them, house them, etc."

"I know." Hal nodded. "I've been doing good."

"But you can't keep it up."

"Not if I want to concentrate on my army, no."

"As you know, Beginnings has the industrialization and farming capabilities to provide for more that can stay behind these walls. Right now we run it at a skeleton staff and it works. Providing for more people means I need more workers."

"Just let me know."

"I will." Joe said. "I won't take anymore than I need. Some times during the year it will be more than others. If the bulk of your people are sustaining the center line and keeping the society as minimal over here as possible, then you got our gratitude and our help."

"Thanks."

"Now."

“Uh-oh.”

Joe smiled. “No more father to son talking.”

“That was father to son talking?”

“All right smart ass. Leader to leader right here. Cards on the table.”

Joe leaned into his desk. “By joining forces with Beginnings, you are saying you want to become a subsidiary of Beginnings. Correct.”

“Yes.”

“Then you shall be. But . . . Just like in the old world, you may govern you little town under local law, but consequently you will have to be under Beginnings law.”

“So what your saying is. I may run Bowman, but you run me?”

Joe sat back in his chair and smiled. “Or, you know, whoever the leader may be at the time.”

“We expected that.” Hal said. “When we discussed coming to Beginnings, we knew asking for help meant being part of Beginnings. If we didn’t want that, we wouldn’t have come to you. And Dad, you heading this place gives me that much more confidence in joining forces.”

“Thank you. Next.”

“There’s more?”

“Oh yes.” Joe smiled. “Not bad. An idea I want you to think about. O.K.? Our resident, Mr. ‘Everything’ Danny Hoi brought something to my attention. Growth. This was before you came to me with this. Beginnings is a safe haven. We have technology now that safe guards us for miles. We spoke of eventually, with growth, of taking advantage of the small towns that are near to Beginnings. When we get too many here, fill the smaller towns. Expand our tracking system, link them together so we can protect anyone that resides outside these walls.”

“Little suburbs.”

“Exactly.”

“So . . .”

“So. If you are under Beginnings rule, then officially you are going to be in our best interest. Like those who live here we will want nothing to happen to you. If Bowman sustains a major Society attack, how are you going to see it coming? Tower guards. Will work, but not for miles. What if you need an air strike to help you out. Could happen, we had that here. Four hundred soldiers stormed Beginnings a month ago. We took out eighty percent before they even reached with in a mile of our gates. If this happens to you. What are you gonna do? You can radio us, by the time we get Robbie and our choppers there, it could be over and a blood bath. Hence a lot of our people, your people, are gone.”

“I know this.”

“Hal.” Joe was firm. “If we work together than we have to look out for each others best interest. I can not do that when you are a hundred miles away.”

“You want us to move base.”

“Can you?”

“We could.” Hal rubbed his chin. “It would be a lot of work.”

“Yes it would.” Joe told him. “Sacrifice fifty men and put them to work on a small town before winter starts. You worry about the training and running your place. We’ll help your fifty men get things going there. Clean up, communication set up, housing, security, electricity, running water, everything.

When it's situated, then you come up. It won't take long."

"Can I pick the town?"

"Certainly. The move will be a lot of work Hal but it will be worth it. We can transport what you need easily and safely. And you'll be close enough, if need be, to retreat behind these walls."

Hal nodded. "When I return, I'll start preparations right away."

"Good boy." Joe took off his glasses. "And we don't need a damn contract either." he moved the paper back to Hal and extended his hand to his son. "Captain Slagel. Beginnings welcomes you and your people."

Hal smiled as he firmly shook his father's hand. "Thanks Dad."

"Now before you leave Beginnings, make sure you see Danny Hoi. He has a map of several areas he has already picked out."

"He sound like he's on the ball."

"Oh he drive me insane. He told me his next civilization move is recreating television. Bet me the first show is the Danny Hoi show." As they laughed about it, there was a light tap on Joe's door. Joe looked up. "Come in Dean."

Dean walked in. "Joe can I speak to you a second please?"

"Sure. Is there a problem?"

"You can say that." Dean answered. "It's with Ellen."

Hal began to stand. "I should leave."

"No." Dean held out his hand. "It's all right. Joe, Ellen's been doing things lately. When the UWA soldier came in, she upped his antibiotic, changing everything. Twice last week she fiddled with batch formulas on specimens. Today she performed a cricothyroidotomy, in other words, we had a choking victim and she made an incision in his throat so he could breath."

Joe let out a breath and ran his down his face. "Oh Boy. She's over stepping her boundaries. I'll speak to her."

"No, you're getting me wrong Joe." Dean said.

Joe looked in surprise. "What?"

"Ellen . . . Ellen deserves more than a nurses recognition. We've blown her off. We made Andrea a doctor, why? Because she had experience and knowledge. Well Ellen has it. And she has it in more ways than Andrea could ever have it. Ellen can cure things. Beat things. Work on virus and infection strains like no one I've seen. I'm leaving Beginnings Joe. You know that. I don't know for how long. And if my research is going to be placed in the hands of any doctor while I'm gone. I want it to be the doctor that I know will work on it as good as I can. Ellen."

Joe looked in such debate. "I hear you Dean. But let's look at this. All right. This is Ellen. Is she gonna do those reports. What about containment? I can't lose her there. She's the only one that does it that well."

"Come on Joe." Dean spoke with some complaining. "She can still be in charge of containment, but she doesn't have to be in there six to eight hours every day. How about three and the rest is spent in the lab working on our stuff. Because we have things Joe that will need constantly attended to. We aren't working on the needs of the immediate, hell we are constantly working on the needs of the future. Plus stupid other chemical shit I have to mix up for this community."

"O.K." Joe held up his hands. "I'm not meaning to argue with you Dean, I'm just bringing up Arguments. We have you, Andrea, Jason and training

Johnny.”

“Johnny is being trained to be an all around. Ellen will be more like me. More on the biological side with a few steady patients.”

“I understand. But what about when you come back?” Joe asked. “What then. Do we need five doctors in a town with not even two hundred people?”

“No.” Hal interjected. “But you no longer have two hundred people Dad. You now have close to seven. Remember? I’m sorry, maybe I’m over stepping my boundaries, but may I make a suggestion?”

Joe held out his hands. “Be my guest.”

“Thanks. We have a doctor in Bowman. One. He never had the schooling but experience and books taught him. We don’t have a research doctor, like Dean. We don’t have anyone that can try different things on our people to help them. Like antibiotics, anti infections. Well, what about with the town eventually moving close. What about Ellen being the traveler.”

Dean snapped his finger. “Excellent idea. Joe, it’s excellent. Not that I like the idea of Ellen traveling back and forth, but it would be good for her and Bowman. I’m sure they don’t have the technology we have or the medications.”

“We don’t.” Hal said.

“Joe, we can have Ellen set their doctor up. She can teach him about our meds. She can be his link. His answers when he needs them. Because I’m gonna tell you Joe. If there’s an infection, Andrea and Jason will shoot from the hip, upping the medication until it works. Ellen, she’ll examine it under a microscope, run it through the programs here that she knows, tests it and pin point what they need. She can do that.”

Joe leaned back in his chair. “If I do this, when you get back. She has to break from her research with you and dedicate time to helping Bowman no matter where they are. They have more people than us. That will be her job.” He saw Dean nod in his agreement. “If I get agreement from council, she will be a research doctor only. Minimal patient contact. She has zero bedside manner with anyone she knows. Strangers she’s good.” Joe paused in silence. “I’ll get a hold of Andrea and Henry, and get Jason to advice on this also. Can you be here in an hour?”

“Absolutely.” Dean smiled. He laid his hand on a sitting Hal’s shoulder. “Thanks for your input.”

“Hey, we need help in Bowman too. I’d like to have some security in the fact that we may not have to send our people here for everything.”

“Dean.” Joe spoke up. “Let me ask you this. You’ve never brought this up. Ellen did once and you laughed. Why the change.”

“Honestly?” Dean spoke soft. “I’m proud of her Joe. I looked at her today and I realized how proud I was of her and everything she learned. And I guess another part of me want to be secure in the fact that if this town loses one Dr. Hayes, it certainly will have another Dr. Hayes standing right by.”

Joe took in Dean’s words and to Joe, no more needed to be said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen didn't hear Dean coming. She wouldn't have. Unless Dean was running in the halls of the clinic, those high top canvas tennis shoes barely made a sound. It was evening. Perhaps Ellen was too engrossed in Jeremy who was still sedated following his surgery. She checked his IV and vitals and turned when she heard the clearing of a throat. "Hey." She smiled and saw Dean standing in the door way leaning on it in his usual 'one hand in the front pocket of his jean' stand.

"El." Dean's hand ran slowly through his hair. "It's almost seven. You think you might want to come home."

"I'm sorry. Didn't Josh tell you. I had work to finish up at containment. In the cryo I started well the specimens on . . . you know and, I wanted to check him."

"He told me." Dean walked in and up to Ellen. He kissed her on the cheek. "I just came to get you. I thought we'd walk home together."

"That would be nice." Ellen grabbed Jeremy's chart.

"How's he doing?"

Ellen handed him the chart. "Good I guess. I bet he feels neglected. Me, Patrick and Melissa have been the only ones who have checked on him."

Dean reviewed the chart. "I see you've been in here three times."

"Yeah. Sorry. I figured with Cindy having the miscarriage complications, Andrea was wrapped up in that. Wasn't that awful? She really wanted to have that baby."

"Yeah it was. Tell me why he was given a sedation at one and then at six."

"Um. Sorry. No one was around and he was agitated with the tube." Ellen indicated to her own neck. "He kept touching it and seemed uncomfortable. I thought a mild sedation would help instead of having him cause more damage than I already did. Sorry."

"Not a problem. Ready?" Dean closed the chart.

"Ready."

Dean carried the chart as they left the room. He laid it at the nurses station and walked side by side with Ellen as they left the clinic.

Once outside, Ellen felt Dean's hand slip into hers. She smiled, thinking how teenage and nice it was. It was a little bit chilly out, but a nice evening walk home.

Dean stopped with Ellen at the front door. He faced her. "How tired are you?"

"Why?"

"Curious."

"Why?"

"Ellen."

"Why?"

Dean smiled. "Forget it." He laid his hand on her cheek and kissed her.

"I knew it."

“What?”

“It was a sex question thing, wasn’t it. It was your way of . . .”

Dean’s hand covered her mouth and he opened the front door.

Ellen slid his hand from her as she stepped inside. Joe, Robbie, Andrea, Hal, Henry. They were there along with all the kids. “What’s going on. What happened?”

Dean closed the door. “You can say a family dinner.”

“Oh.” Ellen giggled. “That’s what you meant outside. Dean that’s OK, my family can be here anytime. If I don’t want them to, I’ll tell them to leave. Hey Joe.” Ellen walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek, as she went to step back, he grabbed her hand.

“Ellen.” Both of Joe’s hands held her. “I want you to know how proud I am of what you did today.”

“Thanks. What did I do?”

Joe rolled his eyes.

Andrea spoke up. “With the survivor. Saving him, performing the emergency surgery.”

“Oh.” Ellen nodded. “Thanks.”

Joe motioned his head to Hal and Hal stood from the couch.

“El.” Hal said. “You know, Beginnings is so lucky to have the medical technology it has. Bowman needs that. We have a doctor, but we can use the help. Another doctor. Especially with our men that we send here.”

“Dean will be happy to help. Andrea’s great too.”

“Actually.” Hal scratched the bridge of his nose. “I was hoping you would tell me you would be able to make some trips here and there down to Bowman to help out. And come down with me when I go home to get us set up with the meds and such.”

“Um.” Ellen shifted her eyes. “I’d be happy to. But I’m not a doctor. I can help though. What about Jason. He really doesn’t do much around here except play with his time machine and help occasionally at containment and the clinic.”

“I would like you.” Hal said. “It would be great to have like my sister visit me.”

“O.K.” Ellen shrugged. “If Joe lets me. I have to warn you my recent trips beyond the wall have been disastrous, so I may insist Robbie escort me.” She winked at Robbie. “He makes me feel safe. No offense to you Hal.”

“None taken.”

Ellen went to turn back to Joe to ask if it was all right and was surprised when Dean neared her with a small wrapped box. “What’s this?” She tilted her head in question.

“For you.”

Ellen held it. “Why am I getting a gift. It’s not a anniversary.” She started to shake the tiny box that fit in her hand. “I wonder what . . .”

“Ellen!” Joe yelled. “Open the goddamn gift.”

Immediately Ellen unwrapped it and exposed the grey small velvet box. “I’ve seen this box before. Where?” She flipped open the lid. “Now I know.” She raised her eyes to Dean. “You medical insignia pin. Why are you giving it to me?” She held it up. “It’s yours.”

Dean shook his head. “It’s yours. I want you to have it.”

“Like an engagement ring. Oh.” She smiled. “How original.”

Joe's moan was the loudest. "Ellen, aren't you getting what we're saying or implying here?"

"Yes." Ellen said. "We're having an engagement party."

Everyone tossed their hands up.

"Ellen." Dean laid his hands on her shoulder. "You have been a nurse for a really long time. You have been my research assistant since we've got here. Lately over the past two years you have become my research partner. I have worked with doctors with so much education that didn't know half as much as you."

"Aw." Ellen smiled. "That's sweet, Isn't he sweet. Thanks Dean. That's a hell of a compliment. Thanks. Is that why I got the pin?"

"Yes." Dean answered. "Because none of us can give you the sheet of paper that says degree in medicine. That is the symbol that you have, in a sense a Beginnings degree in medicine."

"What . . ." Ellen was lost and afraid to assume what they meant until she saw Dean with a small name tag.

"When I would be on leave and intern for my father, he had this made up for me because, to him I wasn't supposed to be an officer in his clinic. I was supposed to be a doctor. Back then I thought how generic it looked. But now I'm glad it was, because you Ellen can wear it. Well in at least five more days." The white name tag short with the black letters was placed in Ellen's hand. Two words were etched on it. 'Dr. Hayes.'

"Oh my God." Ellen grinned. "This is so great. You guys are acknowledging me as a doctor now. Oh my God." She gripped the tag. "Oh wow."

Though the moment was supposed to be a joyous one, Joe couldn't let it lay without adding a little bit of Joe to it. "And you have to take this serious Ellen. I mean it. Not like that course I dished out four thousand dollars for so you could become an acupuncture specialist."

Dean looked more shocked than anyone. "What?"

"Yeah, ask her." Joe said. "She was twenty-three years old, her and Pete were just starting and didn't have any money. She swore this is what she wanted to do instead of working for Doc Breyer. She cried because she could only get two thousand on a student loan. So I forked up the rest. She went to this special school and dropped out after four months. She said it wasn't what she thought it would be. What the hell did you do with all those needles anyhow Ellen."

"I have them." Ellen stared at the name tag. "They're put away."

"Now missy Jane." Joe had an instructional tone to his voice. "Bowman is yours. You'll make frequent trips there to help their doctor out. You'll be in charge of any Bowman residents that end up here. They are yours. And . . . so is the survivor you saved. He's your patient."

"Really?" Ellen smiled. "And the UWA soldier. Does he become my patient too?"

"Yes." Joe reluctantly answered.

"Oh boy." Ellen looked at Dean and Andrea. "You do know my patients will think I'm the coolest." She pinned the name tag on herself. "Look, I'm Dr. Hayes or will be when Dean and I get married. And I promise Joe. Unlike the acupuncture, I will take this very serious. Besides, I don't think Dean will let me *not* take it serious."

“No, he won’t.” Joe said. “Because if you screw up it’s on him. He’s the one that brought this whole thing up in the first place.”

In such a shock, Ellen looked at Dean. “Thank you.” She wrapped her arms around him tightly. “Thank you.” She whispered jokingly in his ear. “You’ll just do anything this week to get laid, won’t you.”

“Oh yeah.” Dean kissed her and broke from the embrace. “Let’s eat.”

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Binghamton, Alabama

There must have been thirty files stacked upon Frank’s desk. A light burned on the desk top while he read from them with a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He knew it was late and he expected the intrusion, but somehow he expected it earlier. Perhaps Lt. Merrick waited until his muscles started to hurt before he came. But he did and he had attitude.

“This is not right.” His voice nearly blasted Frank after his entrance into the office.

Frank only raised his eyes. “I suggest you take that tone and leave this office.”

“From sun up this morning to sundown I have been doing nothing but . . .”

“I suggest.” Frank raised his voice more. “You take that tone and leave this office.”

“You’re not listening.”

Frank sprang up, his huge hands slammed on the desk with a thunderous crash. “And you are not listening. Do not come in here and talk to me like that. Who the hell do you think your talking to?”

“Someone that is not doing what they are supposed to be doing.”

Frank’s facial muscles tensed up. “I’m not going to tell you again. Leave the office before I throw you out. And be forewarned I will not be gentle with you.” Frank lowered himself into his chair he watched Lt. Merrick walk to the door. “And another thing lieutenant. The UWA soldier interrogations that you have been handling. You aren’t handling them correctly. From now on you are relieved of that duty. I will handle them, no one but me.”

Lt. Merrick turned around. “Yet another thing you’re doing.” He had such anger in his voice. “Aside from running your staff into the ground, I heard what you were saying to the men about training. That is not the way I was told to train them.”

“Perhaps that is the reason these soldiers suck. Make no bones about it soldier. This is my detail. My battalion and I will run it and train it as I see fit. Without any questions asked. Is that understood?”

“I’m letting the president know what you are up to.”

“You do that. You go right ahead and do that. Now, that will be all.”

“You don’t think I . . .”

“I said!” Frank blasted. “That will be all!”

The door slammed loudly when Lt. Merrick raged out. Frank calmed himself and grabbed a hold of the cigarette that was burning away. He stared at the closed door and thought of what Lt. Merrick had said. And he realized Lt.

Merrick was a problem, one Frank would have to deal with as soon as possible.

CHAPTER-THIRTY THREE

September 16

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank's lit cigarette twirled as he tossed it waiting for the guard on the building where the UWA soldiers were held. He walked down the long hallway to the end where they were at. It was cold and damp and the darkness of the place seemed to make it worse.

"Keys." Frank held his hand out to the soldier who guarded the door.

A little nervous he handed them to Frank. "Sir, should you wait until we have more men here to go in there with you."

"For what?" Frank asked.

"For your protection sir."

Frank nearly laughed. "I need no protection against these prisoners. You just watch the door." Frank unlocked the door and handed the soldier the keys. He opened it and stepped inside and pulled the door closed.

Tired, thin and looking bad, Link, Kyle and Jeff looked up to Frank upon his entrance. Frank just stared at them.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Towards the clinic, Joe walked with Robbie. They moved at a brisk pace.

"Just make sure you keep track of anything you can find out." Joe instructed Robbie as they neared the clinic. "No matter how minuscule."

"I know that. And we're gonna meet every Thursday for a bible study."

Joe snickered. "Sorry. Do you need to borrow Andrea's to brush up."

"Dad, please, it's the bible, how hard can it be." Robbie opened the clinic doors for his father. "What time is this wedding today?"

"Four. And I'll tell you, it couldn't come at a worse time no matter how small it's supposed to be. I move in two days, my house is a disaster. Thank God Jess is helping Andrea cook. I feel bad that it's their wedding and we have to have the dinner there but . . ."

"They have the biggest house."

"True. Why are you here at the clinic Robbie?"

"Helping Ellen out. Dean's testing her today on her stitching. See, how serious are those two taking it when they're both working the day of their wedding?"

"It's nothing new to them." Joe said. "They're just making it official for a while."

"For a while is right." Robbie stopped in front of the examining room where he was to meet Ellen.

"Well, I'll leave ya'. I want to check that new guy, they're releasing him to containment tomorrow. Have fun and don't be late. It's just our family

there today and I'd like everyone to be there."

Robbie gave a thumbs up, watched his father move down the hall then he knocked on the closed examining room door. "El." He opened. "Hey baby, I'm all . . ." Robbie slowed his speech when Ellen turned around with a huge syringe. ". . . yours. Shit."

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

Stewart was a bit older than Jeremy, but was a face seen more often in the society. And now he took Jeremy's place as George's right hand man. He stood as he watched George pace around the office holding onto a phone. He watched George nod, smile and then hang up.

George laid the phone on the desk. "Jeremy is still out of commission there. He's being moved back to containment."

"Even after he gets out, when will he have telephone access?"

George shrugged. "There are community phones. We'll have to wait and see. If he needs to get a hold of me he will. That's why he's there, to take chances I can not have my inside person take."

"Expendable?" Stewart asked.

"If he needs to be. Yes. And so are you for that matter." George sat down at his desk. "Wedding goes off today. The switching of leaders is in transition. Concentration is on the joining of the UWA and Beginnings. However Hal leaves and we now know where they are located."

"Are you thinking a full scale attack?"

George shook his head. "I can't right now. Not with Ellen going back and forth to there. Anything happens to her all deals are gonna be off with Dean, and he has something I don't want to chance getting. Put it that way. And I want Dean."

"So you no longer need the UWA prisoners in Binghamton."

George shook his head. "We can dispose of them. I should be hearing from Frank late this afternoon when Marcus arrives there."

"Why are you sending Marcus there? I thought you trusted Frank."

"Marcus is searching for camp and farm sites for us. He was heading out that way anyhow. So I thought When they unload him and his jeep outside of Binghamton, he could stop in for a few days and see how things are going with Frank." George leaned back in his chair. "I trust Frank and my doctor. Dr. Morris assured me he has complete Amnesia. But it never hurts to have a little added insurance. Does it? At least until I arrive back there in another week. And thinking about my reasons for hanging out there." George reached for the phone. "I think I'll call that reason now."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry huddled close to the wall with the phone wedged between his ear

and shoulder. Leaning against the file cabinet whispering, he would occasionally look over his shoulder to an irrate Cole. "But Joe . . ."

"Handle it Henry."

"But Joe he's really . . ."

"Henry. Handle it. Make the decision."

"Aw." Henry whined then whined again when he heard Joe hang up.

Cole stood with folded arms, his fingers tapping. "Can't make a decision on your own Henry?"

Like he was six, Henry snapped back. "I'm not the real leader yet. So there."

Cole rolled his eyes. "Can we discuss this?"

"Um . . . yeah. Let me take the leader seat." Henry walked over to the desk and sat down. "Whoa." He swivelled the chair. "I'm getting Joe vibes."

"Henry I have to . . ."

"Shh." Henry smiled. "I feel like Joe. O.K., go on."

"What is this shit." Cole slammed down a stack of papers.

"Um . . . looks like reqs."

"For food."

"Appears so." Henry lifted them. "Is there a problem filling them?"

"Yeah."

"We don't have enough food to fill them?"

"No. Yes. Do you people even realize the chain of events you are causing with this order."

Henry turned more serious. "Us people? Since when weren't you part of us people."

"Since when did we start feeding people that aren't ours and people who don't have to work for it."

"I can recall last month throwing out a lot of food and dumping some on a savage camp. When did the savages start working for it."

"You are missing my point." Angrier, Cole stepped to Henry. "Agriculture doesn't have the man power to farm what we have as it is. Now we have this order to ship down to Bowman in two days. In two days I'll have to pull it from distribution. We have to fill distribution back up, which mean rushing the food from preservation, and rushing more food to them to can. I don't have the men to do this."

"In two days you will. Robbie is returning with about thirty men to start."

"And I suppose they'll just waltz right in our gates without going through containment. Without having . . ."

"Cole." Henry's voice was firm as he stood up. "About the only problem I want to hear come from your mouth right now is that we don't have enough in our fields and greenhouses to refurbish preservation and distribution."

"But what about those divisions, they may not . . ."

"They are not your divisions to worry about are they?" Henry tilted his head. "Cole, does agriculture have ample growth to refurbish."

"What about all these men I'll have under me."

"Cole!" Henry yelled. "I will ask you one more time. Does Agriculture have ample growth to refurbish."

"Yes."

"Then I suggest you prepare for your new men. Those orders for food

are for when they arrive to help you collect it.” Henry picked up the requisitions and nearly tossed them at Cole. “Don’t go off on me again about shit you aren’t informed enough to argue about.”

Cole wrinkled the requisitions as he headed to the door. “These thirty new men. They’re bullshit. They get a free walk right through our doors. And I’ll tell you Henry right now, I won’t treat them like I treat the men of Beginnings.”

“Cole.” Henry called out firm. “You *will* treat them like the men of Beginnings. Because as of five days ago, they became the men of Beginnings. And if I hear that you are being any other way to them, I take it as a sign that it’s far too much responsibility for you to handle and I will look for someone else to replace you as head of Agriculture.” Henry stared at Cole who said nothing. A few moments of angry glares exchanged between the two men and then Cole stormed out. On the slam of the door, Henry plopped down in the chair and let out a loud breath of relief. He then smiled and got excited. “Oh. I have to call Joe and tell him.” Giddy, he dialed the phone.

^^^

In a rare occurrence Dean was in the clinic lab alone, the blinds drawn, the door locked and homemade note cards spread about the counter. He mumbled to himself as he read over them and he cursed at the intrusion of his thoughts when his private phone rang. “Damn it.” Dean picked it up. “Yeah.” He reached for his cards.

“Hello Dean.” George sounded cheerful.

Dean fumbled the phone and the cards. “George.”

“Just wanted to congratulate you on today and wish you good luck.”

Dean held tight to the phone. “You said you weren’t calling back until it was time.”

“It’s almost time and I’m almost convinced.”

“I’m not.”

“What?”

“It’s been over a week George. I think I want proof that Frank’s alive. Or deal is off.”

“I have my eye on your children.”

“Yeah and I have my eye on that weapon I made. Right now the only thing that will tip the scales in your favor is the fact that you have Frank. I want proof or I don’t walk from these gates. Understood?”

“Arrogance Dean.”

“You’re the one who wants it, so deal with it. Proof George.” Dean took slow breaths to hide his nervousness and irritation.

“You’ll get your proof. Then I want no more threats or demands against me, you hear. Or deal is off completely and you and I will be heading in to Check mate.” George took on a meaner tone. “A loss hurts a lot more when it hits close to home. Keep in mind no weapon will ever bring back what you can lose.”

The moment Dean heard the click of the line he leaned to the counter to calm his racing heart. He knew he would have to be careful from now on. Without knowing who the person was working for George, Dean didn’t want to

cut it so close, that he'd end up cutting his own throat.

^^^

"Ow El. Come on." Robbie yelled loudly.

"Quit being such a baby."

"You're putting a needle in my skin. How do you want me to be."

"Quiet. Now come on, it doesn't hurt."

"Uh . . . yeah it does. Put more of that numbing stuff on it."

Ellen shook her head. "You know Frank never . . ."

"I'm not Frank. I don't feed off of pain. Numb it."

The door to the examining room opened and Dean walked in. "How's it going?"

"Dean." Robbie said his name in relief. "Is she done. Doesn't she have to get married to you in a couple hours?"

"Yes she does. El, you'd better be going." Dean walked over to examine Ellen's work. "I can't believe Robbie let you practice on him. Good job."

Ellen looked up and smiled. "Thanks. See I told you I can stitch."

"Whoa." Dean peered closer "What happened to your leg Robbie. How did you cut it?"

Robbie pointed to Ellen.

Dean's eyes widened. "You cut his leg on purpose?"

"Well I was having trouble getting the real stitch effect."

Dean looked to Robbie. "And you let her? Why in the world would you let her slice your leg."

Robbie shrugged. "She promised me a blow job . . . ow." Robbie jolted when Ellen jabbed him. "Kidding Dean. I don't know why. I didn't think it would hurt this bad that's for sure."

Dean shook his head with a whistle. "I don't know about you two. El, I'm heading home, O.K.? Be on time for the wedding."

"I'll be on time." She looked up and kissed Dean. "See you there."

With a 'hmm' Dean moved to the door, waved and left. He stepped in the hall and remembered what he had forgotten to tell them. He turned and walked back in. "Gees, I'm sorry. I knew there was another reason for me coming in here." Dean closed the door. "George just called me."

"Ow!" Robbie screamed in pain when Ellen's hand slipped in surprise.

^^^

He was communicating with Bowman. The radio broke up a little but Hal figured they would work the bugs out eventually. "So everything is going well?" Hal asked Sgt. Ryder.

"As well as they did yesterday. Getting ready to return?"

"Yes, and I'm bringing someone."

"You didn't tell me this."

"It was going to be a surprise. But . . . we have a doctor coming to help Blue set up."

“Really?” Sgt. Ryder sounded impressed. “With medications and things?”

“Yes.”

“I look forward to meeting him.”

“Her.”

“Excuse me?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Her. The doctor is a woman.”

“Shall I alert Grace she will be having a houseguest?”

“No way.” Hal spoke up. “She’s staying with me.”

“With you Captain?”

“Yeah with me. Seems . . . my father had more than my brother to surprise me with. I’ve known this woman for nearly forever. We were quite close.”

There was a slight snicker of surprise that came from Sgt. Ryder. “You sound as if you like this woman.”

“Oh she’s great. So much different than ours. Elliott, the moment we saw each other we embraced. A very warm embrace.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No, really I’m not. Wait until you meet her.”

“I . . . I can’t wait.” Sgt. Ryder was stunned. “And wait until I tell the men that the Captain is returning with a woman, one he’s involved with and likes.”

Hal paused in silence before correcting Sgt. Ryder. “Yes, I certainly will be envied won’t I? Well, I must go. I have a wedding to attend.”

“A wedding.”

“Yes, they have them quite often here, but I’ll tell you all about that when I get home. Keep me posted of anything you hear.”

“I will sir. See you in a few days.”

“Goodbye Elliott.” Hal ended the radio call and grinned as he still held on to it. More than the thought of the men being envious of him once they saw that Ellen was nice, he grinned at the thought of Ellen and Grace’s first meeting. And that thought actually made him snicker.

^^^

It was a summer dress, or at least summer material. Thin, lose in some places, tight in others. The sleeves were short with just a hint of feminine trim. So old fashioned it looked, so much like the dress Ellen had found at the Anderson Farm. Yet Ellen wore it. Jess added the final hem in his bedroom, kneeling at Ellen’s feet, tucking and stitching at the dress that came nearly to Ellen’s ankles. And Ellen knew as she stared at her reflection in the mirror, her hair down simply, and the dress looking so nice, that there were two things that told her Trish didn’t make the dress like she claimed to have. One, the general tailoring of the dress. And two, the Sears and Roebuck tag in the back.

“I’m too dressed up. Am I too dressed up?” Ellen asked Jess nervously.

“No.” Jess spoke with the needle in his mouth.

“I think I am. And you would tell me no just so I won’t talk.”

“Ellen. Hold still.”

“I’ll ask Robbie.” Ellen raised her voice. “Robbie!”

“Ellen.” Jess flicked her leg.

“Ow.”

“He’s taking a shower and painfully too. You jabbed him pretty hard today.”

“Well Dean gave me a damn heart attack. He so calmly says George called. You know George said he was calling back when it was time for Dean to leave.”

“So you thought it meant Dean was leaving?” Jess asked.

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I’m too dressed up.” Ellen shook her head. “It’s a small ceremony in a field. Just my family. Do you think Dean is getting dressed up.”

“He may be.” Jess stitched. “Hold still.”

“He can’t be, come to think about it. About as dressed up as he gets, are those tan pants he has.”

“With a nice shirt and tie, that’s dressed up.”

“You have such a fashion sense. You know your uniform is never wrinkled.” Ellen commented. “I noticed that. I’m too dressed up. I’m putting jeans on . . . ow.” Ellen felt the slight pinch of the needle. “Why did you do that?”

“You are not putting jeans on damn it. you’re the bride. Now let me finish this hem.”

“O.K., O.K., but I know I’m too dressed up.”

“Ellen. Quiet.”

“All right I . . .” Ellen stopped talking when Robbie walked in the bedroom. He wore a towel around his waist and neck. “Is that how your dressing for the wedding?”

Robbie snickered as he rubbed his hair dry. “Better than you. At least I’m not all dressed up.”

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“What the fuck is this shit?” Frank held what looked like a short leather strip. He brought it to his nose and sniffed it making a curled up face and an outward breath of disgust. He checked the flexibility of the supposedly edible object, and it wouldn’t bend. After sniffing it once more, Frank tapped it on the surface of his desk, then he tapped it again. He laughed at the durability of the food and wacked it off the desk as hard as he could. There was a crack and the top piece of the food flew up. Frank lifted the piece he held in his hand then down to his desk with a snicker when he saw the small nick in the wood surface. Still laughing in amusement at the damage he did, Frank looked up to the knocking on the door.. “Yeah.”

“Frank, I mean Colonel.” Richie walked in.

“Richie what the hell is . . .” The food dropped from Frank’s hand when he saw the black man walk in, wearing a grey suit and tie, none-the-less. “Who are you.”

“Marcus Hunter.” He spoke with arrogance as he walked to Frank.

“Peace ambassador for the society. You don’t remember me?”

“Should I? I have amnesia you know.” Frank pointed to his own temple. “What can I do for you Mr. . . .”

“Hunter. I’m told I can rest up here a few days before continuing on my journeys. And I’m going to observe how things are going while I’m here.”

“Observe?” Frank nodded with a closed mouth. “O.K.” He sat down in his chair. He then noticed Marcus staring. “Yes?”

“Are you going to show me to my quarters?”

“Me personally? No. Richie?”

“I’ll take care of it Colonel.” Richie walked to the door.

“Thanks.” Frank said

“This way Mr. Hunter.” Richie held the door open for Marcus and followed him out.

Frank rocked back in forth in his chair. He picked the food back up and fiddled with it. “Maybe I should have offered him something to eat.” Frank snickered at his bad joke, rocked in his chair and went back to amusing himself with that piece of brown food.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Andrea!” Joe yelled from his cluttered and box filled bedroom. “Where in Christ’s name are my silver cufflinks. I’m flapping like a goddamn bird here with this sleeves!” he flipped open a box and grumbled

“Blaspheme Joe. Not in my home.” Andrea scolded as she walked in a bright peach flowered dress and a wide, wide brim sun hat to match.”

“My house, and what the hell are you wearing.” Joe stared at her.

“Benjamin from fabrics made this outfit for me.”

“Figures.” Joe grumbled.

“Joe. This is the first opportunity I have had to wear it.” She touched the rim of her hat. “You don’t like?”

“No. Where in the hell are my . . .” Joe saw the saddened look on Andrea’s face. “Christ. You look lovely Andrea.”

“Thank you.” she smiled.

“Now where in the hell are my cufflinks. Damn wedding. Of all days. And my shit is packed.”

“Here.” Andrea pushed him a box. “Dresser stuff. Try there and lose the attitude mister.” She pointed her finger and walked to the door. “And hurry, we’re waiting. Denny is complaining about his hair. I’m afraid he’ll mess it up.”

Joe only raised his eyes when Andrea walked out. “Probably has the kid’s hair parted like a damn nerd and . . .” Joe moaned again as he rummaged through the box pulling out a book. “This isn’t dresser stuff. The stupid hat is strangling her brain. Can’t she look inside the box before she writes . . .” Joe stopped when the folded piece of paper fell from the book he held. He wouldn’t have paid any attention to it had it not opened slightly and exposed a name. Looking to the door, then to the tri-folded paper. Joe opened it. It was Beginnings paper, the stuff they started making four years earlier. If possible,

Joe's face became more stern as he read it silently to himself. *'Andrea, I am not a word person. I never was. I do better when I write what I feel. And I just wanted to write you this letter. It's going to be difficult for me at first to adjust, but know that I will get through as long as we can still remain friends. I commend your commitment to Miquel and wish the both of you all the luck in the world. I wish your decision could have been with me. I will always remember our time together and you will always hold a special place in my heart. Love always . . . George.'*

Joe read the letter one more time, closed the flap on the box, folded the letter, placed it in his pocket then continued to search out his cufflinks.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank stared with no emotions to the phone that was extended down to him courtesy of Marcus. Frank took it, spun his chair and allowed his back to be the thing Marcus saw. "Yeah."

"Lt. Merrick has disappeared?" George asked with surprise.

Frank fluttered his lips. "How do you like that? I'm not wasting much more man power on searching for him, that's for sure. He left in the middle of the night, one of my staff said."

"Yes, as you know, we have problems with defectors."

"Assholes."

"So, I see you met Marcus."

Frank turned his chair, looked at Marcus, then turned away. "Yeah."

"How is he?"

"An asshole."

George laughed. "I don't like him much either. Three things Frank."

"Shoot."

"One, take care of him and issue him three or four guards to accompany him on his camp site search. Two, I need you to do something for me tonight. Got a pen?"

"Yep." Frank reached and fumbled for one.

"Write down this number. 916-4556."

Frank wrote it down and stared at it. "Who am I calling?"

"Seems we need to let these people of Beginnings know that they didn't kill you. A little mind game. I want you to do it this evening. Call that number, when the man answers, you tell him that you just wanted to warn him that you were alive."

"Sounds stupid." Frank commented.

"Humor me. Marcus will be there when you call if you run into any problems."

"What's the third thing?"

"The UWA soldiers. They no longer are needed. Have them killed. The sooner the better."

Frank was silent for a moment as he turned his chair once more and looked at Marcus. "I'll take care of it personally."

Beginnings, Montana

Joe looked at his watch as he stood in Robbie's livingroom, he then looked up the steps. "Ellen, for crying out loud. It's four ten. Move it!"

With a running thump, Ellen flew down the steps. "Sorry. I was changing."

Joe looked at the dress she wore. "You had that on when I got here twenty-five minutes ago."

"Yeah, I changed it and put it back on. Then changed it, tried something . . ."

"Ellen."

"Yeah."

"Your wedding?"

"Yes. My wedding." Ellen said nervously.

Joe opened the door for her. "After you. Good thing I radioed Dean and told him you were running late."

"Is he mad?"

"Yep."

"Shit."

"Go." Joe pointed to the jeep and pulled the door closed.

"You look very nice Joe. Cufflinks and everything."

"Yeah." Joe looked at the silver cufflinks. "Had quite the informative time looking for them too."

"Huh?" Ellen was lost.

"Get in the jeep. And why are you so dressed up anyhow?"

Ellen tossed her hands up as she climbed in.

"Christ." Joe stopped the jeep as they hit the spot a mile out in the under developed section. "What the hell is this shit?"

"Joe." Ellen stepped from the jeep. It looked as if every person in Beginnings was there. "It was supposed to be just our family."

"Yeah, well, you know the people in this town. They look for any excuse not to work."

"Oh my God." Ellen was breathless, so many people standing there she couldn't see Dean. Despite the small opening path that divided them.

"You ready?"

"I think. Yes. Shit. This wasn't suppose to be like this. Now I'm nervous."

Joe smiled at her and lifted his hand in a signal wave to Robbie.

The words 'she's here' went through Dean and shook his stomach so hard he thought he lost that internal organ. He lifted himself from the seat on the ground he had as Reverend Bob informed him that Ellen had arrived and was ready.

Dean took a deep breath and walked with Rev. Bob. He saw Paul sitting with the guitar where Rev. Bob was going to stand. He wasn't supposed to be there. None of the massive amounts of people were supposed to be there. Simple, short and quiet. "Rev. Bob." Dean whispered as he walked. "This wasn't supposed to be like this."

Rev. Bob simply smiled and took his place, Dean on his left.

Fixing the grey tie he wore, that Robbie lent him, Dean nervously ran his hand over his crisp white shirt that Jess ironed for him, placed his hands in the pockets of the black pants Danny lent him and turned around to face where he knew Ellen would walk up.

Paul's guitar picking of the simple bridal march--his own rendition--made Dean's stomach flutter. But not as much as when he saw Ellen walking up the pathway holding on to Joe's arm. Ellen waved with a smile to him and Dean's heart pounded so strong. He lost his breath momentarily and cleared his throat in his nervousness. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. The cool breeze that swept through the field wisped Ellen's dress and hair just a little but enough to make the whole entire vision that Dean took in, almost dream like. The moment was too good to be true. Too long awaited and Dean hinged in fear of the second he would wake up and it would be gone.

But the music kept playing, Dean kept watching, and Ellen and Joe drew nearer.

Joe laid his hand with a father's pat onto Ellen's as it gripped tighter to his white shirt. He leaned his head to her the closer they walked to the front. "It's Dean. Come on. Calm down."

"This is real. It didn't seem real until this moment. I'm marrying Dean."

"Yep. This is as real as it gets." Joe stopped walking with Ellen when they reached Dean. He looked to Dean, one eyebrow raised a little and a quirky smile hit him. "Fist time I really give her away Dean." Joe winked. "Don't make me kick your ass if you do her wrong."

Dean's head dropped with a smile.

Before Joe handed Ellen over he faced her. His left hand laid on her face and Joe pressed his lips firm to her check. "Love you." He whispered.

"Love you too." Ellen touched his hand and Joe stepped back.

Joe took his place next to Andrea, looked at her hat and stepped a few inches from her.

"Hey." Ellen smiled at Dean.

"Hey." He whispered back then motioned his head to everyone behind him. "What is up with this?"

"I don't know." Ellen shook her head. "It's not supposed to be like this."

"I'm nervous."

"Me too."

"Can we begin?" Rev. Bob asked with a snicker to his voice.

"Sorry." Ellen said with embarrassment.

"Sorry."

Rev. Bob opened his bible. "Can I ask our two witnesses to step forward."

Robbie moved close to Dean's side, and Jenny stepped forward to

Ellen's. At the sound of a small sob, at the same time, Ellen Dean, Robbie and Rev. Bob all looked to Jenny.

"Sorry." She dabbed her eye. "Sorry. I need a hanky." She faced the crowd and whispered loudly "Who has a hanky!"

Andrea, holding her hat, did a feminine run to the front, handed Jenny a handkerchief and stepped back.

Rev. Bob waited until he saw all were situated. "We'll begin."

Ellen swallowed and felt Dean search out her hand. They joined fingers and locked them. So tight his hand held hers. "You look very handsome."

Dean smiled. "Thanks."

Rev. Bob peered once at his bible then back up. "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices when truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful and endures through every circumstance." He closed the bible. "I believe that Dean and Ellen most represent that passage. In time, all things work out. Good things return to each and love prevails. Hence, Dean and Ellen standing before me." Rev. Bob smiled at both of them. "We're gathered here . . ." he paused when Jenny sobbed again. "Are you all right?"

Jenny nodded with a whimper. "That was beautiful."

"Back to where I was." He cleared his throat. "We're gathered here today, amongst God's green earth, to celebrate the greatest gift God has given us. The gift of love and expression through marriage. I believe this man and this woman know each other well. There's not much as a man of the cloth that I could teach them about love that they don't already know. They've already seen ups and downs, good and bad, and here they are. I've given them an assignment. I asked them to write their own vows today. Ellen?"

"Oh God." She gasped in nervousness. "Sorry reverend." With another deep breath she faced Dean. "Here I go . . . Thank you for this. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. This step here that we're taking is . . . it tells me something. It tells me you have faith in me. Which makes me feel good, Dean, Because I have this humongous amount of faith in you. And I want you to know, that I promise as your wife to stand by you. I'll love you and try my hardest with you. Because you're worth it. And I truly believe that I couldn't face tomorrow if I didn't have you there. I know this from our past. And Dean, I'm not letting you go this time."

Dean kissed Ellen, ran his hands through his hair and waited for the 'go ahead' nod from Reverend Bob. "The road's been long El." He let out a loud breath. "Real long. But we made it and I'm still waiting for someone to jump out and say. 'Hey, we're kidding you'." He paused in his nervousness. "El, I can't stand here and tell you what my heart feels, because I'd be standing here forever. Just know, from this moment on I will do my best not to let you down. And I'll stand beside you too . . ." Dean closed his eyes. "I am so grateful to God for this day, you can't even imagine how grateful I am. I'm . . . grateful for you."

A soft smile came across Ellen's face and she kissed Dean. "Thank you."

"You too." He winked.

Rev. Bob motioned his head to Jenny then to Robbie. He held out his

hand and both of them laid the thin gold bands in his palm. “Ellen, just like I told you..”

Ellen took the larger band and grabbed Dean’s hand. “With this ring, I thee wed.” She slipped it on his finger. “In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, I take you as my husband.”

His steady hands trembled as Dean lifted the band and took Ellen’s hand. “El, with this ring, I thee wed. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. I . . .” Dean’s voice cracked a little as he placed the ring on her. “I take you El, as my wife.” He lifted her hand, ran his thumb over the band and gently laid his lips to her fingers.

Reverend Bob watched their joined hands. “We have witnessed the vows spoken and the exchanging of rings. Now with the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife . . . You may kiss your bride.”

A quiver took over Dean’s top lip as he leaned down to Ellen laying his left hand that sported the wedding band upon her cheek. So fast, so strong his heart beat as he kissed her softly, then kissed her again. Pulling away slowly, they embraced.

Reverend Bob extended out his arms as Dean and Ellen ended their hold. He laid his hand on their shoulders and guided them to turn and face the people of Beginnings. “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Ladies and Gentlemen of Beginnings. May I proudly present to you. Mr. and Mrs. . . . Dean Michael Hayes.”

Dean and Ellen blushed some and smiled as they face those who greeted them with applause, whistles and cheers. The awaited union had taken place. Finally and for real . . . Dean and Ellen were married.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Binghamton, Alabama

Link, Kyle and Jeff moved slow because their feet were in chains and they were linked together like a chain gang as they moved passed the gate guard and out into the deep wooded area.

“Keep moving.” Frank ordered as he stayed behind them. “Go. Go. Move. That’s it.”

The gate guard watched until he no longer saw Frank and the UWA soldiers. He turned to the soldier who held the post with him. “Are you sure one of us shouldn’t go with the Colonel.”

“Positive.” The other soldier responded.

“He’ll be all right out there with them?”

“They’re chained together. The Colonel will be fine.” At that moment, three shots, all two seconds apart rang out. “See what I mean?”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Dean’s hand intercepted the glass of wine that Robbie poured and passed to Ellen. “Don’t be getting her drunk. I made need to use that tool later.” He quickly kissed Ellen and took the glass of wine elsewhere. He looked around at the massive amount of Slagel’s and Slagel extensions that were still in his home. It was his wedding night and he couldn’t determine if it was his imagination or if it was taking the Slagel’s and everyone else too long to leave his house.

The hitting against his leg by Joey, who had way too much sugar, spun Dean in the direction of what he thought might be a solution to one of his problems for the night. Henry. Dean moved to him. “Hey Henry.”

“Dean, did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“I yelled at Cole today. Deepened my voice and everything. I sounded so leader like.”

“That’s good Henry. I’m proud of you. Henry . . . I have this really special evening planned tonight.”

“I would expect as much Dean.” Henry leaned down to him. “It’s your wedding night.”

“Yeah. But Joe’s house is a disaster and he can’t take the kids. Any chance I can get you to take your son with you tonight.”

“Oh I’d love to . . .”

Dean smiled.

“But I can’t.”

“Henry, he’s your son.”

“You took him Dean, and . . . I have to be up and in Mechanics by four.”

“Henry, come on, it’s my wedding night.”

“Yeah I know.” Henry grinned. “Excuse me.”

Dean tossed his hand up. He almost felt as if there were some secret plan to hinder any quality wedding night time he and Ellen could get. Joe couldn’t take the kids because of his cluttered home. Jenny was too busy doing something she couldn’t say. Dean’s house was still full as it hit nearly nine. Henry wouldn’t take his own son. Robbie kept insisting on getting Ellen drunk. It was a good thing for Dean that Billy kept yelling at Robbie. There had to be a person that wasn’t against him. And there was. Dean walked over to Danny.

“Hey Dean.” Danny spoke up before Dean could. “I need to know if your chemically superior mind can come up with something I need for a new invention I’m creating.”

“I don’t know. What?”

“Check this out. Your wedding night has made me think of this.”

“Oh no.”

“No, no, this is good.” Danny grinned. “Let’s bring back, candy panties.”

Dean choked on the surprising laughter that came from him. “Candy Panties? Why do we need those?”

“Novelty. Come on, Dean, I’ll name them after you. Of course ‘Dean’s candy panties’ doesn’t sound as cool as ‘Danny’s candy panties’. Does it?”

“No.”

“See.”

“Danny, I have a favor to ask you. What’s the odds of you taking my kids tonight for me.”

“Actual odds or vicinity odds?”

“Any odds.” Dean said.

“Slim to none. Dean that’s five kids.”

“Four. Josh is staying with Denny.”

“Four kids?” Danny whistled. “I don’t know. It’ll cost you.”

“I’ll pay.”

“Here’s the rate. One kid, you sign a small favor slip. Two, a medium one. Three, a big one. And all four will cost you a huge favor slip.”

Dean thought about it and considered his worst two. “O.K., I’ll go with the medium favor slip.”

“Dean, Dean. It’s your wedding night. You sure you don’t want to get rid of them all?”

“Positive. I’ll keep the older two.”

“O.K.” Danny shrugged and reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a homemade tablet and pen. He circled the word ‘medium’ and handed the sheet to Dean. “Sign please.”

Dean took the pen, shook his head and signed the favor slip. “You have this down to a science now don’t you.”

“Hell yeah. If you change your mind, let me know.”

Dean handed the favor slip and pen back. “I won’t. Thanks.” There was a certain amount of relief for Dean knowing that Joey, the hyper child, and Nick, the crying child, would not be an intrusion on his night. He looked over to Ellen who sat on the couch talking to Hal and Robbie. He looked at the two children he knew would be staying home. Alexandra snuggled close to Ellen on the couch. And Billy sat on the floor a book set on the coffee table in front to him.

The two calm children. Dean smiled. His wedding night wouldn't be so bad after all.

^^^

There were candles lit, not many in Dean and Ellen's living room, but enough to give that romantic feel. A bottle of wine was open on the table, two half filled glasses sat next to it. Slow music played softly and Dean held Ellen somewhere between dancing with her and seducing her.

He smiled some as his hand moved across the long sleeve white button shirt she wore. "This looks much better on you than it did on me." He spoke softly, fiddling with the collar.

"I thought you'd like it." Ellen stared at him while they dance.

"Very, very nice." Dean kissed her. "When you said you wanted to put something comfortable on, I thought you meant jeans."

"Usually I would have." Ellen giggled at his teasing kisses.

Dean undid the buttons as he swayed with her. He brought his wine tainted lips to her neck, gliding them up to her ear.

"Daddy!" Alexandra called. "I'm thirsty."

Dean closed his eyes. "Not again." He shook his head. "Alex, I left you water on your night stand."

"Thank you!"

Ellen snickered. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not. Now . . . where were we."

"You were." Ellen pointed to her neck. "Right here."

"Yeah, that's right." Dean, with an ornery grin, placed his lips where Ellen pointed. His hands undid a few more buttons and pulled at the collar, opening the shirt. He moaned some as his hands moved to her back, down to her thigh and strongly up, lifting the edges of the shirt as he felt her. He traveled his lips downward, across her collar and to the openness of the shirt. He bent his knees just a little and moved his mouth softly and gently across Ellen's chest.

"What *are* you doing to my mother?" Billy's voice called out too close.

With his head still buried in Ellen's shirt, mouth to her breast, Dean shifted his eyes and saw Billy. He immediately removed his hand that was planted on Ellen's backside and stood up straight with a heavy breath. "Billy."

"Dad."

"Billy go to bed."

"I can't." The Dean prodigy peered up. "You're making too much noise."

Dean blinked several times. "We're making too much noise?"

Ellen saw it coming on Dean's face. "Dean."

"No El." He whined. "I've been trying to make love to you for nearly an hour, they won't go to sleep."

Billy looked confused. "What's making love?"

"That's it." Dean tossed his hands up. "Billy get you shoes on."

"Dean?" Ellen questioned as she watched him grab Billy's hand. "What are you doing?"

"What I should have done an hour ago." He moved down the hall.

“Deal with the devil or not, I’m signing that favor slip.” He poked his head back out into the living room. “I’m gonna consummate this marriage with you yet.”

Billy tugged Dean’s hand. “What’s consummate?”

It was cold out. Danny was smug as he handed Dean the ‘huge’ favor slip to sign, and Dean’s big romantic wedding night was not going as planned. But at least he was going to finally have Ellen alone. He cringed when he walked into his house and took off his shoes to see the living room light on. “She fell asleep.” Dean said to himself as he walked toward the bedroom. “She was drinking too much she . . .” He stopped at the bedroom door and saw the candles lit. “She read my mind.”

Ellen finished her wine and set it on the night stand. She laid on the bed still wearing Dean’s shirt. “Catch your breath. You were running, I heard your tennis shoes.”

Dean inhaled deeply and let it out slowly as he walked into the bedroom. He took off his tee shirt and tossed it across the room. “The moment I have been waiting for.”

Ellen watched him near the bed. “Dean, we’ve made love before.”

“That’s not what I meant.” From the foot of the bed, Dean started his slow climb to Ellen. “What I mean is . . .” His lips touched upon her bare calf then grazed to her thighs as he crept up to her. Dean ran his hands up the back of her legs to the front, bending her knee as he brought his body to Ellen’s. “For the first time ever El. In my memory. In my mind. I’m going to make love to you . . .” He kissed her. “As my wife.” Chuckling with almost a gloat to him, Dean pressed his body firmer to Ellen bringing her leg around his waist. And before any other circumstance could interrupt them, Dean began to kiss her in what he was hoping would be the short preliminaries to their lovemaking.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

So lost and so annoyed Frank looked as his finger pressed up and down on the button of the old style black phone. “Nothing.” He said to Marcus as he showed him the receiver. “Dead.”

“It was working an hour ago.” Marcus said. “You have to make that phone call.”

“I know. It’s dead.”

Marcus took the receiver, listened, clicked the button and hung up. “All right.” He reached into his coat pocket. “You can use this.”

“Thank you.” Frank took it. “Now where in the hell did I put that number?”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

There was something about the way Ellen kissed him when she had too much to drink that Dean just loved. More intense, less any inhibitions, whatever it was, he didn't want it to stop. With his hand held under her hair and their lips still locked, Dean rolled on to his back bringing Ellen with him. His hands roamed her nude body as far as they could reach, feeling every inch of her and hating when she pulled from the kiss.

Ellen giggled and lifted her hair from her eyes. "I'm hungry."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Right now. At this moment. You're hungry?"

"Yes."

"Right now?"

"Dean." She snickered. "You keep saying that. I drank too much and if I don't eat I'll get sick."

"But right now? Can't you wait?"

"Dean. We made love once already. We can't stay in this bed all night."

"Yeah we can, it's our wedding night."

"So you've said. It's getting old." Ellen looked serious at his shocked expression. "I'm kidding." She started to laugh.

"So you don't want something to eat."

"No I do. Just a piece of that sandwich wrap Jess made. Please."

"All right. Stay here." Dean rolled over and reached down to the floor for his boxer shorts. He swung his legs out of bed, stepping in them and pulling them up. "Don't fall asleep."

"I won't. I promise." Ellen laid her head on the pillow.

Dean stopped cold in his walk out, when his phone rang. "Shit. I knew I should have shut that thing off."

"Don't answer it." Ellen spoke groggy.

"Look at you. You're falling asleep." Dean picked up the phone. "Hello."

The was a long moment of silence, a heavy breath, then Frank. "I'm alive."

An excitement shudder shot through Dean and with a huge grin, he gasped a shriek of excitement when he heard Frank's voice. High pitched and emotional, Dean's words trembled. "Oh my God."

"I'm alive and . . ." The was another brief silence. "And . . . Dean." Frank spoke his name with relief. "Dean, tell everyone I'll be home as soon as I figure . . ."

The line went dead.

"Frank. Frank!" Dean called into the phone.

Ellen sprang up. "Frank?"

Dean turned around to her showing her the phone. His breaths trembled. "Oh my God."

"Dean?"

So stunned, yet his face shined with a happiness and relief. He ran his fingers through his hair. "That was Frank. El, that was Frank." He sat on the bed and grabbed Ellen's hand.

"Dean, what did he say?"

Dean swayed his head still in shock. "We got cut off. He probably said

more than they wanted him to.”

“You don’t think they did something to him, do you?”

“No.” Dean grabbed her hand and looked into her eyes. She looked as happy and scared as he felt. “He’s the insurance that they get me . . . El.” He laid his hand on her face and smiled. “Frank sound fine. He sounded just fine.”

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

To the pieces of the broken cell phone that laid on the floor to the barrel of the revolver that pointed at him, Frank’s eyes shifted. Sitting in his desk chair, he then followed the gun to Marcus.

“I knew it was an act.” Marcus kept his aim on Frank. “I can’t believe the president bought it.”

“You hit the phone from my ear.”

“I have a gun pointed to your face and you’re bitching about me knocking the phone off of you?”

“You think I’m scared that you’ll kill me.” Frank fluttered his lips.

“Quiet.”

“You broke the fuckin phone when I was trying to call home.” Frank kept eye contact with Marcus.

“And you added more than you should have. Wait until the president hears about this.”

“The president can blow me.”

Such a shocking disbelief hit Marcus. “You have a lot of attitude for a man who has a gun pointed at him.”

“And you have a lot of attitude for a man who’s seconds from death.”

Marcus laughed. “How do you figure?”

“Very easily.” In his fast spring from his seat, Frank swiped Marcus’ hand out of the way. He reached into his shoulder harness, pulled out his revolver, extended his hand and fired a single shot directly into Marcus’ forehead.

The force of the close range shot sent blood and pieces of Marcus’ head spraying out and his dead body dropped to the floor exposing a shocked Richie who stood by the door.

“Frank.”

“Shut up.” Frank shook his head in disgust then bent down for the phone. “Can you believe he broke the only phone that isn’t tapped. Fuck.”

“Frank.” Richie looked at the seeping, growing pool of blood. “You can’t do this anymore man, someone is gonna start to notice the higher ups are no longer around.”

Frank looked so perturbed at the busted phone. “Can you believe this?”

“Are you listening to me?” Richie stepped over Marcus’ body. “I’m not cleaning this one up. I cleaned up the Lt. Merrick thing.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Frank slammed the pieces of the phone on the desk. He walked to Marcus. “God, look at the mess.”

“Yeah, well that’s what happens when you shoot someone in the head

two feet from you.” Richie watched Frank stand in thought. “I don’t understand. If you hate George that much. Why don’t you just shoot him, get it over with and we book.”

“It’s not that easy..” Frank looked at the blood that splattered on the walls. “I wished it was. I have to lay low. I need information. Right now, I can’t take any chances because I haven’t a clue where they have Ellen.” Frank faced Richie. “And until I find out where your sister is, we have to stay right here.”

LEAVING . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

September 18
Binghamton, Alabama

So quiet that the only sound in the dark hall was the clinking of the keys as Frank locked the door he just stepped from.

Richie swayed his head. "I always thought there was something demented about you."

"Yeah." Frank, like he was back in Beginnings, hooked the keys on his belt. "Ready. I have men to train."

"Why can I ask, did you not take them out and toss them in the ditch with the other seven officers?"

"Prisoners of war." Frank walked fast.

"Prisoners of war?" Richie's small legs had to really move to keep up with Frank. "How can that be? Isn't this their camp?"

Frank stopped walking as soon as they stepped outside. "No Richie, this is *my* camp now." With his usual arrogant smirk Frank found the men waiting in the field. "I just have to work on letting *them* know it."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe's were the only eyes to date, with the exception of Andrea, to see the letter he held in his hand. At the early morning meeting at Robbie's, before anyone began their day, Joe held the letter, then looked at Robbie, Henry and Dean. "I laughed. Dean and Robbie, you laughed. I stopped laughing when I found this." He tossed the letter on the table.

Robbie grabbed it first and with a solemn look passed it to Dean who read it and passed it to Henry who . . . snickered.

Joe raised his eyes to Henry.

"Sorry." Henry handed it back. "I told you."

"How the hell did you know Henry?" Joe put the letter back.

"I didn't. I made it up. Boy was I right. So what does this mean Joe?"

"Well, I'm gonna ask her a few questions. Go from there. We're moving into the house today, so perhaps after that is finished with. Her and I will talk."

"Dad. How do you feel about this?" Robbie asked.

"How am I supposed to feel?"

"Pissed." Henry said. "Or at the very least. Really, really mad."

Joe looked oddly at Henry. "If Andrea is working for George, then I'll get pissed. But aside from that if it was just an affair, it happened before me and her, and it's none of my business, is it? That's what makes it so delicate."

Dean peered up from his notes. "So how are you going to approach her with this?"

"That I don't know." Joe answered. "But I do know this. The letter is a piece of evidence. And it's evidence that tells me that Andrea. My wife, the church going woman, an original, is now, without any uncertainty, a viable

suspect.”

There was an air of sadness that hit that table after Joe’s words. A thought no one wanted to have. But unless something else appeared evidence-wise, Andrea, one of the most trusted people in Beginnings, jumped to the top of the list.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters.

Stewart always considered himself a lucky man. Jeremy, though he held a high position with George, was not lucky. Jeremy always had the awful luck of delivering bad news to the president. Perhaps that was why Jeremy got shipped out to Beginings. A prestigious spy? Yes. But also a sitting expendable duck if he was found out.

Bearing good news, Stewart walked into George’s office for their daily morning briefing. “The engine repairs on the ship are working again. It’s looking good. She’ll be sea worthy for the voyage yet.” Stewart saw George smile as he took his seat across from him. “And I just took *that* call.”

“And?” George asked.

“Went well. No difficulties.”

George let out a long breath. “A small problem off *our* hands now. Thank God. Any news on the second batch, will we have to do the same thing?”

Stewart shrugged. “You may want to take a ride to DC and see. I’m getting sketchy answers.”

“I’ll do that. Now . . . preparations.”

“Train is being loaded now.” Stewart looked at his notes. “Lab equipment and such. Especially the genetic material. Dr. Stevens said we must not run into any problems or we can lose what little we have.”

“I understand that.” George said. “Did he say how the train stops will effect the specimens?”

“As long as the train moves on schedule. We’re good.”

“Then talk to that damn conductor because he tends to play around.”

“I will. May I tell you something sir?”

“Sure.”

“I think it’s a good thing that you’re staying back here during the beginning of this all.”

“Why is that?” George asked.

“Gut feeling. Has a lot to do with Marcus or our lack of speaking to him in two days.”

“Well we only told Marcus to call in if there was a problem.” George said. “Must not be a problem there.”

“Do you suppose everything is all right in Binghamton?” Stewart questioned.

“I know it is. It’s not in our full control now, yes. I know this. But once our scientists arrive out there and set up along with the other two ambassadors, it’ll be less a military control thing than it is now, and more of the full service base that it’s intended to be. We need that. It’s close to the other side of the country.”

“Sgt. Haynes and his men are ready for the move there sir.”

“That’s next. Let’s let Frank work on that training before we fill his camp up with more men.” George explained. “Then once the scientists arrive, and the second half of the force out there, then I’ll go. The safety factor is there. I don’t trust Dr. Hayes yet. Who knows what he’ll try with me.”

“I completely agree.” Stewart added. “Completely. Has Dr. Morris said anymore about Frank’s amnesia?”

“As a matter of fact, I spoke to him yesterday. Said that too much time has passed. It doesn’t look good. I wouldn’t believe this amnesia thing if I didn’t trust Dr. Morris so much.”

“That trust worthy?” Stewart asked.

“That and qualified. I’m eventually going to move him from general medicine into teaching once the genetically enhanced are able to learn more. I mean, that’s why Dr. Morris was chosen. To teach, after all that’s what he did at Harvard Medical most of his life.”

“Impressive.”

“Very.” George leaned back and stared at the Society agenda for the next two weeks. “This is impressive. The ship, the elimination of our error, Binghamton. Yep, barring any screw ups. Things just may be finally going our way.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie was in need of a hair cut. That was the first thought that hit Joe as he walked to meet Robbie near the back gate. Hoping to get a short talk in with his son as they both headed back into town. He watched Robbie with a group of four security men, by the back gate. A clipboard in Robbie’s hands. Possibly giving out new perimeter checks while Robbie prepared for his brothers departure.

Robbie’s blonde hair blew in the fall wind, he must of sensed Joe. Because before Joe could signal he was waiting that twenty or so feet away, Robbie looked up, squinted from the sun and smiled that smile that only Robbie had.

Joe lifted his hand in return and waited for his son. Watching him proudly as he filled in better than anticipated for his older brother Frank. Better than Joe would have thought. Robbie following Frank’s footsteps was nothing new to Joe. Robbie always tried to follow Frank’s footsteps, thinking his big brother always did things the best. To Joe, that was great. The connection between his sons as they grew up. They fought like mad but all of them loved each other unconditionally. There was a certain amount of curiosity in Joe to see how the three grown up boys were going to be. There also was a certain amount of fear with that curiosity, because a part of Joe knew it probably would be worse between them.

But Joe really was proud of all of them. And he was with Robbie. Watching his son’s hands move as he explained things to his men. A knowledge look upon his young face. Making decisions that were of extreme importance, and Robbie always hated decisions. But he came to his decisions well. Unlike

Frank who never thought. Hal who tended to think too much, Robbie gave half thought and half gut instincts into everything he decided to do.

“I’m just so confused Dad.”

Joe heard Robbie’s fifteen year old voice in his head. Decision making is what made Joe snapped to that memory. And to Joe, that day on the baseball field in the ‘World Series’ of pony league ball, Robbie made his first ever real decision . . .

“I don’t know what to tell you Robert.” Joe sat next to him on the bench.

“What would Frank do? I should ask Frank huh?” Robbie sat, looking so down, his white baseball pants clean from his not playing.

Joe turned back and looked into the bleachers to his other three sons. Hal, just out of boot camp, talked to some girl, homely too. Jimmy read a book and Frank looked perturbed. Both of them on leave, came home for this game. He faced Robbie again. “Don’t ask Frank. You do this on your own.”

“Is it a hard decision Dad? Or am I over reacting?”

Joe had to think about it. He looked to the score board. The last inning,. Nothing, nothing. Then he looked out to the field at the teenage boys out there. Robbie’s big decision. The team he played against was filled with boys Robbie had played side by side with all his life. And since a division of streets, Robbie got moved to another league. Having to prove himself all over again as a ball player, Robbie spent most of his time on the bench in the new league. But not this game. Luck was with Robbie. Four players were out with illness and the right fielder got beamed with a ball and he too was out. Robbie was in. But luck was against Robbie as well. The pitcher, Robbie’s best friend, was about to set a record and receive an award. Larry was about to pitch his eighth consecutive no hitter. “It’s a tough one kid.”

“We have two outs. Maybe our guys will strike out, we’ll go into extra innings and Larry will be done pitching. And I won’t have to hit until next inning.”

“Maybe . . . maybe not.” Joe watched the second batter get hit in the leg with a ball. “You’re gonna have to bat now Robbie. Get in the batter’s box.” Joe stood up.

Robbie stood too. “Maybe this guy will hit a home run and the game will be over.” Robbie dropped his head.

“Robert. Just do what you have to do. OK?” Joe rubbed his son’s head and left the dug out. He walked up to the bleachers plopping down between Frank and Hal. Joe nudged Hal. “Pay attention, you’re brother is gonna be up.”

Hal tuned away from the homely girl. “It’s about time they let him play. What’s he gonna do?”

Joe shrugged.

Frank huffed. “I’m not understanding the problem he has. What? Is he stupid?”

“Christ Frank.” Joe cringed. “He doesn’t know these guys he’s playing for. He knows the ones he’s playing against. Larry and him are best friends. Robbie can hit Larry every single time. It’s a matter of team loyalty to a team that never let him play, or friendship loyalty to a kid who’s about to get a hell of an achievement award.”

Hal shook his head. "Robbie certainly is sure of himself."

"He can hit Larry." Joe told him. "Every single time." He watched Robbie stepped to the plate.

Jimmy looked up from his novel. "There's no decision there. Robbie strikes out. He's the third out. Larry gets his award and it's extra innings."

"What are you fuckin nuts?" Frank scoffed. "Is it any wonder why you picked the Navy? Go back to reading your book. It's competition, friendship goes out the window. He fuckin knows he can hit the ball,. Step up to the box, nail it, screw Larry, be the hero and get the trophy."

Joe rolled his eyes slightly. "It's a principal Frank. Your brother is taking this serious." he watched Robbie takes his batter's stance and swing a few times. "I think he'll make the right choice."

CRACK!

"Oh yeah!" Frank shouted out.

All four Slagel's in the bleachers stood with the rest of the crowd at Robbie's sailing ball. They watched it fly. Going, going . . . gone.

"Dad? Dad?"

Joe snapped out of his memory.

"Where was your mind at?" Robbie snickered as he stood next to Joe.

"Lindbergh field eighteen years ago." Joe told him.

"What happened at Lindbergh field eighteen years ago?"

"The championship. You versus Larry."

"Oh." Robbie remembered. "Yeah, that's right. I won the game for our team. I was cool. What made you think of that?"

"Watching you out there. Knowing how you have to make decisions." Joe started walking with Robbie. "I was just remembering how that was probably the first hard decision you made in your life."

"Pretty stupid now." Robbie laughed. "I can't believe I was in such debate over that."

"Hey it was trophy or your friendship. You lost a friendship over that."

"No big deal now. He's most likely dead."

"Robert." Joe shook his head. "Anyhow, I was also thinking. You're doing this very well, heading security. How are you going to feel when Frank returns?"

"To be honest Dad. Relieved. I can't wait to get back into mechanics. I miss it."

"Really?" Joe was hocked. "I had no idea you liked it so much."

"No I hate it. Especially working for the prick. But . . . I could hide and sleep all the time. Dad, when Frank walks back through the gate the moment that he does, he's getting his clipboard, his heavy fuckin keys and I'm telling him take his damn job back and get his lazy ass to work."

Joe chuckled at Robbie's comment, laying his hand on Robbie's back for a moment while they walked. And though Frank probably would nail his little brother if Robbie actually said what he told Joe he would, Joe would enjoy it. No matter what transpired the moment Frank walked in through the gate, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that Frank would be walking through the gate.

Hal was amazed as he watched the amount of preserved food that was being loaded into the truck that set in the distance from where he and Henry were. He watched it in so much awe that he stopped paying attention to Henry.

“They have to fill out the forms Hal. Hal?”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“The men you’re sending. They have to fill out processing forms. Ellen has them.”

“O.K.” Hal folded his arms and watched the truck. “You people have all this food?”

“Yeah and we have more growing. Did Sgt. Ryder tell his men they will be utilized as field workers?”

“They’re aware and have no problem.”

“We’re getting housing ready for them and the other fifty men that are coming to get your town ready. But we’re gonna have to put them four in a house.”

“O.K.”

Henry smiled, swaying his head. “This small building here is tracking. This is where we’ll eventually link you up to.”

“Been here.”

“Have you. Oh.” Henry reached for the door. “I’m thinking this is where Joe is. It’s on his agenda for today. We’ll grab him and get Ellen.” As Henry opened the door he heard the high pitch beeping.

“Is that your alarm?” Hal asked.

“Yeah.” Henry bolted in. “Mark, what’s going on.”

“Tracking is screwed up.” Mark tossed his hands up.

“How do you know?” Henry asked.

“Look and listen.” Mark pointed to the radar. “No noise. No signals. Watch the area behind the under developed.”

Henry shook his head. “O.K., nothing.”

“Wait. It’s repetitive. Happens in time. And . . .”

A long alarm beep occurred and a single light blinked on the screen shot across and back, then disappeared.

Henry blinked in amazement. “What the hell was that.”

Mark was sure of himself. “A malfunction.”

Hal leaned closer. “I don’t know about this tracking thing. But maybe it’s not a malfunction, maybe it’s an animal.”

Henry looked in debate. “I don’t know. Could be.”

Another beep, another shooting light.

Mark shook his head. “Malfunction. The signal is weak, too weak. If it is an animal, it’s no bigger than two feet long.”

“Then it could be an animal.” Hal said.

Mark picked up the clipboard with the computer sheet on it. “I’ll say it again. Malfunction. It’s been happening steady for over an hour.” Mark held his ear, cringed, two seconds later it happened again. He handed Henry the sheet. “Ran it though the computer program.”

Henry read the results. “All right, let’s watch for another hour or so. If

it keeps up we'll go out and check the tracking back there. Danny's leaving so I'll have to do it and I'm busy right now." He set the clipboard down.

"Henry?" Hal gained his attention. "How can you be so sure it's a malfunction and not an animal? I'm curious, it just looks like a light to me."

The blink, flash and beep happened again.

"Did you see that flash and shooting light?" Henry asked. "Well that's supposed to be the life signal. Smaller, weaker signifies a small or weaker intrusion. Animal. And that can't be an animal darting across that area that fast."

"That fast?" Hal was confused.

"That fast," Henry said then lifted the clipboard to show Hal. "That area the light shot across is close to two miles. And going by the speed computer estimates, I know of no such animal, that small, that can move at sixty-four miles per hour." Henry took the clipboard back. "Malfunction. We'll check it out later Mark. Keep me posted."

Questioning in his mind about Henry's quick dismissal of the situation, Hal took one more look at the tracking screen and hesitantly followed Henry out.

^^^

"Mr. Hoi." Joe called for Danny as he walked up to what would be his new home. Danny added the final touches.

Danny turned around with a grin. "All done Joe. I swear. Just making it look nice for your woman."

"That's not why I'm here."

"Oh?" Danny looked to Joe and Herb, an older gentleman who worked the fields. He stood with Joe. Danny snickered. "Did you guys come to beat me up."

"Danny." Joe said his name stern.

"I'm ready for ya." Danny raised his fist and laughed. "Kidding. What's up?"

"Danny." Joe huffed. "You were supposed to meet me an hour ago then we were all heading to the clinic together."

"Now see Joe." Danny walked from the house to him. "You didn't tell me why I have to go to a meeting, so I got scared."

"You?"

"Yeah. Clinic. Dean and Ellen." Danny shuddered. "They may want to work on my brain. It is highly intelligent."

"I'm sure. No. No experiments. But . . . now you have to rush." Joe told him.

"Rush?"

"Rush. Go pack."

"Am I uh . . . leaving?" Danny asked.

"You can say that. You would have known an hour ago, but you blew me off."

"I was busy Joe, getting your house ready. Where am I going?"

"To Bowman. I need you to get the power up enough so we can have some telephone communications with them."

"No shit. I'm going out of town on business." Danny grinned. "Thanks."

That's cool. You know, they do call me . . ."

"Mr. Telephone connection guy?"

Danny laughed. "I wasn't going to say that, but that's good. No, Mr. traveler. O.K., I'll pack, see you at the clinic." He quickly grabbed his tool box. "This is great. Not only will I be the man here, but there as well." Danny began to dart off. He stopped. "Your house is done." He ran again and came back. "But uh . . . watch that front door, it's not really connected yet. See ya!" Fast Danny took off.

Herb looked at Joe, a look of pleasure not on his wrinkled face. "How long did you say I have to be in a closed in vehicle with that guy?"

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Dean closed the large black case that set on the counter in the clinic lab. "O.K. El, the coolant pack in here should keep the meds good for five hours. The trip won't be that long."

"But get it put away as soon as possible."

"Exactly."

"What about stuff from the cryo-lab? Am I taking any experimental stuff?"

"Um . . ." Dean scratched his head. "I don't know. I was thinking about that."

"Yes? No?" Ellen asked enjoying his debating look.

"I'd like to send some down with you. But . . . you know they aren't fully tested yet. On normal people that is."

"I can take a couple new drugs down just in case."

"You know what? Let's do that. Hal doesn't have a processing, so who knows what he has. Take the new cold med down but only give it to . . ."

"I know, I know, semi-SUT-equivalents."

"You got it." Dean smiled, kissed Ellen quickly then kissed her again. "I'm gonna miss you."

"No you won't."

"You don't think?" Dean moved the black case to the other counter. "Think about it El." He walked to the lab door and closed it, the lock clicked. "How many hours in the day do I not spend with you. Not many." He closed the blinds.

"What are you doing?"

"Saying goodbye. You leave me in a little over an hour." Dean walked back to the counter, he placed his hands on Ellen's waist and lifted her up to the counter.

She giggled. "Look at you impressing me with your strength."

Dean took off his lab jacket.

"Really Dean. What are you doing?" She felt her legs part and Dean found a spot between them. He looked so serious. "Dean."

"El." He smiled and kissed her.

"Anyone could walk in."

"Oh no they can't, it's locked. No one is gonna get in here unless they are authorized and no one is around." He pulled at the tee shirt she was wearing.

"Stop."

“Nope.” He kissed her.

“Dean, I’m only going for a couple days.”

“And speaking of that. Be careful. We know your ‘leaving Beginnings’ reputation.”

“Don’t we though.” Ellen ignored him as he manipulated her.

“Lift your arms.” Dean lifted them and then her shirt. He tossed it. He laid his hand on her cheeks and kissed her.

“You do know if you want to attempt this counter action thing, you’re gonna need a step stool.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” Dean took off his own shirt. “Watch me.” He moved closer to her and so soft he caressed his lips on her neck.

Ellen’s voice soften. “Dean. No. We can’t.”

Dean’s fingers laid on her bra straps, sliding them slowly from her shoulders as he kissed her where the straps once were, then he moved his mouth down to her chest. So soft, barely touching,

“O.K., maybe we can. What the hell.”

Dean lifted his head and grinned. “Music to my ears.” His whole tone changed. He slipped his hand under her hair and despite Ellen’s giggle, he kissed her and backed her down to the counter.

Buzz . . .

Johnny’s laughter rang in the room.

Dean, stunned and still leaning on top of Ellen in his counter position, looked up.

“Dean.” Ellen whispered. “You said no one was coming.”

Johnny just walked in as if nothing was going on. “Do you guys think you should be doing that in a clean sterile environment such as the clinic?”

“Christ.” Joe walked in. “I’d like to know that too.”

Dean’s eyes widened. “Can anyone else walk in here?”

And with that, a running Danny Hoi bolted in. “Whoa. Hey. Should I refrain from asking what’s up?”

Joe turned his head to Danny then back to Dean and Ellen. “Do you two mind?”

“Yeah.” Robbie entered the lab. “Unless you were planning on entertaining us.” He grunted painfully when Joe back handed him in the gut.

Dean, shaking his head, lifted himself then pulled Ellen up. “Of all moments to be grand central station.”

“It’s a goddamn clinic Dean.” Joe scolded. “You have a home.”

“But Dad . . .” Robbie instigated. “They have that reputation of liking the clinic best. And Dean could you put on a shirt? I’m really turned on by you at this moment.” Robbie noticed the overly serious glance Joe gave him. “What? I’m kidding.”

Dean sought out Ellen’s shirt and gave it to her, he bent down and picked up his own. “Sorry El.”

Ellen tossed on her shirt. “No I think it’s pretty funny.” She slid from the counter. “Danny, what are you doing here and Herb?”

Danny answered. “It’s the big leaving for Bowman meeting. I’m going as her protection Dean.” Danny winked. “So fear not. No seriously, Joe wants me to hook them up. Not hook them up like Dean was about to well but . . . try to get communications semi . . .” Danny snickered. “Up. Sorry Dean.”

Dean immediately looked down at himself and saw he was secure from

any embarrassment. "You're an ass Danny."

"I got you though." Danny rambled. "Hey, Joe when are we gonna start this meeting. I'm getting excited, not Dean excited. But I want to go."

Joe rubbed his own eyes harshly. "Danny, Christ. As soon as Henry gets here."

"What about me." Henry walked in. "Did I miss anything."

Robbie looked at Hal and Henry. "Just Dean and Ellen having sex on the counter."

Dean tossed his hands up. "We weren't having sex."

"Not yet." Johnny corrected. "Had I been a minute later. Perhaps."

Robbie laughed. "Then it would have been over with."

Hal looked mortified. "Should we be in here? They're married and perhaps they want some time alone."

Joe spun on his heels to his son behind him. "Not in a public place they don't need time alone. Now can we all drop the Dean and Ellen pretending to be kids and get on with this goddamn meeting before I have a stroke?" Joe watched Henry shut the door. "Thank you." He took in the faces in the lab, all the faces that awaited the finish off meeting before the Bowman trip. And Joe knew the short briefing would be far from brief. They never were, when there were more than three people from Beginnings in the same room. He had to wonder how he ever got anything accomplished at any meeting he had. And that thought was reiterated when in Joe's small pause of thinking, the group took advantage of that and began chattering about things that had nothing to do with Bowman.

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Binghamton, Alabama

Dressed out of Caceres society uniform and in shorts, Frank cooled down in his office after taking an unscheduled break from training on what seemed to be an extremely hot day for September. "Fuck." Frank rubbed his hand over his head as he sat in his office.

Richie snickered. "It's not that bad."

"You've been in here all day. I ought to make you train with everyone."

"No you shouldn't. Anyhow, go on."

"Oh yeah." Frank snapped forward in his chair and grabbed his water. He gasped at the coolness, put down his glass and looked disgusted. "About four feet tall. I swear."

"No way."

"Yep. O.K. maybe I'm exaggerating, but no bigger than you. Skinny like you too."

"Yeah but you like me."

"True. But Dean. Man." Frank shook his head. "You know just when you think he's a nice guy, bam, he jerks you off. Not literally."

"I hate them type of guys Frank. Make you think you can trust them and they stab you in the back."

Frank held out his hand. "My point exactly. You're a little man. But Dean, he's a little man with attitude."

"What does my sister see in him?"

“She says he’s well endowed. But I know she says that to bug me.”

“Women always do. So when did this all start?” Richie asked.

“Plague time.”

“O.K., just so we get this right. Original plague time or post-time machine plague time.”

“Both. In the original plague, she wanted to have a baby so she asked him to get her pregnant. He knew her and I were close. But no. He had to pester her and bother her to make a relationship and you know your sister.”

“She can’t say no.”

“Exactly.” Frank said. “It was worse when time rippled.” Frank explained with seriousness. “Something happened with her and Pete because of a letter Robbie sent her, I don’t know. He was writing back and forth to her since he got my letter. Or something like that. So . . . Ellen arranges to go to Little Dean’s lecture. He sees how vulnerable she is. And as soon as she tells him she’s in a bad marriage. He jumped on that.”

“Like a dog.”

“You know it. That’s when he knocked her up in that history.”

“See now here’s what I don’t understand.” Richie stated. “You and her were always close. She didn’t know this man from Adam. Had a fling with him at some lecture . . .”

“After the lecture.”

“Of course. As I was saying. Why didn’t you and her just raise the baby together.”

“I tried. She even said I tried in the history I don’t remember. But he made her feel guilty.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Frank shook his head. “He’s been playing with her ever since. Seven fuckin years I had to share Ellen with this man because he uses the kid thing against her. I can’t tell you how many times he’s taken her from me. That’s what caused the strain in our marriage you know. He took advantage of her again. She was going through a rough time, he was Mr. Understanding and they had an affair.”

“This Dean guy Frank. He sounds like a real asshole.”

“Wait until you meet him. You’ll hate him.”

“I already do.”

“Thanks.” Frank leaned back and rocked in his chair. “And you know it’s bad enough that there are no women left and we have to share with someone else. But it should be a three way partnership.”

“This guy won’t let it be, will he?” Richie asked.

“Nope. Takes advantage of the situation every single time. But he does have one thing going for him. He’s smart.”

“Well I’m sorry Frank that’s not everything. You’re smart.”

“I am.” Frank nodded.

“Wait until I see my sister. I’ll talk to her.”

“Please.” Frank ran his hand down his face. “All right.” He looked at his watch. “Breaks over.” He stood up. “Did you do that math yet for me Richie?”

“Oh yeah. Almost forgot.” Richie pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and read it. “Using your estimate of fifty miles a day, the UWA soldiers that you let go, should arrive back at their base in Bowman on October 23rd.”

“What?” Frank was shocked. “It’s only September.”

“Yep.”

“Fuck.” Frank rubbed his head.

“Now that’s barring they don’t run into trouble. They may find horses or bikes. They aren’t gonna find anything motorized, you said that yourself. Gas is not an option. So even finding a horse, I figured it still would take them two weeks. Stopping. Letting the animal rest, eat and such. And the bikes, with as much time that has passed won’t make it. They won’t. The tires will die.”

Frank let out a long breath. “O.K., so we’re looking at minimal three more weeks here. Shit. My father better send down a fuckin helicopter to lift my ass out of here.”

“What about Ellen?”

“We have time. We’ll find where she is. George will be coming back. If I have to, I’ll wait the time out, then lock him in a room and beat the hell out of him until he tells me where she is.”

“That’ll work.”

“Yeah” Frank walked to his office door. “Back to training.”

“Frank?” Richie called out. “Why . . . why are you training society soldiers?”

Frank just grinned and walked out.

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Beginnings, Montana

Two trucks. One long and filled with food, the other a pick up, waited, engines running at the back gate. Hal and Ellen would ride in the pick up. Danny would drive Herb in the big truck, the one that would return with half the Bowman men who were going to Beginnings. Robbie was bringing down a truck for Ellen and the other half.

Ellen stood with Henry, he held Nick and they both watched Dean standing with Hal.

“Henry, what do you suppose they are discussing. Dean looks serious.”

“Probably medical stuff El. You know Dean, he’s always trying to impress someone with it.”

Joe cleared his throat as he approached Ellen and Henry. “O.K., little lady, say your goodbyes. And listen to Hal, you hear me?”

“Yes.” Ellen smiled and embraced Henry and kissed Nick. “Help Dean with the kids Henry. And watch Bev around him.”

“You mean watch Dean around Bev . . . ow.” Henry rubbed the back of his head. “Ow Joe, why’d you hit me?”

“Why are you starting shit? Go away.” Joe stepped between them facing Ellen. “Stay low if there’s trouble,. You know how it follows you out there. And make . . .” Joe felt a tap on his shoulder, he looked to Henry behind him. “What Henry?”

“That wasn’t very nice Joe stepping between us.”

“Like I care.” Joe returned to Ellen. “As I was saying. Be careful.”

“Yeah, but I’m good. I have a Slagel watching me and you know they are the best protectors.”

“Without a doubt.” Joe laid his hand on her cheek. “Got a favor to ask you.”

“Sure.”

“Check on . . . check on the women situation there. See if Hal’s right about the way they are. If they really are that way, we may have some problems when we all merge.”

“Got it. But I doubt they are as bad as Hal says. Come on Joe, you know how men get. I mean, all men but you.”

With a grumble, Joe kissed Ellen again, looked at his watch then at Hal and Dean. “What the hell are they so engrossed in talking about?”

The expression of seriousness and thinking, along with amazement on Dean’s face was what everyone seemed to notice as they watched him and Hal speaking. Dean looked up to Hal, folding his arms and nodding his head slowly.

So poignant Hal appeared explaining to Dean. “And I can assure you that in our community and on the trip, nothing what-so-ever will happen to Ellen. I will stake my life on it.”

“I believe that. And I appreciate it.”

“O.K., so getting back to what brought me to that. I guess Dean, as you can see, I guess it’s a matter of uh . . .”

“Pride? What? I’m lost. What exactly is it that you’re beating around the bush to ask me?”

“All right, well women are few, very few. And well, since Ellen will be staying with me, I’d like to sort of impress my men with a nice woman beside me.”

“O.K.” Dean blinked. “That’s fine. But . . . You want to show Ellen off?” Dean hid his snicker. “Ellen?”

“Dean, please, Ellen is wonderful.”

“O.K.”

“I don’t think you’re quite getting what I’m asking you.”

“Hal, the Slagel is coming out in you. You’re not asking me anything. Ask.”

Hal took a moment to gain his composure. “Think about it. Ellen is *staying* with me. Staying with me I want . . .”

“You want to sleep with her?”

“Oh my God! No, that’s not where I was going. Dean, I apologize if you thought that. No. I just want to make it, well, seem that way?”

Dean looked over to Ellen. “You want to borrow my wife to impress your men by making it look like you not only have a woman, but one that isn’t like the ones in Bowman.”

“Exactly.”

“Hal, how are you going to explain the fact that she’s married to me?”

“I thought of that. See, once my men understand the understanding and share situations of Beginnings . . .”

Dean nodded. “You say we had an understanding.”

“Does this sound stupid.”

“No, very Slagel like.”

“Can I?” Hal asked.

“Borrow my wife?” Dean shrugged. “Sure go on. Borrow away. But

Hal . . .” Since Dean got a typical Slagel request, he wanted to see if he could get that typical Slagel reaction. Laughter. A snicker. Scoffing. So Dean took on a fake serious, bringing himself more on tip toes and looking Hal straight in the eye. “Hal, Don’t touch her. I wouldn’t want to beat you up.” Setting himself back down on the soles of his feet, Dean waited.

It didn’t happen.

“I wouldn’t take advantage of your generosity that way Dean. And I would never place you in a position where you’ll have to get violent with me because I did.”

“What?” Dean was shocked.

“Hal!” Joe whistled loud and shrill. “Let’s go! Now!”

“Thanks Dean.” Hal shook a stunned Dean’s hand. “I’ll be in touch.” Hal darted off.

“Uh . . .” Dean tossed his hands up. “I was . . . where . . . God, *is* he a Slagel?” he scratched his head and walked over to Ellen.

Ellen felt Dean’s arms go around her from behind and his lips touch her neck. “It’s about time Dean. I was beginning to think you were gonna miss Hal more.”

“I am.”

Ellen turned around face to face with Dean and she smiled. “See you in a couple days.”

“Yep. Be good. El? Did you know Hal wants to make everyone think you and he are well, you know, together?”

Ellen laughed. “That is so typically Slagel. The big leader of his community and now he wants to be the only man with a woman. Make all the men envious. Until they get to know me.”

“Yeah . . . I mean . . . I . . . you’re wonderful El.”

Ellen closed her eyes with a slight smile and swayed her head. “I have to go.” She kissed him quickly and stepped back. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” Dean winked, grabbed her hand then let it slide from his as she walked away to join Hal by the pick up truck.

Dean stepped closer to Henry and Joe to watch them leave. Hal was back in his uniform, looking so . . . Calvary as Ellen correctly described, with the exception of the red bandana on his head. They got in the pick up truck, Ellen waved as she slid in, then Hal shut the door for her. Dean still was teetering on whether Hal was actually a blood line relative of Frank’s. And Dean stood there feeling a little lost, a little more empty as he watched them pull safely from the gate.

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“Combination.” Joe stated as he watched over Mark’s shoulder in the tracking room. Watching the beep and flash of light. “Rabbits and trouble. You know we’re infested with the rabbits and Squirrels in that area. Tracking probably isn’t picking them up completely. Got two or three in that little field and they’re confusing our electronics.”

“You’re probably right.” Mark said.

“We’ll find out soon.” Around Joe’s neck was the headset, he lifted it

to his head. "Henry? You there."

"Yep. Leaving the secure perimeter now."

"How much longer to you get there?"

"I'm at the end of the road by the cliff." Henry shut off the jeep. "I'll let you know what I see when I climb up there."

"Check back." Hating the feel of the headset in his ear, Joe lowered it again and waited.

"Danny's job." Henry complained to himself as he walked through the beginning of the woods that lined the cliff behind the underdeveloped section. The only section of Beginnings that had no perimeter fence. The cliff seemed to be nature's safeguard. "Danny's job." Henry kept bitching walking the fifty yards across the small grassy area and to the tree that he had to climb. "Danny's job. Probably a wire loose or something." He stopped at the tree and grabbed the rope ladder. As his foot stepped to the first rope rung, he heard a ripping sound and felt his foot hit the ground. "What?" Henry looked down, the rung was so frayed it broke the second Henry had stepped on it. "Swell. Looks like something chewed on this." Hoping it was an animal and not poorly made rope, Henry began to climb.

He huffed, caught his breath and braced himself in the 'V' of the branch looking at the tracking dish tightly secured to the tree. "Joe."

"Yeah Henry."

"I'm up here. This is way too high. I can't breathe."

"How's the dish look?"

"Good." Henry visually examined the wire connection. "It doesn't look like anything is wrong."

"I think it's a programming problem Henry. The computer tracking is getting confused."

"I think you may be . . ." Henry stopped talking when he heard a loud rustling sound in the grass below.

"Henry?" Joe called him.

"Wait a second." Henry heard it again. "Joe did you just get a beep there?"

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"What?"

Henry heard the movement but couldn't see. Safely he shifted his body to get another view. He looked to his left at the larger field with an abundance of brush and high weeds. He was well above it. "Shit!"

"Christ Henry, What?"

Henry's eyes widened. What it was he didn't know. He watched the grass move. A fast parting zipping across the field. It was if God himself had his huge finger, reached down and drew a line quickly from one end of the field to the other. But what made the movement, Henry didn't know. "Joe." Another line, then another, it was like watching an Etch-a-Sketch in the grass. "Joe."

"Henry what's going on up there? I'm getting like ten little flashes and beeps."

"Something is in the grass Joe."

"Rabbits? What?"

“I don’t know.” Henry had a frightened tone to him. He watched the grass stop moving. “I’m getting down. I don’t like this.” he fumbled as he reached for the ladder and kept his vision peered to the area. Nearly falling, Henry climbed down, missing a rung and swinging on the roped ladder. He didn’t like the feeling he was getting.

“Henry you O.K.?”

Henry’s feet planted firmly on the ground and as soon as they did his body filled with horror when he heard a long, high pitch animal squeal in the distance. To him it sounded like a warning cry. His head swayed to it and as it did, the loud rustling of grass and weeds began. Henry could see the tops of the stocks moving and moving toward him. Then Henry took off running. He flew as fast as he could the fifty yards to the jeep. The moving foliage sound grew closer but Henry focused on his jeep, his heart racing, pounding hard. He stretched his lanky legs to the limits, leaping over whatever got in his way. Something or some things were following him and he didn’t know what. He dove in the jeep, not even taking time to toss his tool bag in the passenger’s seat. His shaking hands reached for the keys in the ignition as he heard the noise drawing near. Finally, he started the jeep.

BANG!

Henry shrieked when he heard the crash against the rear side of the jeep. He pressed his foot to the peddle, shifted the gears and screeched off as fast as the jeep would move on the rough road. He kept on driving through the secure perimeter, ordering it back up and never looking back to see what it was that chased him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Beginnings, Montana

There was something very red about Joe's face as he sat in his desk looking up to a very frazzled Henry. But the red disappeared as soon as Joe released the laughter he contained. Loud and roaring it was. Joe slapped his hand hard to the desk, leaned to the side of his chair, laughed harder and rubbed his eyes.

"It's not funny Joe."

"Sorry." Joe blurted out more laughter. "You were running from bunnies?"

"Killer bunnies Joe."

"They chased you Henry?"

"Yes, fast too. That's what's on the screen Joe. Killer rabbits."

"Like *Night of the Lepus*?"

Henry was so frustrated, he stomped like a child. "Listen to me Joe."

"No Henry. Listen to yourself. Do you hear how ridiculous you sound? You tell me you were in the tree. You saw the grass move but you couldn't see what it was. And then you tell me it chased you, or rather they chased you. These rabbits. And you believe yourself. Just like you believed Frank."

"What?"

"Remember that one Easter he was telling the kids about how Peter Rabbit forgot to take his Prozac and went hay wire Easter Eve attacking Robbie in his bed. You believed him."

"He sounded believable Joe. And this is true. I'm not exaggerating here. They squealed."

"They squealed?" Joe asked with ridicule.

"Squealed like . . . like . . ." Henry slapped himself in the head.

"Dean!"

"Dean squeals? Is there something you aren't telling me Henry?"

"Huh?" The light bulb went off in Henry's head. "Oh Joe no." He shook his head. "When you were in the cryo lab the last time, did you see those six rabbits on the counter. Or rather hear them? Danny and I did."

Joe stopped laughing. He stood up. "Let's find Dean."

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"Oh Hal, we can have so much fun with this." Ellen stated as she sat in the truck riding with Hal.

"You really will do this?" Hal asked.

"Oh sure, I'll play along. I'll do it good too."

"El, I appreciate this. I'm hoping that maybe if the men see how you are perhaps we can stop fearing any woman we run into."

"But Hal." Ellen held up her hand. "You guys are such gentleman compared to our Beginnings men."

"Really?" Hal was shocked. "They don't treat you with respect?"

"Some do. But for the most part, they treat us like expectations."

“You have got to be kidding me.” Hal was offended. “My brothers too?”

“Not Robbie. Frank does. Snaps his finger at me and expects me to run.”

“Do you?”

“Well, yeah. It’s Frank.”

“You’re gonna have to stop that El.” Hal was disgusted. “And wait until we get my big brother back. I think I’ll sit down and have a word or two with him.”

“Won’t work.”

“It won’t?”

“No, he’s Frank and I’m Ellen. And he’ll never change the way he treats me. You can try though.”

“I will.” Hal stated strongly.

“O.K. . . . Hal, this is so much fun this ride. I want you to know I’m enjoying this immensely.”

“Thank you. Me too.”

“I feel very safe with you. And I don’t feel safe with many people.”

Hal smiled. “Thanks again.”

“And . . . that uniform and bandana.” Ellen gave a thumbs up. “Kicks ass for your sex appeal.”

Hal blushed some, but he blushed with arrogance.

“I wonder if Danny and Herb are having this much fun?”

Herb tried to pretend he was sleeping. But that didn’t work, nor did it stop Danny.

“No, no , no Herb. Didn’t you hear me.”

“I’m sleeping.”

“Oh no you aren’t.”

“Danny, I am.”

Danny peered at Herb close, swerving the truck and causing Herb to scream. “Sorry.”

“Just . . . Just drive.”

“Sing with me.”

“No.” Herb said annoyed.

“Just one song. Sing with me.”

“No.”

“O.K.” Danny tapped his hands on the steering wheel. A bright smile then hit his face. “Hey, I know.” He reached down and grabbed the radio.

^^^

Dean had just finished checking on Jeremy in his post release from the clinic exam. And then Dean found himself in Ellen’s office, grinning from ear to ear, laughing softly as he listened to the radio. He laughed at what he heard, but most of all he laughed at the thought of Hal’s face, Herb’s face and just about anyone else that tuned in to listen to the non stop duets between Danny and

Ellen.

Danny's voice led the song. "*Mock . . .*"

"*Yeah.*" Ellen sang.

"*Ing.*"

"*Yeah.*"

"*Yeah.*"

"*Yeah.*"

"*Mocking Bird.*" Danny went off singing like he was some sort of super star. "*Now everybody have you heard . . .*"

"Dean." Henry called to him.

Dean, who was deep in listening, jolted at the call and shut the radio off. "Joe, Henry. Wasn't that funny?"

"A killer." Joe stated. "But we need to talk to you. We need a favor."

"What's wrong?" Dean stood up looking at Joe and Henry.

"Nothing really." Joe pointed to the door. "Feel like taking a walk with us?"

"Sure." Dean said. "To where?" He asked as he followed.

"Your little cryo lab."

Dean stopped walking. "Why?"

"Dean."

"Joe." Dean grew firm. "It's my lab."

"And it's my community Dean." Joe snapped back. "I'm not demanding here, I'm asking. If this was the old world you wouldn't get away with one tenth the shit you do here. Now instead of the FDA, animal rights, human rights and any other goddamn organization breathing down your neck, you have me. I barely bother with what you do there. Today there's something I need to see. Now do you take me or do I just go check it out."

Dean shook his head as he walked by Joe. "Fine. But let me get in there first. O.K.?"

"That's fine. If I don't see what I need then I'll ask. It's nothing that you did Dean. It's just something I need to see."

Dean had a sort of pouting storm to his walk. "It isn't right Joe. What we do in that lab is really Ellen and mine's business."

"Yes it is." Joe agreed. "Until it becomes something that effects the community. Then it's my business. You are way too defensive about this. Why is that?"

"It's just . . . it's my work." Dean lead the way across the street and to the entrance of the tunnels. And during the whole walk he kept wondering to himself what it was that he was doing that actually effected the community. On that, Dean was baffled.

Joe stared at his watch then at Henry, then at the closed cryo-lab door. "What is he doing in there?"

"Hiding evidence."

"Of the killer bunnies?" Joe asked.

"Joe you shouldn't joke around like that. Really, what if they are."

"Henry, for crying out loud." Joe scolded and the cryo-lab door opened.

Dean ran his fingers through his hair and opened the door wider. He

looked frazzled. “All yours.”

Joe’s first step into the lab was slow and with shifting, suspicious eyes. “Dean, what took you so long?”

“I was uh . . . cleaning up.” Dean tried to hide the long breath he let out.

A slight gagging sound came from Henry. He spoke muffled as he pulled his shirt over his nose. “Joe just ask him so we can leave.”

Joe sniffed outward harshly. “What is that smell Dean?”

“Smell?”

“You don’t smell it? It smells like rotten flesh.”

“Yes.” Dean said. “It is.”

Henry gagged. “Joe why does he have rotten flesh down here?”

“I moved it to the back.” Dean explained. “It’s something me and El are working on.”

“Rotten flesh?” Joe questioned. “May I ask whose?”

“Um, yeah. Robbie got it for us. It’s a piece of a deer. We’re trying to work on skin surface infections and we need some big tissue samples. We can’t get any human volunteers.”

“Gee, I wonder why.” Joe looked around. “Is that what you were hiding?”

“No. I mean, yes.” Dean took another breath. “What is it that you wanted to see?”

Before Joe could answer, he heard the bang of the cage. He looked to the counter to the six cages. “Them.”

“My rabbits?” Dean smiled. “Why?”

Joe moved to the cages. “They make noise, do they not?”

“Um . . .” Dean scratched his head. “Yeah. Oddly enough, yeah.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Yeah.” Dean answered. “But I can’t tell you exactly. We’re working on that. We’re kind of working on so much we can only do so much at a time.”

Henry nudged Joe. “Tell him Joe, Tell him.”

“Shh.” Joe silenced Henry. “Dean, are doing something to these rabbits?”

“Of course.” Dean replied. “That’s why they’re down here.”

“What?” Joe asked.

“Well, these babies . . .”

“Babies?” Joe was shocked. “How much of babies are they?”

“Three weeks.”

“Christ!” Joe exclaimed at the six of the rabbits that looked full grown. “What did you do to them?”

“While their mother carried them, I injected into her uterus, this serum I’ve been working on that speeds up the metabolism. It really doesn’t work well. We have a lot of bugs to work out.”

“And that’s all you’ve done to them, this is how they got this way?” Joe questioned further.

“No.” Dean shook his head. “We created this high protein feed to help their weight, make them bigger. That’s sort of working. That’s what they eat. Is this why you’re here Joe, about my rabbits?”

“Yes. How loud do they get and do they squeal all the time?”

Dean was a bit surprised by Joe’s line of questioning. But he didn’t

mind answering it, obviously someone besides him and Ellen found some interest in his 'special' work. "They squeal loudly when they are upset. Actually, making noise isn't new to rabbits, it's just usually not that loud. Their vocal chords do seem to be larger. That's what my best guess is on the sounds." Dean tossed his hands up. "Is that it?"

Again, Henry with his nose still covered by his shirt, nudged Joe. "Go on Joe." A bang at the cage startled Henry. "See Joe."

"Henry!" Joe yelled. "Dean, how big will they get if they're that big now?"

"Not very." Dean explained. "They probably won't live another week." He saw the shocked expression on Joe's face. "See no matter how much we change the serum, the outcome is still the same. Their hearts are huge and they are growing faster than their bodies. I'll show you what I mean." Dean walked to a small fridge, opened it and pulled out a cloth covered tray. He carried it over toward Henry and Joe and set it on the counter. He lifted the cloth.

Henry screamed in disgust when he saw the large rabbit, without its fur. The rabbit's chest was opened and spread apart. "Dean, put that away." Henry began to gag.

Dean snickered as he showed Joe. "See the heart? It's nearly the same size as his body. It gets too big and eventually it explodes from within. Too much exertion will cause premature cardiac arrest."

Joe nodded. "I've seen enough."

Dean shrugged grabbed the cloth, and carried the tray to the fridge. He stopped to show Henry the rabbit before covering it and placing it back.

Joe rubbed his own chin, peering up at Dean. "So it was the serum that caused the heart condition. What about just the feed?"

"The feed makes them heavy. See, we're trying to get more meat on the rabbits for better food consumption."

"I see. Dean, any chance any of that feed got outside this community?"

Dean didn't answer.

"Dean?" Joe raised his voice along with an eyebrow. "Any chance."

"Maybe a small chance."

"A ha!" Henry shouted. "I knew it. I knew it."

"Knew what?" Dean wondered. "We left a little feed outside. It's just protein, that's it."

"Dean, those rabbits seem awfully strong. They jump pretty high too." Joe commented.

"Yes they do. And they are strong."

"How fast are they?" Joe asked.

"Not very." Dean answered.

"But they jump high."

"Oh yeah." Dean walked over to the cage and opened it. "They do that when they see someone in the lab. El and I usually let them out to roam. Because . . ." Dean took out the large rabbit. "We can catch them easily. Watch." Dean set the rabbit on the floor.

Joe jumped back when he watched the rabbit fling himself up higher than any rabbit Joe had ever seen. "Shit."

"Amazing huh?" Dean smiled. "But then . . ." The rabbit tried to jump again, this time only a little, then he looked as if he rested. The rabbit began to move across the floor, only instead of hopping he sort of rolled. "See, Joe,

They're too big, too fat, they tire easily and can't move."

Joe grumbled in defeat. "So I suppose there isn't a chance that the rabbits in the wild got a hold of your super feed and now are big and move over sixty miles an hour?"

Dean laughed loudly. "No way. The feed makes them big, yeah, but way too fat to even move a half a mile an hour. What is all this about?" Dean picked up the rabbit and carried him back to his cage.

Henry explained. "Something chased me Dean. I couldn't see it in the field but it was up at the under developed section. And it squealed like your rabbits."

Dean hesitated before putting the rabbit away. "You ran from rabbits?"

"No, Dean." Henry was defensive. "They or it, was fast. Zipped too. Radar picked it up."

"Radar?"

Joe nodded. "Clocked whatever it was over sixty miles per hour. We thought it was a malfunction. But when Henry saw something moving in the high grass we had to question. I'm going back to my theory on the computer was confused because there are so many rabbits in that area it can't distinguish one small signal from another. It then blurs them together as one fast moving object."

Dean closed the rabbit cage and looked serious. "How high and thick was the grass Henry?"

"High, about five feet and thick. There was a lot of brush there."

Dean's hand ran over his own head to his neck. "And . . . this was where?"

"Behind the under developed section, up behind the cliff. You know, where the tracking is. The field beyond that." Henry told him.

"It chased you." Dean watched Henry nod. "And it squealed." Another nod from Henry and Dean shifted his eyes to Joe. "Clocked over sixty miles an hour? And that is the area with no perimeters?"

"What are you thinking Dean?" Joe asked.

"I'm thinking." Dean swayed his head. "I'm thinking we'd better talk to Melissa and find out where Marcus was."

"Marcus." Joe stated the name of the genetically enhanced child of Beginnings. The child who was thirteen months old but looked six years old. The child, who when younger had to be caged up. But now was given almost as much freedom as the rest of the children, treated like them even though he was so different from them. It being Marcus hadn't even crossed Joe's mind. But the mention of his name made Joe's mind immediately start to race. If it was Marcus out in that field, Joe hoped it was only the rambunctiousness of a child who needed the area to expel his energy and not the surfacing of some genetic instinct that could breed worry in Beginnings.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Ellen watched, impressed as the men who lined the streets saluted Hal as he drove into the center of the small town. "Hal, this place is wonderful." She

peered out at the charm Bowman projected. It's small town style buildings, clean street. "Oh Hal."

"I live right on that corner." Hal pointed to the vacant drug store. "We can unload your things. Are you wanting to rest before I show you to the clinic?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I'll wait if you're busy."

"Not at all. I'm all yours." Hal grinned. "I had Sgt. Ryder assign men to help put the food away and help Herb set up our own distribution. Danny, well, I figured Sgt. Ryder can take him about seeing Danny and Herb are staying with him."

"Oh so you and I are alone?"

"Works better that way. Don't you think?"

"Yes, we need our privacy." Ellen giggled as Hal stopped the truck. "Hey!"

"What?"

"I know him. I know him." Ellen pointed to Sgt. Ryder. "Hal." Ellen smiled as she reached for the door. "He saved Frank's life."

"Sgt. Ryder?"

"Yes." Ellen excitedly jumped from the truck. "Hey!" She called to Sgt. Ryder. "Remember me?"

Sgt. Ryder grinned and stepped to Ellen. "You're O.K.?"

"Yes. Thank you." Shocking Sgt. Ryder, Ellen embraced him tightly holding her arms around him for a little while. "Thank you for all that you did for me and Frank."

"I'm sorry about what happened to him."

"He'll be fine." Ellen broke from the embrace. "Did you know that you saved Hal's brother?"

Sgt. Ryder took a double take. "Frank is your brother?"

"Yes." Hal smiled as he answered.

"Amazing." Sgt. Ryder shook his head. "Well, Ellen, welcome to Bowman."

"Thank you." Ellen looked around. "This place is very nice. Hal, help me put my things away?"

"Absolutely." Hal walked to the back of the pick up. He saw Danny and Herb pull up. "Elliott the young man in that truck is Danny. He's the one who will get our communications up." Hal lifted the bags from the truck. "Danny!" Hal called out as Danny stepped to the street. "Sgt. Ryder here will assist you." He got an agreeing nod from Danny and lugged Ellen's bag and medical box from the pick up. He led Ellen into his apartment building.

Sgt. Ryder saw the very upbeat Danny Hoi smile and wave to him. He grinned at Danny's enthusiasm, he waved back. Then the smile fell from Sgt. Ryder's face when he watched Herb step from the truck. The second Sgt. Ryder saw the frazzled, annoyed and tired looking old man, Sgt. Ryder knew he was in trouble.

^^^

It would take some getting used to for Joe. First having to walk that far to get home, and second the new home. He had lived in the same house since he arrived in Beginning. He checked out the modular home, pale blue in color. It was nice but it had it's drawbacks. One of the biggest being the fact that Danny had Ellen and Dean's home three doors up. Joe loved his grandchildren dearly but the days of peaceful after-work time would be gone. Joe could see it coming. In fact he did see it. He could see his grandchildren utilizing the large underdeveloped field behind the new modular homes as if it were one big backyard.

Stepping to his front door Joe paused. He took another look. Did he just see Joey floating above the grass? Joe blinked and he saw the reason for it. Flying across the field was Joey but Joey was not alone. He rode on Marcus' back. Marcus on his hands and knees moved at an incredibly high speed. Joe watched the grass bend and move and his mind flashed to what Henry said he saw. Joe whistled loudly to get the attention of the two boys. "Marcus! Slow it down, I don't need Joey breaking anything." He heard the grunt and squeal reply and Joe watched the rate of speed slow down. Marcus listened. Good sign.

Joe reached for his door. "Christ." It teetered on the hinge. "I'm kicking his ass."

"Whose?" Andrea asked as she unpacked.

"Danny's." Joe stepped in the house. "Looks good."

"Getting there. You could have been here to help."

"I could have. But I was working. I'm busy Andrea. And . . . I need to talk to you."

"Sure. Can we talk while I unpack?"

"Yep." Joe neared her. He had it on his mind all day. How he would handle it. Would he beat around the bush. Would he be direct? Subtle? Or would he be Joe? Joe reached into his pocket. "Looking for my cufflinks the other day I found this." Joe laid the note on the table. "I was wondering if we could talk about it."

Andrea reached for the note and opened it.

Joe watched the expression. He swore if Andrea wasn't a black woman she would have turned white. "Andrea? Can we talk?"

Andrea folded the note back up, slammed the box she was unpacking shut and stormed off out of the room.

Joe heard the bedroom door slam. "Maybe not."

^^^

Melissa was silent. Hesitating before saying anything to Dean. "Why?"

"I just need to know." Dean questioned as they stood at the nurses counter. "Where was he today?"

"Dean, he was in school."

Dean nodded slowly. "Melissa, I understand the protective instincts of a parent. I do. But . . . Jenny told me . . ."

"O.K." Melissa held up her hand. "O.K., I couldn't get him motivated this morning. So I figured since I was on the afternoon shift, I'd keep him home from school. Dean, he played, that's all he did."

“Did he leave the house?”

“Yes. But not for long.”

“Melissa.” Dean stayed calm. “What did I tell you. He’s either got to be around others or he stays in. Right?”

“But he wasn’t gone for very long.”

“He runs in excess of sixty-miles an hour. Which means alone for twenty minutes, Marcus ran from one end of Beginnings to the other.”

“What did he do?” Melissa asked.

“Nothing.” Dean shook his head. “We think he was wandering around the underdeveloped section, maybe a little further than he should.”

“He doesn’t know sometimes Dean. Yes he’s big but you know mentally he’s still so young. I’ll keep a better eye on him.” Melissa said.

“Better? Melissa you do fine. O.K.? I worry about him getting hurt. He’s a kid, just keep him around someone if he wants to play. He tends to act like they do.” Dean began to walk away and stopped. “Which isn’t always good when he and Joey are together.”

“That’s all the time.”

“I know.” Dean smiled. “All right, speaking of Joey. I’m out of here. I’m on call so just reach me at home, I’m bringing stuff with me.” He started walking down the hall, he turned and walked backwards speaking to Melissa. “Oh and uh I won’t say anything about Marcus running around today. We’ll keep it between us.” Dean spun back around picking up his pace to his lab. Going over what seemed to be a million things in his mind, Dean hurried into his lab and gathered up the folders he was taking home. As he reached for the one stack he saw it. A note. Sitting on top. He briefly skimmed over the message that read, *‘The cat’s away. Does the mouse want to play? Find me. Bev’*. Not paying much attention to it, not thinking, he placed it inside one of his folders, secured the stacks in his arms and left the lab.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

“Pretty much Dean has created everything we have.” Ellen explained to Blue. “There isn’t much that we can’t treat.”

“I appreciate this.” Blue stood by the open small refrigerator.

“Here is a little booklet Dean made up. He’s so anal.” She snickered as she gave it to Blue. “It tells you by symptoms what to use. We gave you basics, anything else you can get from us. I have reqs for you to have on hand.”

“Reqs?”

“Requisitions.” Ellen explained. “As far as I understand, there will be frequent trips between us until you guys settle closer. Just send the req up with whoever is coming up. Once you guys are close, you can have it immediately. Until then you’ll have to wait. So plan ahead.”

“I understand.”

“One thing you’ll have to get used to, everything in Beginnings, with the exception of food is requisitioned. It helps keep track of things.”

“Like a purchase order.”

Ellen smiled. “Exactly. Any questions?”

“No, but I’m sure I’ll think of some.” Blue said.

“I’m here tomorrow too.”

Hal, who had been quiet in the back, stepped forward. “Get used to working with . . . Dr. Hayes, she’ll be the other doctor here in Bowman or wherever we end up. Of course she’ll still live in Beginnings, but, we get to have her often.”

Blue seemed to like that. “Excellent. I’m so glad to have the help. There’s a lot of people here.”

“We’ll do well together.” Ellen commented. “And Hal tells me you have a woman here who’s pregnancy is high risk.”

“Yes.” Blue nodded. “She’s at the house now. Bed rest.”

“She’s been having contractions. Any dilation?”

“Steady at two. For a while. I got her drunk and was able to sustain it.”

Ellen nodded. “I want to see her. I brought some medication that should help her. She’ll have to take it regularly.”

“The Captain can take you there.”

Hal shook his head ‘no’ at Blue. When Ellen turned to him, Hal stopped and smiled. “Sure I’ll take you. Get your things El.”

Ellen patted the black medical bag Dean had lent her that used to be his father’s. “Right here.”

“Then let’s get this over with.” Hal laid his hand on Ellen’s back, leading her out. He stopped in the doorway, looked back at Blue, mouthed the word, ‘you’ll pay’ and then he and Ellen left.

Blue stood alone in his clinic a relieved and happy man. He had better medical supplies and . . . there now was a chance that he no longer had to make anymore trips to that house.

Highly attractive or an oddity. Ellen was wagering on the latter as the reason for the stares she got walking down the streets of Bowman with Hal. No matter what they did, the men stopped and watched her as she walked by with him.

They approached the large white house, guarded with two UWA soldiers out front. They both saluted Hal as he and Ellen passed by them.

“Big.” Ellen slowed her pace on the walk and looked up at the house.

“We believe it belonged to the mayor of the town.” Hal told her as they stepped to the porch. “This is going to be an experience for me.”

“You don’t come here?” Ellen asked.

“No, I do. When I have to. But I’ve never come here with a woman. I’m curious to see the reaction. So . . .” Hal moved Ellen to the door side. He laid his finger on her lips. “Shh.” He knocked on the door. “And the thunder rolls.”

Ellen snickered a silent ‘what’ as the door opened.

“Captain.” Grace said his name with a hint of hatred. “This is an unscheduled visit. You know how I feel about them.”

“My apologies Gr . . . Gr . . . my apologies. But I’m sure Sgt. Ryder told you the doctor from Beginnings is here to check on Monica.”

“Yes. He did.” Grace opened the door wider. “Is he with you.”

Hal looked to his left. “Yeah the doctor is right here.”

“Then fetch your guards we don’t know this person and I don’t want

one of my girls in the hands of an animal.”

Smiling, Ellen poked her head around. “I’ll try to be gentle.” She looked up at Hal and winked. “Thunder baby.”

Grace gasped. “You’re the Beginnings doctor.”

“Yes.” Ellen held up her bag. “May I come in.”

“Oh yes!” Grace answered the door. “Please, please.”

Hal’s eyes shifted. If he didn’t believe it with his own eyes he wouldn’t have believed it. Grace smiling?

Grace held the screen door open for Ellen, letting her in. “Captain, you’ve done so well with this. Thank you. That will be all.”

Quick was what Hal had to be to stop the front door from closing. “No, that won’t be all. I believe I will wait for her.”

“Oh.” Grace looked at Ellen. “You have other business in town?”

“I’m still helping Dr. Blue at the clinic.”

“Then I’ll show you to Monica.” Grace moved Ellen along, turning and looking back at Hal. “Captain stay here.”

“I have no intentions of walking any further into this house.” Hal said, felt that annoying, typical tickle in his nose when he went into that house, and he sneezed loudly. He laughed when he heard Grace’s gasp of disgust at him.

Like she just performed a difficult circus act, Ellen impressed all the resident women to the point of applause as they gathered tightly in Monica’s room. The baby’s heart beat was strong and loud through the Doppler that Ellen held on Monica’s stomach. “Sounds like a girl.”

Monica smiled. “How do you know?”

“Heart rate is relaxed. The faster the heart beat the more it tends to be a boy.”

“Have you any children?” Monica asked.

“Yes.” Ellen answered. “Many.”

“Where are they now?”

“Back in Beginnings.” Ellen put the instrument away, dancing around the words ‘my husband’ so not to ruin Hal’s new reputation. “My father has them.”

“Your father survived the plague.”

“Actually, my father died some years ago before the plague. Joe, Joe has been like my father for over twenty years. Joe is Hal’s biological father.” Ellen saw the lost look on Monica’s face, she turned and looked at the other women in the room. They all looked just as lost. “Hal. The Captain.” The woman all grumbled. Ellen snickered. “That’s funny, his brother has the same effect on women in Beginnings.”

Grace was shocked by this. “The Captain has a father *and* a brother who survived the plague and are in Beginnings.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “The captain has a father and two brothers in Beginnings.” She heard the gasp. “No, really. They’re all gruff but . . . I love them all. I’ve known them forever.”

Grace laid a soothing hand on Ellen’s shoulder. “You poor thing.”

Ellen had to laugh, what other reaction could she have? Grace was just so serious. She set the medication down on the counter. “O.K. Monica, because

there is some dilation of the cervix, I want you to take the pills twice a day like clockwork. O.K.? I also see no reason why you can't walk around, taking it easy with it. You have to get some circulation other than going to the bathroom. You don't want a blood clot and I noticed your legs are swelled." Ellen looked to Grace. "Get her up and moving. O.K.?"

"How will that effect her baby?" Grace asked.

"She hasn't had contractions in some time, so with the med she should be fine. Hal said she has a history of premature deliveries. Can't guarantee this baby won't be born early, but we can try to hold it in there as long as possible."

Monica grabbed Ellen's hand. "What if I deliver early?"

"I can tell you this. We have excellent medical care in Beginnings. My youngest son was born seven weeks early. He's fine. And . . . you're a hour away, round trip. Any problems, radio communications are up. Danny is here getting some phone service going. You call, Robbie will fly down and get you."

"Robbie?" Monica asked.

"Hal . . . I mean, the captain's brother." Ellen heard the moans. "Robbie's the nicest one." Ellen closed the medical bag. "Well, I'll leave you. It was very nice meeting all of you." Ellen felt the strangest thing. Her hair being touched by Monica.

"Your hair is pretty. And soft."

"Excuse me?" Ellen asked.

"Your hair is so soft. Grace feel her hair."

Ellen shuddered when she felt Grace stroke her hair. "Um, we have a great chemist in Beginnings," She started to get up when she felt another touch her hair and then another woman touch her arm. "Excuse me."

"So soft." A woman commented. "How are you so soft. We try."

"Chemicals. Creams." Ellen stood up feeling really uncomfortable.

"Well, I should go." She backed up. "You girls have been great."

Grace physically stopped her. "Doctor. You should exercise extreme caution out there. Please."

"I will. Hal will protect me personally." Ellen hurried to the door. "Thank you."

"Doctor." Grace called to Ellen. "We'll expect you not too late."

"Um O.K." Ellen opened the door, walked out and popped her head back in. "Bye." she shut the door. Ellen paused in the hall before going down, trying to shake the weirdness that still lingered after being in the room with the odd women. How strange they were to Ellen, so curious and treating her like she was a novelty or toy. After shaking a shudder once, Ellen hurried down the staircase and met up happily with Hal who was still waiting on her.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

"Oh my God. Frank . . . Frank."

Frank could hear Ellen's voice in his mind as if she were in that office with him. The sounds of his last day, his last moment with her were as alive in his memory as he was.

Gun shots . . .

“El . . . Run.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“Run . . . Run.”

The touch of her lips. The rustling of grass. Ellen’s scream . . .

Frank’s eyes closed tightly, his forefinger and thumb pressed tightly to his eyelids as his head flung back in the chair. He swallowed harshly. His mind staying with Ellen, his heart filling more with hatred for George.

“Frank.” Richie’s voice invaded Frank’s thoughts.

Frank raised his head up, opened his eyes and let out a long breath.

“You have to call George.” Richie slid the phone to him. “You’re a half hour late.”

Frank sniffed hard and pulled the phone to him. “I hate calling him.”

“You know what to tell him about his man Marcus, right?”

“No. I’ll wing it.” Frank began to dial the phone.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

With one hand on the just hung up phone and the other on his chin, George stared with seriousness after finishing his evening check-in with Frank. Marcus had left Binghamton a day early. Why? Marcus never bothered to call for his check in. Why? Frank had no explanation and that was the only thing that stopped George from being totally suspicious of something going on. Surely if there *was* something happening in Binghamton, Frank would have had some extreme excuse or made up story to cover up. But Frank had nothing. And that told George perhaps he was being honest and Marcus was just being facetious. Just incase, to take no chances, George decided he would move the plans along faster. First with the scientists and two ambassadors. Instead of leaving for Binghamton in two days, they would leave at first light. Once there, George would move ahead with part two . . . Dean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Bowman, North Dakota

Joe snoring loudly.

That was how Ellen began to tell the tale she told to the group of men who sat with her and Hal on Sgt. Ryder's long front porch.

So loud Joe snored. It seemed to ricochet through the campsite. It caused her to laugh and Frank to get annoyed with her as they snuck and made love in her sleeping bag they moved to the edge of the woods a distance from where Joe, his current fiancé, Robbie, Hal and Jimmy were.

"El, come on, Knock it off." Frank whispered.

"I can't help it."

A ripping Joe snore and Ellen giggled again. So young they were, sophomores in college.

Frank sealed off Ellen's mouth with his own, shutting her up. Buried within that sleeping bag, Frank managed to turn things around, getting as serious as he could in the little space he had.

Zip. Zip. Zip.

"Shit." Frank tried to move his head but it wouldn't go up very far.

"Frank?"

"Shit. We're zipped in here."

"What?"

"Shit. Someone is tapping me on the shoulder."

"Who?" Ellen asked.

"Hello?" Frank called out

Muffled and coming from right outside the sleeping bag he and Ellen were in, were giggles.

"Fuck." Frank bit his lip. "Hal!"

There was the tiniest unzipping of the bag. Just enough for Hal to open and speak into. "Um Frank. Seems we both are in a dilemma. Me, see, I'm fourteen and federal law prohibits me from actually holding down anymore than a paper boy position. And there is this really neat bike I want. You, you Frank are stuck in the sleeping bag, doing God knows what kind of obscene thing with a girl that dad believes you think of as a sister. Now . . ."

"Hal, I'm kicking your ass when I get out of here."

"You shouldn't make threats Frank. See, I can wake up Dad. What would he think about this?"

"You're dead." Frank reached for the zipper.

"I'm in control."

At that point Frank lost it. Bellowing out and not caring whether his father heard him or not, or whether Ellen was right there in that bag with him. "Hal, I swear to God, let go of the zipper. Or you'll become a fuckin statistic when they find your skinny ass, long haired body half buried in the woods. Let go!"

For visual purposes Ellen made a cringing face. "My ears rang for ten minutes. And that wasn't the end of it. After Frank scared Hal into letting go of the zipper and dropping the blackmail thing, he was so pissed, he unzipped the

zipper so hard he got my hair caught in it. I lost a huge chunk of hair. My scalp hurt for days.”

All eyes on that porch moved to Hal.

Hal tossed his hands up. “What? No. No.” He shook his head. “Don’t look at me. That is not what happened. She is telling it distorted because she was in that bag. Jimmy was the one that stood over that sleeping bag, Not me El. Remember? Jimmy. I was reading a really good book.”

Danny Hoi spoke into the radio. “Robbie? Did you hear that?”

Robbie’s voice was loud. “Oh my God Hal! Can you still lie! No that’s not what happened at all. I remember.”

Hal scoffed and grabbed the radio. “You were a mere child Robbie. You were sleeping.”

“I was not!” Robbie said. “I was at first but your ass woke me up. Because you had this problem. Everything had to be your business.” And even though it was over the radio, Robbie’s version came thought clear . . .

“Robbie. Robbie.” Hal shook him.

“What?” Robbie woke up.

Hal snickered. “Check this out. I was trying to tape Dad snoring so I could put it on the answering machine and guess what?”

“What?”

“Frank is with Ellen in her sleeping bag.”

“What happened to Frank’s sleeping bag? Ow!” Robbie felt Hal hit him in the head.

“Come on. Let’s go make some money.”

“How?” Robbie asked.

“Frank will want to give it to us. We just have to ask him. Come on.”

Jimmy’s groggy voice emerged from his sleeping bag. “Hal. Behave. Go to sleep and leave them alone.”

“Yeah right.” Hal fluttered his lips at Jimmy. “Come on Robbie.”

“Robbie, don’t. He always gets you in trouble.”

“No I don’t.” Hal said. “Robbie, come on.”

“Hey.” Robbie covered his eyes when Hal shone the flashlight beam close to his pupils, blinding him. “All right.”

Like they were in an episode of Mission Impossible, Robbie and Hal crawled the distance to the moving sleeping bag. Hal laughed, held up his finger and zipped the bag closed. Robbie had to admit he thought it was funny. The trapping of Frank and Ellen and . . . the new bike he and Hal eventually got and shared.

“What!” Ellen was so shocked when she heard Robbie say that, she snatched the radio from Danny Hoi’s grip. “Robbie. You guys got the bike?”

“Oh yeah. It took about six months. Dad never did figure out where we got the money. El, Hal used that against Frank forever. Hell, ask him how long he used that against Frank?”

Ellen looked to Hal. “How long?”

Hal shook his head. “Until I got the bike.”

Ellen spoke into the radio, “Is that true Robbie.”

“No.” Robbie said. “Years and years and years. Ask him where he got the five hundred dollar down payment for the motorcycle? Every single time Hal needed something he went to Frank. Oh he was sly too. Frank was the mean brother, Jimmy the smart one. Me the one always in trouble and Hal . . . Hal was the dick of the family. And he got away with it too. Fooled everyone.” Robbie rambled on. “Man he would say, ‘Frank, I need fifty bucks’ Frank would tell him no and Hal would be like, ‘So Frank, how often do Kelly and Ellen talk, just curious’. He used it until Frank found out Hal was having that affair with his CO’s wife.”

Hal snatched up the radio. “Goodnight Robbie.” He shut it off and looked to the faces who hinged on his response.. “Please, he exaggerates. I was young and Frank always helped me out of the goodness of his heart. And I never had an affair with my CO’s wife.”

Sgt. Ryder nodded slowly. “So then why did you shut the radio off Captain? Seems to me not only is this merger with Beginnings going to be fruitful, but awfully informative as well. And . . . damn it. What is this.”

All eyes went where Sgt. Ryder’s eyes were. Grace, escorted by two guards neared the porch.

Hal winced. “What does she want.” With a complaining manner Hal stood up with all the men when Grace approached.

“Doctor.” Grace spoke to Ellen. “We would like to shut the house down now. Let’s go. We’ve waited long enough.”

Ellen shifted her eyes. “Excuse me? Go where?”

“To the house.” Grace told her.

“For what?”

“You should be there. And this is not accepted behavior. These are men.”

“Yeah so.” Ellen told her, not liking Grace’s tone.

“We don’t hang out with men.”

“Maybe you don’t, I do. Thanks for the housing offer but I’m staying with Hal.”

Grace was aghast. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I plan on having sex with him, that’s why.”

Hal pulled up a fake blush. “Ellen please, our personal lives are just that.” He tapped her hand.

Grace grew even more angry. “Do not make me come up there and physically bring you to our house.”

Ellen laughed. “Physically bring me to your house? Grace, if you come up here and even remotely try to physically bring me to your house, I guarantee your moo-moo wearing butt will be rolling on the grass. Now if you don’t mind we are talking and reminiscing. Go.”

Grace took in a long breath, stared at Ellen, stomped up to the porch, lifted Ellen’s much smaller body, tossed her over her shoulder like Frank does and stormed off with Ellen.

Sgt. Ryder looked at a stunned Hal. “Captain?”

Hal looked lost. He looked to Danny who laughed hysterically.

Danny caught his breath. “That was funny. You know what. I’ll get her, I’m not part of this bizarre ritual you guys have going with the women here.” As Danny went to step from the porch, he stopped. “No need.”

Ellen came stomping up the front lawn . . . alone. She looked mad.

“What a bitch.” She let out a loud ‘whew’ . “Hal sweetie, your two guards need some help, seems they can’t carry Grace by them selves.” Ellen took her seat again on the porch. “Where were we?”

Hal grinned, sent two men to help his other two guards then kissed Ellen on the cheek . He looked at Ellen differently from that moment on. She had just become his new hero.

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Beginnings, Montana

Robbie hit his cigarette loud, pulling it from his mouth with a ‘pop’ noise as he sat in Rev. Bob’s chapel office on the marital couch. “Now . . .” Robbie blew the smoke out and up as he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “Let me see if I got this straight.” He squinted and looked down at the coffee table to the open bible there.

“Try it.” Rev. Bob waved the smoke from his way.

“O.K., now. Adam and Eve were the first man and woman on earth.”

“Yes.”

“They are the father and mother of all children.”

“Yes.” Rev. Bob nodded.

“This Eve lady gave birth to Cain and Abel.”

Rev. Bob snapped his finger. “You got it.”

“No. It still makes no sense.”

Rev. Bob stayed in religious control. “How can it not?”

“Some one should have edited this better. Cause check it out.” Robbie’s finger moved across the page. “Adam and Eve are the parents of all. They had Cain and Abel. Cain offed his brother and went to the next town and married some woman. Who gave birth to Cain’s wife? And who gave birth to all the people that made this place the next town. Eve? No way. There has got to be some other mother someone is forgetting about.”

Rev. Bob shut the bible. “Well.” He slapped his own knees and stood up. “You brought up some very interesting points.”

“Thanks.”

“I bet you were just the favorite pupil in bible school.”

“Never went to bible school. I was Catholic. Went to Catechism when I got kicked out of St. Mary’s.”

“And it shows.” Reverend Bob checked out his watch. “My goodness, look at the time, it’s pushing nine. Let’s save the Book of Genesis for next Thursday. Shall we?”

“Yeah.” Robbie stood up. “So we’re done?”

“Yes.” Rev. Bob ran his fingers through his tossed grey hair and he opened the door for Robbie.

“Can we discuss the great flood next?”

“Why yes, Robbie, we can.”

“Excellent.” Robbie stopped in the doorway. “This is great, because I think Noah was actually this really brilliant astronomer and he saw this huge meteor coming and he tracked it to fall in the ocean. Knowing the earth would flood, he built an ark.”

“Goodnight Robbie.”

“Night.” Robbie took a step and stopped again. “Hey, do you suppose there is any connection between Noah and the dinosaurs? You know how they say a meteor wiped them out.” He saw only the glare he got from the reverend. “Just a thought. Goodnight.” Robbie stayed quiet until he heard the door to Rev. Bob’s office close and when he did, he snickered in amusement at his performance for the Reverend.

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Binghamton, Alabama

“So what are you gonna do?” Richie asked Frank late that evening.

“What can I do.” Frank tossed his hands up and looked to the cloudless dark sky. “I send the trucks tomorrow.”

“Frank. Two ambassadors. Eight scientists. Lab equipment . . .”

“Richie I know.”

“Frank.” Richie looked at him. “You’re gonna have to be careful. It looks like this is turning out to be an actually Society location. I know, I’ve lived in seven of them. This is the way it starts.”

“Why is that?” Frank questioned.

“Because, first the military sets up, then what ever they are establishing the site as. Obviously this is going to be some sort of research facility. Two months ago I was in the coal mining . . .”

“No Richie. What are you doing for them? Why is it that you move around with them.”

“I’m a carpenter. I fix the structures. I was in construction Frank. I’m part of the clean up crew. We move from site to site, clearing out the over growth, fixing the buildings and getting the basics up and running. Water, power and such.”

“Didn’t you see what they do?” Frank asked.

“No.” Richie shook his head. “I didn’t. A lot of men don’t. They haven’t a clue.”

“And you weren’t suspicious? I’m not coming down on you I’m just trying to understand why everyone is working for George. Working for a killer. Working for a man who will kill anyone who won’t work for him. Working for the man who ended our world and still wants to take over what’s left.”

“You guys in your little Beginnings world know this. And the UWA knows this. But look at the numbers. The total of your two communities is ten percent of what George has. So the majority isn’t aware. And we heard ‘rebuild’ and we were there.”

Frank nodded silently.

“And now Frank they’re coming here.”

“Yeah but they won’t be for long.” Frank told him. “Once I find out where Ellen is, and once George returns, he’s a dead man and I’m out of here.”

“Beginnings.” Richie said the name with a slight smile.

“Yeah . . . Beginnings.” Frank leaned back against his porches’ step. “Home.”

Bowman, North Dakota

“Really Ellen.” Dean had a hint of sarcasm to his voice as he spoke to her that night on the radio. “Do you think it’s wise to have the other half of our female population hating you already. You have problems with this half as it is.”

“Dean, I’m serious.” Ellen sat in the police station her feet up on the counter. Hal was there with her, but he slept in a chair. Utilizing the piece of furniture to it’s fullest. His legs extended as far as they could go, his body leaning, the base of his head resting on the back of the chair.

“O.K., tell Blue, ice and that’s about it. Did you see if there was any internal damage.”

“She won’t let me look. Blue says no. He doesn’t see any. But Grace says she’s having a hard time hearing.”

“Probably because the inner ear is filled with blood. That could happen when someone punches you in the side of the head. A rupture of the drum is easily spotted. She’ll have to use ice on the outside and wait it out. It get’s any worse. Sorry hon, she’ll have to come up here for us to look at.”

“O.K. thanks.” Ellen paused. “So what are you wearing?”

“Are we having radio sex?”

“No.” Ellen laughed. “I want to get the visual of you as I’m talking to you.”

“Jeans.”

“Shirt, no shirt?”

“El, I’m laying on our bed. I am wearing a shirt.”

“What are you doing. Besides talking to me that is.”

A slight snicker from Dean came over the radio. “All right, I’ll tell you. Actually I’m laying here, thinking of you and trying to sum up the physical feeling of you being here.” Dean waited for a response. “El?”

“I don’t get it.”

Dean started to laugh. “Never mind. I’m working. Actually reading some files. I have some things to discuss with you when you get back. What are you doing?”

“Talking to you. Watching Hal sleep in a chair. God Dean.” Ellen cased him up and down. “I swear if you don’t look at his face, it’s Frank. They are built exactly alike. Everything but the face. Hal’s shorter, but still. I wonder if he has the same . . .”

“Ellen.”

Ellen snickered. “Danny found the uplink for the phones. It’s at a town forty miles from here, so he’ll be gone all day tomorrow. But Binghamton should have some phone service to speak to us.”

“Good.”

“Dean, quit reading while I’m talking to you. Anyhow . . . I met some of the men who are coming to Beginnings.”

“Did you process them?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, all pretty healthy. Mentally, they are a good bunch. What I’ve met so far. I’ll meet the rest tomorrow. Dean?”

“I’m not reading.”

“I miss you.”

“Thanks El. I miss you.”

“I’d better go. I just wanted to radio you and hear your voice. Tell the kids I love them. And Dean, I love you.”

“El.” Dean spoke soft. “I want you to know something. I’m really happy with the way things are between us. I am. Just know that. OK? And I love you too.”

It was an intrusion. It was Robbie. “Ah, how sweet. Don’t buy it El. And Dean, you know she’s doing my brother right now.”

“Robbie.” Dean scolded. “I can’t believe you were listening to us.”

“Uh Dean? It’s a radio. How can you not?” Robbie asked.

“Turn the channel.” Dean told him. “It was intimate.”

Robbie laughed. “No, Dean it wasn’t. Now, what I heard Frank and Ellen do over the radio, that was intimate.”

Ellen shrieked. “Robbie!”

Robbie just laughed.

Dean did not. “Robbie, I swear you are the only person I know who would eavesdrop on a conversation.”

“Um . . . Dean.” Henry’s voice came on. “You know me.”

“Me too.” Mark interjected.

“You know me Dean.” Dan from security added. “You guys could have added more spice.”

“God!” Dean exclaimed disgusted. “Anyone else care to own up to the fact that they’re listening.”

“Me.” Steve from security said.

“Me.” Another added.

“Me too.” And yet another.

“What is it with people in this community? Isn’t there anything better to do.” Dean questioned.

“No.” Robbie answered. “Not really. Hey El, Tell Danny not to stay there too long. Neville competition stats tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell him.” Ellen said.

“El?” Dean called her name. “You’re talking to me.”

“Sorry. And we’d better say goodnight. Night Dean.”

“Night El.” Dean replied.

“Night El.” Robbie did too.

“Night Robbie.” Ellen said.

Robbie snickered loudly. “Hey look we’re the Walton’s.”

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Beginnings, Montana

Robbie was so amused with himself as he meandered around Beginnings after his visit with Reverend Bob. No one was at the social hall. Jess was on shift, he stopped and spoke to him for awhile. To Robbie there really wasn’t too many left in Beginnings that he could actually hang around with and have a good time.

He reached into his chest pocket for a cigarette and felt the emptiness.

“Shit.” He began to pat himself thinking he placed them in another pocket. “Where did I . . .” Robbie remembered he left them at the chapel office. So engrossed his was in annoying and challenging Rev. Bob into a bible frenzy, Robbie forgot them. Looking behind him to distribution and then to his keys. Robbie weighed his options. To get cigarettes he had to unlock one of two doors. Distribution or Rev. Bob’s office at the chapel. Fearing Joe and not Reverend Bob, Robbie moved toward the chapel.

It was never locked, ever. And Robbie walked right in to Beginnings’ house of God. Up the small aisle of the quiet place and to the back office Robbie went. Unlike Frank, Robbie reached for the key he had tagged for the chapel office and opened the door. He had a strange feeling of excitement as he made his unauthorized entry into the minister’s domain. Sort of like a long awaited revenge on Fr. O’Shea for making Robbie count un-blessed communion wafers when he busted Robbie eavesdropping on confessions. Though Rev. Bob was not Fr. O’Shea, to Robbie they all worked for the same boss.

He turned on the light as soon as he opened the office door. He could see his cigarettes in the Beginnings’ equivalent to a pack, laying on the coffee table. Robbie walked to them to retrieve them. He picked up the pack, pulled one out, placed it in his mouth and put the pack in his chest pocket. Moving back to leave, Robbie spotted them and the kid in him had to look. Not so much for the pictures but to read what people actually wrote to Rev. Bob in his year books.

They were stacked on the edge of his desk, held up by two bookends. Ten of them. Four years of highschool. Six years of college. “Cool.” Robbie twirled his index finger. “Eenie, meenie, miny . . . Iowa s=State. Freshmen year.

Wanting to light his cigarette but afraid the lingering smell would give away his intrusion, Robbie chewed on the butt of it and he flipped open the yearbook. “H . . . H . . .” Robbie looked through the freshmen. “Robert Haddon.” Robbie snickered. “Look at you, you have . . . fuck.” Robbie flipped a page, then through some more. “Fuck.” The smiled left Robbie’s face and Robbie closed the yearbook, tucked it under his arm and left Rev. Bob’s office.

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Andrea wore a long robe, it was tied tight across her waist and her arms were folded over her stomach as she walked into the livingroom of her new home.

Joe, sitting on the couch and peering at spread out work on the coffee table, looked up at her. “She lives.”

“She needs to speak to you.”

“You didn’t want to speak before Andrea.” Joe turned a page and grabbed his cigarette. “Wasn’t meaning to fight with you.” He kept his eyes glued to his work as he talked. “I over stepped my boundaries.”

“Oh no Joe, no you didn’t.”

“Really?” Over the rim of his glasses, Joe looked at her. “Christ Andrea you haven’t spoken to me or looked at me all day.”

“I know.” Andrea said.

“I shouldn’t have held onto that letter. It was wrong.”

“Joe, you’re my husband. I should have showed you that letter.”

“I wasn’t your husband then, so it was none of my business.”

“But you’re my husband now and I’d like to be honest with you about it.”

Opportunity, Joe thought. “So uh . . . why didn’t you then.” Another flip of a page and Joe pretended his work was more important.

Andrea moved next to him and sat down. “Embarrassed.”

“What?” Joe looked at her finally.

“Embarrassed.” Andrea fiddled with the edges of the robe. “See, when George first came to Ashtonville, he was still, to me, the president. And he payed so much attention to me. He and I used to spend some evenings together reading the Good Book, talking about our spouses, our lives, those we missed. Did you know he had five children Joe? Five?”

“Yes I did.”

“And a family, such a large family. Brothers, sisters. None of them survived. Which bothered him because, well you had two sons that survived. Why couldn’t he? And when Dean released his research that survival was male gene hereditary, he was lost.”

“He started the goddamn plague Andrea. If his family died, he killed them. He gets no pity from me. None.”

Andrea nodded. “He got it from me because at the time, I didn’t know he released it. And we got close.”

“I see.”

“We shared some intimacies in our grieving while we were in Ashtonville.”

Joe tried not to show his surprise. “I see.”

“I stopped it because I just felt so bad because I didn’t have the feelings a woman should have for a man she was sleeping with. I had started to get close to Miquel. He and I were really starting a base relationship. The way it should have been. The way a man and woman should be.”

“So why did he write that letter well after you and Miquel were married?”

Andrea’s head dropped.

“The reason for the embarrassment.”

Andrea nodded. “I sinned. I committed adultery. It was during the time before we knew that there were more women than men. It was just our little community. There was no excuse for betraying my Miquel. I don’t know why I did. Pressure by George. Sympathy for hurting him. I don’t know. No excuse. Rev. Bob helped . . .”

“Rev. Bob?”

“Yes.” Andrea nodded sadly. “He helped me end it with George. Talking to us both. George finally accepted it and that was when he wrote me the letter.”

Joe closed his eyes and laid his hand on Andrea’s.

“Do you hate me Joe? Do you think less of me?”

“No. Not at all.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you. Now, I really need to look at this distribution stuff right . . .” He looked up when there was a knock and his door opened. “Robert.”

“Dad.” Robbie poked his head in the door. He smiled at Andrea. “Mom.”

“Robbie!” Andrea grinned and walked to the door. “Come in sweetie,

let me fix you something to eat.”

“I can’t. Thanks. Dad?” Robbie pointed outside. “Can you come out here for a second.”

“Sure.” Joe dropped his pencil and stood. “Andrea I’ll be back.” He followed Robbie outside. “Must be important if you’re pulling me out. What’s up?”

Robbie turned on a flashlight and handed Joe the yearbook. “I left my smokes in Rev. Bob’s office. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular. Just . . .”

“Being nosie.”

“Yep and . . .” Robbie opened the yearbook and shined the flashlight down for Joe to see.

“Christ.” Joe let out a slow breath and looked back at Robbie.

“Surprise. Surprise. Huh Dad?”

“That’s an understatement.” Joe closed the yearbook.

“There’s more.”

“I bet, but this has to be returned. So . . . take this over to Danny Hoi’s. He’s not home but he has that copy machine he is using for the paper. Copy this whole thing if you can.”

“I will.”

Joe handed the yearbook back to Robbie. “And say nothing. Tomorrow I’ll call a meeting. Dean and Henry need to know this.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

September 19

Binghamton, Alabama

On the norm, Frank's thick black hair was usually cut and cropped so short, it plastered close to his head. But as Frank waited in his office for Richie, his fingers played with his hair in annoyance at the length. Too long since he cut his hair, he cringed when his hand ran down the back of his head and felt a curl. A tiny one, but a curl none the less. And Frank knew if he didn't cut it or shave it soon he would have to break down and use a comb.

"You wanted to see me Frank?" Richie opened up the door.

"Yeah, Richie, come on in." Frank stood up.

"What's up?"

"You're fired."

"What?" Richie laughed.

"I'm serious. I was thinking last night. I can't have you working for me."

"Why?" Richie neared the desk. "Frank, if I don't work for you they'll ship me out."

"No, you'll work, but not as my right hand man."

Richie looked insulted. "I thought I did good."

"Yeah you did." Frank leaned on his desk. "But . . . with these ambassadors and scientists coming in a few hours. I can't take a chance with you. If they find out what I'm up to, and find out that you're involved, they take you out. And I mean take you out."

"So."

"No. Not 'so' Richie. I wanna go home. And I'd like to give to the woman I love the news that her brother is alive. A brother she didn't like, but a brother none-the-less. I don't want to tell El that you were alive but they found you out and killed you."

Richie shook his head, looking little mad. "That's not right. What am I gonna do. Be a worker bee and hang?"

"No. You'll be in charge of maintenance around here. We have no one to do that. And . . . you'll also be close to the Society people when they get here."

The expression on Richie's face changed. "A spy?"

"Yep." Frank nodded. "And you'll pull a John Matoose."

"Huh? Who?"

"We have one of George's people in Beginnings. Still. I guess. But he tells us about George now in exchange for his life. We wanted him to pretend that we didn't know, you know, feed George false information and such, but that didn't work."

"It can work in my case."

"Yep. Feed them false information. Volunteer it. Let it be known that you worked for me and tell them what they want to know . . . sort of. But make sure you let me know what is said. O.K.?"

"Got it." Richie gave a thumbs up. "When do I start this new position?"

"Immediately. I'm pulling that guy Squirrel in to be my secretary slash

right hand man.”

“Squirrel? You mean Scarell?”

Frank snapped his finger, “Yep that’s him. A weasel type. Him.”

“You have to watch.”

“I know.” Frank nodded. “But that’s O.K., it’ll keep me on my toes. And with you and I not working together, we stand a chance of finding out more.”

“I think you may be right. O.K., then what do you need me to do now?” Richie asked.

“First is Dr. Morris. Go over to see him, tell him that since we are getting new people, you’re maintenance around here now and if he needs anything done to let you know.” Frank waited for Richie’s agreement. “Then go see the guys that are preparing the lab. I’ll head there before you to let them know you’ll be in charge. Right now you head to the hospital.”

“I can do that.” Richie walked to the door. “I liked hanging around you again Frank.”

“Me too Richie. But we’ll have plenty of time to do that in Beginnings.”

“I can’t wait to see my sister. Especially since you caught me up on her.”

“I have a lot more to tell you.”

Richie started opening the door. “Frank, on a down note. What are we telling these new ambassadors when they ask about all the missing officers.”

“Same thing we told the men. They are on survival training.”

“Will they buy it?”

“Um . . . probably not. No.” Frank shook his head. “But how are they gonna prove it otherwise?”

“You have two of them locked up at interrogations.”

At first Frank looked serious and then Frank grinned. There was a chuckle that accompanied it.

“Frank? Um . . . that’s supposed to be something that worries you. What are we doing with them? Explaining them? What if they pull an inspection. We can’t get kill the officers in the middle of the day.”

Frank kept grinning. “I have an idea. What time am I supposed to call George?”

“An hour.”

“Good. That’ll be perfect.” Frank saw the lost look on Richie’s face and he waved Richie away. “Don’t worry about. I got it under control.”

“All right.” With a shrug, Richie left.

It wasn’t long after the door closed, and Frank stood in his office that he started to snicker. He’d stop, think and laugh again. He was enjoying a moment of self amusement. Because it just amazed Frank at times on how brilliant and quick thinking he could actually be.

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Beginnings, Montana

Sleep wasn’t going to be an option for Jess Bowen when he walked

into his and Robbie's home early in the morning after his shift. Perhaps later he'd sleep, he was off on this Friday. He seemed more puzzled as he turned on the livingroom light and moved to the kitchen. Puzzled on how he got himself roped into doing Danny Hoi's work.

Was Danny that keen sensed. Or was Jess that dense? He wondered that as he grabbed the coffee pot and began to fill it with water making the pot of coffee for Robbie. Jess had walked right into it. Bored while walking his living section rounds, he responded to Danny's four in the morning radio call saying he needed to speak to someone really smart. Anyone would respond to be sarcastic. Jess did. And Danny got him. And before Jess knew it, he had volunteered to do the editing for the first ever Sunday edition of 'The Beginnings Times' or at least the parts that were not immediate news. Danny assured him he would handle that portion. They still had two days.

Jess's finger flicked on the coffee pot switch and he noticed the silence. Where was it? The thumping about above him from an overslept Robbie who rushed to meet his start time of six am. A normal routine in the Slagel and Bowen home.

Thinking that Robbie had gotten an early start, Jess reached to shut off the coffee pot. He stopped when he realized he would need that coffee and he walked out of the kitchen to head upstairs to shower.

Jess moved his way down the upstairs hall to the bedroom and stopped at Robbie's door. A corner of the bed. Jess never really thought them useful, with the exception of a place to corner tuck the blankets. But as Jess leaned in Robbie's doorway with a snicker on his face, he saw that Robbie did make that corner of the bed useful.

Papers sprawled out across Robbie's floor were the backdrop. Robbie, dressed, teetered face down over the corner of the bed. His stomach pressed against the bed, his arms and head dangling and his leg, one straight, the other bent to the floor. "Robbie. Don't you have to be at work?"

Bang.

Robbie in a startle, rolled onto the floor and to his papers. "Oh God." He grumbled.

"What is wrong with you?"

"I haven't been to bed yet." Robbie stumbled to his feet and looked at the mess. "Shit. I didn't finish this. I swore I finished it."

"What is all this?" Jess walked in the room helping Robbie to pick up the papers.

"I had to copy a yearbook for my Dad. I did one and he calls me to ask me if I could copy three more for our suspect meeting. I didn't think it would take so long, and I had to get it done so I could return the yearbook before Rev. Bob went to the chapel."

"I see that you did."

"Not entirely. I have to put them together. Fuck" Robbie stacked the papers. He looked at his watch. "I'll have to do it later."

"Why don't I do it for you?"

"You have to sleep."

"Not today." Jess laid his stack on the bed. "Danny roped me into editing some of the new newspaper today so it's close to being done when he gets back. I have to meet Trish in two hours at history."

"Don't be late, you know how she is."

Jess grunted. "Tell me about it. But hey, at least Danny convinced her not to wear that visor while she works on the paper."

"You still have to call her 'Scoop' though, don't you?"

He winced first then Jess laughed. "Unfortunately." He took the paper stack, fanned out in Robbie's hand, grabbed them and collated them. He then saw one neat pile on Robbie's bed. "Is that the first copy of the yearbook?"

"Um, yeah." Robbie looked at it.

"I'll use that if I need help. Go get ready for work."

"Jess, are you sure. This is really great of you." Robbie walked to his door.

Jess smiled. "Robbie, for you, it's not a problem."

"Thanks." Robbie grinned. "I owe you big time."

"I'll remember that." Jess pointed, then after Robbie left he looked back at all the papers. He scratched his head in bewilderment when the reality of the task set in. "Why do I do this to myself?" He spoke out loud and began to grab all the papers. "I'm too nice."

^^^

"Henry!"

Henry stopped in his hurried walk to tracking when he heard the call of his name. He turned around and saw one of the housing team, Luke, running to him. Luke was younger than thirty, but looked forty. He was a worker. Anything menial, security part time, construction. He like the other ten designated 'workers' were chosen for three things. The focusing on work and *just* work when called for. Their size. Though short, Luke was hefty and strong. And the clincher, a birth defect they seemed to all be born with, an inability to balance wits and common sense in everyday situations.

"Yeah Luke."

"O.K." Luke took a moment to think. "Have you seen Joe?"

"Have you checked distribution? He's restocking."

"Really?"

"Yes." Henry turned to go back to Tracking.

"Well, since you're gonna be the leader, can you sign these?" He handed Henry a clipboard and pen.

Henry read and lifted each sheet. "Reqs?"

"Yes."

"Luke, these are requisitions for people. We don't requisition people."

"I thought we did."

"No." Henry handed him back the clipboard.

"But . . ." Luke closed his eyes and held his forefinger to his own temple speaking slow as if reading and rattling off a mental list. "We have to prep the extra housing for the new arrivals tomorrow. We have to do inventory in the furniture and housing supply warehouse. Do not take the men from plastics, metals, paper or armory or food. Take them from the fields." Luke opened his eyes.

Henry stared at him for a moment. "Things Joe instructed?"

"Yes." Luke nodded.

"Then just go to the fields and get the men. You don't need to

requisition them.”

“I thought I did. Cole said no and when I left him, I thought.” Luke snapped his finger. “Gee whiz, no wonder he wouldn’t give me the guys. I didn’t have a req for them. So . . .” He handed Henry back the clipboard. “Could you sign it so I can have them? I really don’t want to be running late today. Neville competition kicks off at noon.”

“Cole won’t give up the men?”

“No.”

“Tell him *I* said that you are to have the men and you are to have them now. If I have to go down there and get them, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Luke closed his eyes and nodded. “Hell to pay. Got it.” He opened his eyes. “So, will I be like a tattletale if I do this. I don’t want to come across as a tattletale.”

“No, you won’t be, I’m not fully the leader yet so it doesn’t count.”

“Thanks Henry.” Luke tucked his clipboard and hurried off.

Easy enough, Henry thought and walked to tracking. He didn’t need to ask Mark about it when he walked in. There it was. The flashing, the beeping, the messed up underdeveloped section of tracking. “Shit.” Henry stomped and stood behind Mark.

“Fucked up Henry. When’s Danny get back?”

“Tomorrow. Have you tried turning it off and on?”

“Yep. I want to just turn it off. But we can’t do that.”

Henry left out a slow huffing breath as he viewed the history notes the night shift has taken. “Well we see it works even with the glitches.”

“I saw that.” Mark said. “Leroy noted a deer-like signal running across.”

“At a normal speed none-the-less.” Henry set the notes down. “There’s nothing mechanically I can find. There has to be a ton of rabbits up there. A ton.” He tapped Mark on the shoulder. “Let me sit there.”

“What are you doing?” Mark stood up.

“No need in annoying you all day again with this shit. I’m gonna reset the preferences for a higher weight signal. Not much more.” Henry’s fingers clicked as he went into the programming section. “Just enough so it stops picking up the rabbits.”

“But I thought you guys did that originally.”

“We did.” Henry said.

“So it has to be screwy if it’s picking up the rabbits anyhow.”

“Not necessarily. Not if the rabbits are bigger than what we put in.”

Mark laughed in ridicule. “Henry, how big can rabbits be?”

Henry’s eyes shifted and looked to Mark. “Even though Dean says it was only one time. I know, he’s probably been feeding our fine furry creatures his new special protein feed so we can have huge rabbits for consumption.”

“Cool.” Mark nodded. “Never is enough meat on them when you roast them.”

Henry made a couple of final clicks. “Done.” He stood up. “All right.” Henry peered at the monitor and waited. Nothing happened. “I think problem solved.”

“Looks that way.” Mark sat down. “Thank God.”

Henry snickered. “No please, even though it’s an honor, Henry will work just fine.”

“Huh?”

Henry shook his head. “Never mind. I’m out of here.”

“Hey Henry?” Mark called him. “What if these aren’t rabbits?”

“What else could they be?”

“Ever see the movie, *Tremors*?” Mark’s tone picked up and grabbed some excitement. “What if like it’s the tentacles coming up out of the ground and snatching up it’s food. Whoa. And what if like it moves as fast as it did in the movie. We have that cliff. How awesome that would be if this huge creature thing came plowing out of that cliff, diving down into the under . . .”

“Mark?”

“Yeah.”

Henry shook his head ‘no’ waved goodbye and left.

Mark shrugged. “Just a theory.”

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Ellen’s nude body laid on Hal’s bed. A small section of the bed sheet draped over her backside exposing her bare back and bare legs. Hal, shirtless, stood at the side of the bed fixing the covers.

“Hold it.” He told her then reached for her hair.

“Like this?” Ellen asked raising her arms.

“Wait, let me look.” Hal hurried from the bedroom and into the living room. He stood there, looked at Ellen and hurried back in. “Let me fix this.” Hal lifted up her hair, letting it drop more across her face. “Perfect.”

“Perfect?”

“Yes, stay like that. Keep your eyes closed.” Hal looked at his watch. “Now any . . .” There was a knock at his door. “Like clock work.” He waited for another knock, grabbed his shirt and walked to his bedroom door. “Thanks El for doing this.”

“Oh you’re welcome. Anytime.”

Hal grinned and with his shirt in his hand he walked to his door and opened it. Sgt. Ryder and four other men stood there. Hal’s staff for the everyday meeting.

Sgt. Ryder watched Hal put his shirt on. “Are we early?”

“No.” Hal tied to appear groggy. “I slept in. Come on in.”

“You?” Sgt. Ryder questioned. “You never . . .” He stopped speaking when he saw into Hal’s bedroom.

Hal noticed that not only St. Ryder, but the other men in his livingroom stared in shock into his bedroom. Hiding his grin, Hal made his way through them. “Excuse me.” He reached forward and brought the door to the bedroom closed. “Let’s go to the table, shall we gentlemen.” Hal held out his hand in a pointing motion. Then, without them see his ‘so pleased it worked’ look on his face, Hal led the way to their morning meeting.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

He looked as if he could have been disgusted, but he wasn't. He just looked that way. That was just Joe. In the clothing stock house he walked around with a clipboard, barking orders to those who helped count and talked to Henry as he did all that.

"I don't mind at all Joe." Henry took the sheet of paper Joe gave to him.

"Good, because inventory and distribution are big. Too big to show you on top of everything else. I'll handle it from now on in. Especially with the new people we're getting. Should something happen to me, you pass this responsibility off to Robbie, he knows it as well as I do."

"Got it." Henry moved fast to keep up with Joe.

"All right. Rough wear is running low. Clothing right now will not be able to stock up fast enough for winter with all the new people. We won't be able to make the items."

"OK." Henry took notes.

"We have to schedule a run. That'll get us through until we train new people to help in making the clothes and spooling the cloth. I'll go through the maps see what we haven't hit lately."

"O.K., just clothing. Anything else?"

"Everything else." Joe stated. "We're increasing population by ninety percent. Where we are good on food, we have to stockpile everything else again to meet our upcoming needs. Hal said they have items in Bowman. That's good. We need, sorry, you need to send an inventory team down there to count up before they start to pack up."

"O.K., when?"

"Soon as possible. Winter wear I'm gonna assume is good for Bowman's men, but we can't take a chance." Joe moved to the door with Henry and stopped. "Hold on." He whistled out in the warehouse. "Hey Tony, when you come down from them coats do me a favor. Get a hold of clothing and fabrics for me. Give them the numbers of what we need and get back to me on how many they estimate they need to run a crew to make the shit. And tell Ben do not exaggerate. We still have to run it skeleton."

Tony saluted from the rafter. "Got it chief."

"Let's go Henry." Joe led him outside. "Now Bowman is sending us men. We know a lot are going in the fields, but we need them in other divisions as well. We can move them around as soon as the fields areas get caught up. But set up a meeting with Hal for some men for other divisions. Run it minimally. Tell him they can be temp workers. I'm not seeing him needing full force for the up coming winter. But . . . who knows what his military strategy is gonna be."

Henry reviewed his lists. He didn't realize how much he was writing down of Joe's rambling. "Joe, if you're running these divisions, why are you telling me all the stuff?"

"You're gonna be leader in this community." Joe handed him another sheet. "It's up to you to take the information I give you and schedule the runs."

"Can't you do it Joe?"

"I could. But it no longer will be part of my job. I'm doing most of the work here Henry. This really isn't all that difficult. I'm telling you what we

need. Where we are getting it from. You just need to schedule it out for me. And . . .” Joe handed him a final sheet. “That’s it for clothing, food distribution, and household.. All the needs. It’ll give you something to start on.” Joe gave him a pat to his back and moved on. “See you at my office in a little bit.”

“Start on Joe?”

“Start on Henry. I still have five other warehouses to look at . . .” Joe grinned. “Those sheets are only the beginning. I’ll see you later with the rest..”

Henry blinked harshly as he watched Joe move on to the supply warehouse. He looked at the large stack of ‘run’ reqs in his hands. “The beginning? Shit.” Henry struggled so much as he walked clipping the stack of reqs under his own notes on the clipboard, that he just wanted to keep on walking and find a place to hide out from another one of his days of ‘leader in training’.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

The part of the phone you speak into. The part of the phone you are supposed to place your mouth near, was the same part of the phone that Frank pressed his middle finger to while he smirked and spoke to George. “Yeah.” Frank lifted the phone, curled his lip in disgust and returned to him again. “Yeah . . . Yeah.”

“And then after they have settled in I need you to go to the mess hall and . . .”

“George.”

“Yes.”

“Can I speak?”

George went silent for a second. “Um, sure Frank. What’s up.”

“I have been trying to tell you. We had a slight problem this morning.”

“Problem?”

“Slight.”

“What happened?”

“Well I was out canvassing the outer area for training and I spotted two of those UWA soldiers camping out about three miles from here.”

“What!” George’s voice raised up. “You got to be shitting me? Son of a bitch. What did you do?”

“Brought them in. Scared the hell out of them.”

George let out a breath. “Good. Did you get anything from them.”

“Like?”

“Like information Frank.”

“Um yeah.” Frank said. “They got separated from their group about a month ago and were trying to make it back. I have them at interrogation.”

“Well get rid of them before the ambassadors and scientists arrive. We don’t need any junk left around now. We’re pretty much settled.”

“Get rid of them?”

“Shoot them.”

“O.K. Thanks.” Frank said. “Talk to you next check in.”

Smiling and bobbing his head as if he sung a tune to himself, Frank

hung up the phone and happily left his office.

Ten minutes hadn't passed since his phone call with George, and Frank was leading the two remaining officers off the base. The officers were dressed in UWA uniforms--left over from the soldiers he freed--and they were blindfolded with a wide cloth around their faces. Frank led them out, and per George's instructions, Frank shot them both.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Even though she promised Danny she wouldn't, Trish wore that black visor as she sat in History reviewing the articles with Jess that would be placed in the new paper of Beginnings.

"Big first paper." Trish commented to Jess. "Here you missed a error here. please be more careful, people will read this you know."

"Whoops." Jess snickered. "Sorry. I'm trying, you're the one typing these up."

"Hey!" Trish tsked. "I'm very busy. And I typed these up in between the competition forms, going to paper and requesting larger sheets of paper for this paper, amongst editing out bad writing in this paper and paper said . . ."

"Trish." Jess held up his hand. "With all the 'paper' references, you're starting to confuse me."

"Well get unconfused Jess. We have work to do. Danny wants to copy these when he gets back tomorrow. Plus . . . he'll have the Bowman update to be typed and added in. I don't know where he's gonna put it all." Trish looked at the newspaper layout that was all over her desk.

"Danny is so into this, I'm surprised he hasn't picked up a printing press somewhere."

"He wanted to, but ink was the problem. Henry makes the ink cartridges for the printers around here and that ink works for the copy machine."

Jess wrote corrections as he talked. "So much like a business tycoon, Danny is. Starting a paper and delegating the work to others."

"Are you complaining?"

Shocked, Jess snapped his head up. "Um . . . no. No. Not at all."

"Good. Because you are gonna have to do two things. Work faster, harder and neater especially since you'll be handling more of the editing everyday. I can't do it all, I can't work history and be Mr. Hoi's secretary and serve on the Neville Committee. Which I do."

"Wait a second." Jess set his pencil down. "I'm working on the paper today."

"Yes."

"Not after."

"Oh yes."

"Oh no. Where did you get that from?"

"You volunteered." Trish told him.

"I did?"

"Danny said you told him you were the smartest man in Beginnings

and would love to help him out. You're almost editor in chief."

Jess had to laugh. "How do I get myself roped into these things?" He grabbed his pencil again. "Of course, what else do I have to do with my spare time."

"I don't know. What?" Trish asked.

"Nothing. I was uh . . . being sarcastic."

"Why?"

"Forget it." Jess shook his head with a smile.

"O.K." Trish shrugged. "Don't you ever hang out at the social hall?"

"Once and a while I do. But it's sort of like, how can I describe it. Going to a dance alone." Jess noticed the confused look on Trish's face. "In the old world I was never one to go out by myself, to bars or movies or anything. It doesn't hold the same effect. You just don't have as much fun as when you pair off with someone and go out. And in this world now, pairing off with someone is difficult."

"True. There are no women."

"Yes, all men know this." Jess nodded. "But in the old world . . . it didn't even have to be the opposite sex that you went out and had fun with. Do you . . . do you know what I mean?"

"Oh yes." Trish said. "A special friend."

"Exactly." Jess smiled.

"I was married to a man named Clyde in the old world. He died of the plague. Anyhow, Clyde he had a special friendship with this guy. They would go out, go on trips together, sometimes them two would get so caught up in what they were doing, Hell I didn't see them till the next day." Trish snickered at the memory. "Clyde was cute."

"And his friendship with this guy never bothered you?"

"Oh no, why would it. I supposed some wives would be upset with sharing their husbands. But I wasn't one. It gave me more time to do what I enjoyed, reading, movies, bowling, Tupperware parties. And I was smart enough back then to know, it's a guy bonding thing. Some men really need that. You're one of them huh?"

Jess nodded. "Trish, you seem like a worldly woman around here."

"I am."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Wait. Do you need womanly advice or 'scoop' advice?"

"Womanly."

"Well in that case . . ." Trish leaned to her side, bending down behind her desk, she emerged back up without the visor. "Ask away. I love to give advice."

"I like you Trish."

"I like you too. And . . ." Trish winked. "You're real cute. Ask away."

"O.K., well as you know, I'm fairly new here in Beginnings. I hang out, but don't know anyone. I'd like to get to know someone. You know, you can have a ton of friends, but I'm one of those men who needs that one on one buddy friendship more."

"Ahh." Trish moaned in sadness. "You're lonely aren't you? No one really talks to you, do they?"

"No. I'm a talker too. I'll talk about anything. Anyone you can think of here that can use a friend, a close friend."

“I thought you were close friends with Robbie.”

“I . . . I am, sort of. But I don’t bother him with it. I’m looking for that type of relationship that I heard Frank and Henry had.”

“I see.”

“Yeah and Robbie is like . . . he’s everybody’s buddy, but no one’s best friend. He’s not the type of guy that needs someone dumping their problems on him just to unload. And he certainly isn’t the type of guy that needs anyone close to him.”

“Oh that is so wrong.” Trish said. “Everyone needs someone close to them. Male, female. You do. My husband Jeff needs me and so does Hap, and . . . uh I’m a special friend to a man named Forrest.” Trish dropped her voice to a whisper. “But there’s no sex there. And well, Tinker in the field division is a special friend to me. And Robbie needs Ellen, just like Dean needs Ellen and Frank, *needed* Ellen, he doesn’t anymore he’s dead.” Trish noticed she had amused Jess. “I guess what I’m trying to say is, everybody needs someone. And don’t let Robbie fool you. He has that rough Slagel exterior but he has a heart. I know for a fact he would love to have someone he could let down his walls with. Robbie’s lonely, Ellen sees this, but . . . what is she gonna do about it. She can’t devote one hundred percent of her time to him.” Suddenly and frightening Jess, Trish perked up. “Oh! Would you like me to speak to Robbie for you?”

“Really? I feel stupid asking him to be my friend. I mean we live together.”

“He probably assumed you would be friends and is feeling the same way.”

“You think.”

“Oh yes.” Trish waved her hand. “Robbie doesn’t get close to people and he certainly doesn’t latch on to new people. He asked you to move into his house with him. That tells me something. I’ll talk to him. You guys should start hanging out together. Maybe he can stop annoying everyone in this community when he has nothing to do.”

“Thanks.” Jess grinned.

“No problem.” Trish ducked beneath her desk again and came back up with the visor on. “Now . . . we’ve wasted enough time. Back to the press.”

Jess gladly did. He paused before continuing his reading and correcting and he looked at Trish. And it dawned on him that it was the first time in a very long time he had a personal conversation about himself with anyone. It felt good to have someone listen, to be a friend even if it was briefly. And in the lonely world that it had become for Jess and many men, a little closeness, a little friendship could go a long way for a better day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie had radio control. Robbie had the attention of everyone in Beginnings and those in Bowman who listened to him. He stood in the training area wearing his headset radio. He stood before a large group of security men, some field workers and they all were seated and spread around him. The microphone of his radio was lowered so as not to blast out the diaphragm when he spoke to them.

“Listen up.” Robbie spoke. “At noon, it commences. The start of it. The first annual Neville Competition. The grand prize for this ongoing event has yet to be determined. But since Danny Hoi is determining the prize, I’m positive it will be worth it. But hey, just the competition is worth it. And . . . Ben from fabrics is making the trophy which is the cool seventies style ruffle shirt that Charlton Heston wore in the movie.” Robbie waited for the silence of the cheers and he gave a thumbs up to Ben from fabrics. “Now, since Neville has become our post apocalyptic God, we all wanna be like him. For the rules . . .” Robbie pulled out the notepad. “The competition is open to anyone who registers. And it’s not just *us* gentlemen, our new brothers in Bowman are competing too. You must be registered to be a part of it. The earlier you register, the better. Because from that second on what you do starts counting towards points. You will be scored on the following. Games. We will hold events, like the Olympics to add to scores. These will be announced later. The following are areas that you can accumulate points on a daily basis . . .” Robbie began to read. “Making it from one are of the community to another in a record speed time. These times are determined by the Neville committee. For example. It’s been decided if you make it from the fields to the utility building in six minutes on foot, you get fifty points. And so forth. A chart will be provided for you. Another scoring factor . . . Escaping from dangerous situations. Elimination of viable enemies near the home front and . . . acts of heroism. But . . . in order to get points for any of the daily scoring you *must* fill out one of these.” Robbie pulled from the back of the clipboard four sheets. “These are Neville competition applications. Fill them out and turn them into one of the Neville committee. They will meet, determine the level of score and hand it out accordingly. For example if you nearly get shot in the head.” Robbie held up a paper. “This is the ‘escaping dangerous situations’ application. Fill it out. As you’ll see, they review, get witness verification and at the bottom they pick a level. A near miss of a bullet in a deadly range is a level three, second highest level. In order to hit a level four, you have to be injured in some way.” Robbie handed out the applications for the men to view. “Pass them around, take a look. History has all applications in stock there. That’s where you pick them up.” Robbie saw Dan from security’s hand raised. He pointed at him. “Yes Dan?”

“Who makes up the Neville committee?”

“Good question. For the radio listeners it was asked who makes up the Neville committee. I’m gonna tell you but you are eliminated from competition if you try to sway the committee. They are as follows. In Beginnings,. We have Trish, Jason, and Forrest. In Bowman, it is Elliott Ryder, Dr. Blue and a woman with a weird name, Gergerace. Anyhow . . .” Robbie shrugged. “They’ll meet bi

weekly either in person or on the radio. Any more questions?" He saw Dan raise his hand again. "Dan?"

"Will we all get a copy of the rules?"

"No, we won't all get a copy of the rules. Too many people here. The rules will be located at History, the social hall, the chapel and with any committee member. Anyone else?" Robbie waited and looked around. He grinned widely and clapped his hands. "Good luck gentlemen and over the next few weeks let's have fun with this and may the best man be Neville." A loud eruption of eventful cheers echoed in the security area. Robbie gave a thumbs up to everyone then looked over his shoulder to his father who had watched.

With rolling eyes, Joe just shook his head.

^^^

"Shit." Dean set down his radio and ran his fingers through his growing hair. "Not there." He paused tapping his fingers on the counter in the lab. "Hell with it." Hooking his radio on his belt, grabbing his personal cell phone, Dean left his lab and walked down toward Andrea's office. He knocked the door's frame. "Hey."

Andrea looked up from her files. "What's up?"

"I'm out of here for a while."

"Where are you off to?"

"Well, I was hoping to find Jason, to do it or Johnny, but . . ." Dean tossed his hands up. "To no avail. Anyhow, Forrest needs my help grinding the prescription for Johnny's glasses. If you see him tell him I am personally finding him and making him put them on."

Andrea smiled "I'll tell him."

"O.K., well I'll see you later I have to talk to Joe so I don't know when I'll be back."

"That's fine." Andrea smiled again. "Bye Dean."

Andrea lowered her head back down to her work after Dean had waved and left. She listened to his feet hit against the floor and fade away and then Andrea, dropped her pencil slowly and looked back up.

Her hand smoothed against the surface of her desk as she stared in thought. After a moment, she stood up, closed the chart she viewed, tucked it under her arm and left her office.

She could see in her walk down the hall that the lab door was open. Looking around first, up and down the clinic corridor, Andrea turned into Dean's lab. "Jason."

Jason, surprised, looked up from the computer he was reaching for. "Andrea."

"What . . . what are you doing in here?"

^^^

Like the tiniest of bowling balls rolling across the hard floor, that was the sound that made Johnny lift his head from his work in the cryo lab. A rolling sound, soft and faint but in the room with him, it clicked, and Johnny looked

around. Nothing. He returned his views to the feeding charts he reviewed as he sat at the counter and then the sound began again. Rolling, rolling, click. "What the fuck?" And Johnny got his answer when he heard a giggle. Rolling his eyes he looked to the door.

Bev stood in the open door. "Busy?"

"Yes." Johnny wrote something down. "And why aren't you? Don't you hold a job during the day or something?"

"I'm on my break. And I was hoping to change the bad luck I've been having by finding you."

"Bev." Johnny dropped his pencil. "Why is it that you keep tracking me down."

"I like you."

"Yeah well, you like Dean. Remember?" Johnny raised his eyes. "You have been making it no secret around here that's who your have your views set on."

"Dean is smart. So are you."

"So the flavor of the month is intelligence?" Johnny asked.

"I don't understand." Bev took a step into the lab. "You started this whole thing between me and you."

"By complimenting your legs?"

"Yes." Bev moved slower in. "Wow, Dean works here."

"If you're so infatuated with Dean." Johnny watched the look on her face. "Why do you keep chasing me?"

"I like you."

"You shouldn't be in this lab. And you like Dean. Sorry babe, I did the share thing. I was the secondary. I don't do the secondary. Rather go woman less than play second fiddle again." Johnny kept his eyes on his work, staying cold and ignoring Bev as she stepped closer.

"Who said you would be second fiddle. I'm a free woman, I'm not with Kevin anymore. Not too often a woman in this community chases a man. Why do you insist on making me chase you?"

"Why do you insist on chasing me?" Johnny stood up and started to gather his work.

"I told you. I like you. You're different. And . . ."

"And you want Dean."

Bev inched her way to Johnny. "I want Dean for a different reason. I want you, for you." She stood right next to him, she softened her voice. "We can help each other out you know. We're supposed to."

Johnny smirked with arrogance. "Help each other out? What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You can help me get what I need. And in return *Johnny*, I can help *you*, get what you need."

"And what is that?"

"This." On Bev's one word answer she dropped down to the floor before him.

"Shit." Johnny's eyes widened when he felt her hands run down across his waist and to his zipper. His tall stance fell to a lean into the counter. He swallowed the lump in his throat, and his eyes widened at the sudden sensation that began to sweep up his body. Wondering if he should take a stand with Bev or advantage of the situation, Johnny let his eyes roll slightly as he gripped the

counter's edge.

It never was warm in the lab, yet Johnny felt warm. He took off his lab coat, flinging it across the lab and then his hand reclaimed their cling to the counter. So surreal the situation felt. So dreamlike until . . . reality set in with the closeness of voices that came into his earshot. A male and female, closer and closer. "Shit." Johnny opened his eyes, the cryo door was open. He looked down again, then back up and Andrea and Jason were entering the lab. "Stop." Johnny called out.

Andrea and Jason stopped cold.

Andrea tilted her head in wonder. "Johnny?" She took a step to him. "Are you all right? You look flush."

"Stop. You can't . . . you can't . . . come . . . any further."

"Why?" Andrea asked.

"Dean will . . . Dean will get pissed." Johnny closed his eyes tightly then opened them. "He's got a . . . he has . . . he . . ."

Andrea and Jason both looked oddly at him.

"You have to leave." Johnny said. "I'm under strict orders. Not to let anyone . . . in."

Andrea looked at Jason then to Johnny. "Well we're looking for the Beesly file. Dean was supposed to have finished running . . ."

"In!" Johnny's voice was high pitched. "In the fridge."

"The fridge?" Jason questioned. "Why is the Beesly file in the fridge?"

"Think cold thoughts. I mean, in the bin next to the fridge. I put it there by . . . by mistake."

Andrea turned to Jason. "Did you look there?"

"No. I searched the other two bins. That's why I thought I'd go into the computer For sure he logged the results." Jason tossed his hands up. "Let's go."

"Thanks Johnny." Andrea waved. "And gets some rest you're acting strange."

"I will." Johnny gave a strained smiled. "Can you shut the door?"

Andrea smiled. "Sure sweetie." She stepped through the door first and Jason followed her.

Johnny watched as Andrea and Jason seemed to leave in slow motion. He wanted to wonder why they came down the cryo-lab at all, but at that moment all he could do was wait for the door to close and when it did, with a grunt, Johnny plopped forward to the counter.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Stone cold was Frank's face as he stood near the entrance to the base. His insides churned and soured as he watched the two truck loads of society people roll right in. He stared, letting not one bit of his feelings out. But he stared. Frank had no idea when he sent his trucks out to meet the train, what he was getting. He did now, as he watched them arrive. He was getting the sense that somehow he just wouldn't have the control anymore.

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie opened Joe's office door, slid to his stop, cringed, then grunted in disgust when he saw Henry behind Joe's desk. "Dad." He looked to his father who sat in the chair. "Come on, you're still leader."

"Henry needs to get the feel." Joe explained. "Humor me."

"No." Robbie shut the door. He held on to a large stack of papers. "Where's Dean?"

Henry decided to answer. "He had to go to glass and do something. He's been there for a little bit."

Robbie sat down in his seat and no sooner was his rear end in the chair that Dean walked in.

"Sorry I'm late." Dean closed the door. "Joe, I have Johnny's glasses. He needs them, have you seen him?"

Before Joe could say anything, Robbie did and calmly too as he bit his nails. "Last I heard he was at the cryo lab getting a blow job from Bev."

There were three things that happened after Robbie's remark. Henry's loud sound of disgust. The banging as Dean fumbled and nearly missed his chair as he went to sit. And Joe's grunt.

Joe winced. "Did we need to hear that?"

"Um . . . yeah." Robbie said. "We asked him to get close to her. He did. Well she got close to him. Or would that mean they were both close." Robbie shrugged ignoring the looks he got. "Anyhow, that's what Johnny told me. Took him by surprise too." Robbie snickered. "But uh . . . not as much as surprise as when Andrea walked into the cryo lab in the middle of it."

"My wife walked in on him?" Joe asked.

Dean was just as shocked. "What was Andrea doing in the cryo lab? Did Johnny say whether he kept her out or not?"

Again Robbie shrugged. "I'll guess he kept her out because well they never saw Bev."

Joe was just so confused. "Why in God's name would Johnny volunteer the details to you?"

Henry knew the answer to that one. "It's a guy thing Joe. Really and Johnny still a kid so he brags."

"No." Robbie snapped. "God. We asked him to get close to her. He was letting us know how the plan was going. Of course he says now he has to get total control and in order to do that with her, he has to be a . . ." a snicker came from Robbie. "A dick. He's gonna blow her off." He saw the silent glares he got from all three. "What?" Still he got stares and then it hit him. "Oh." And Robbie laughed.

Joe turned away from Robbie and to Henry. "Wanna get this thing moving along?"

"Joe why don't . . ."

"Henry."

"OK." Henry moved his chair closer to the desk. "I don't know why Joe called us here. It has something to do with Robbie. So Robbie, do you want to do the honors?"

“Yeah.” Robbie’s hand tapped on the stack of papers he had. He looked so pleased. “Since I have been chosen to become the new Ministry assistant, I attended bible class with Rev. Bob.” He stopped while everyone got their snicker out of their system. “Anyhow. We talked about some good stuff. Drove him a little crazy about Cain and Abel and the great flood.”

“Robbie.” Henry interjected. “Could you get to the point.”

Without saying what was on his mind to Henry, Robbie continued. “Well, I was smoking a cigarette and when I left, I left them in there. Now I had to go back, right. I could have stolen them from distribution but my dad would have been . . .”

“Robbie.” Again, Henry interrupted. “Please. We all have things to do.”

“Henry.” Robbie growled his name. “Quit being such a prick and get off your high horse, all right? Fuck. I swear the moment you become leader I’m moving for your impeachment and having people vote me in.”

“You couldn’t do that.” Henry argued.

“Could too.”

“You could not.” Henry said. “They wouldn’t do it.”

“Ha!” Robbie scoffed. “Bet me. Henry they voted on you being leader a while ago. If given a choice they’d pick me.”

“No they wouldn’t. Joe?”

Joe hesitated. “Well, Henry everyone likes Robbie. They just might.”

“Oh that’s not very nice.” Henry shook his head. “Dean do you agree?”

“What? What are we talking about?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Henry asked.

“No not really.” Dean answered. “I’m still shuddering in the fact that Johnny had oral sex in my lab.”

Robbie held up his finger. “No Dean. Technically he received . . .”

“Robert.” Joe scolded.

“But Dad, technically . . .”

“Technically my ass.” Joe growled. “Now can you please just quit with the dramatics and tell these two what you found when you were being noisy in Rev. Bob’s office.”

Robbie let out breath that showed his shock. “I can’t believe you ruined it for me. All right.” Robbie took the first copy of the yearbook from the stack. “This one is mine.” He handed one to Joe, then to Henry and Dean..

Dean was stuck in bewilderment staring at the blank top sheet. “What is this? There’s nothing on front.”

Robbie grinned. “I did that on purpose so you wouldn’t know until I told you to . . .” Robbie flipped over the first page. “To turn to the next page.”

“Oh!” Henry was so excited. “I love looking at other people’s year books. Is this Rev. Bob’s? Does it have autographs and messages from people. I love . . .”

“Henry!” Joe yelled. “Pipe down. That’s not why were looking at this. This is a secret gentlemen, what we have in our hands can not be knowledge to anyone outside this room. Clear?” He waited for the agreement. “Yes, this is Rev. Bob’s Iowa State yearbook. Robert, do the honors again.”

“It’s about time.” Robbie chuckled at his father’s displeasure grunt. “Now, this is really, really important that you listen to what I say. Everyone, turn to page twenty-seven. And!” Robbie instructed loudly, “Keep your eyes focused on the left hand corner. Henry don’t peek.”

Henry whined.

Dean's head bobbed from side to side. "My eyes are peered Robbie. What?"

"O.K." Robbie gave a 'shush' look to his father. "Dean, what is Reverend Bob's last name?"

"Haddon." Dean answered.

"Correct." Robbie nodded. "Now. Everybody scan down to the fourth row and let's find Rev. Bob's wonderful freshman picture." Robbie didn't have to look for Reverend Bob. He saw the picture of Rev. Bob the night before and quiet enjoyed seeing the man of the cloth, thin, and with dark thick hair. But he didn't enjoy that pictures as much as the moment when Dean and Henry saw him. Their *What's?*, shocked expressions and slow raising eyes to Robbie was worth the wait. "Yep."

Dean took a double take. "No. No way." His eyes kept blinking over in over in disbelief.

Henry's mouth was open as well. "Oh my God. It's George's picture next to his. He went to the same college as George? Wow. But Iowa State is a big place, do you think they knew each . . ."

"Henry!" Joe yelled. "Is that the only thing you see?"

Henry responded with a blank look.

"I fuckin knew it." Robbie grunted. "He had to ruin it didn't he?"

Joe held out his hand to Robbie to halt his complaining. Calmly, Joe looked at Henry. "Henry, look again."

Henry looked down to his paper yearbook. "O.K."

"Look closely Henry." Joe instructed.

"Joe, I'm looking, I . . ." Henry peered up to Joe. "Shit."

Robbie tossed his hands up. "Finally."

Joe nodded very slowly in assurance to Dean and Henry. "Looks like my immature and nosey son discovered a pretty big secret about Reverend Bob. Now, my question to all of you is . . . at this point in the game, how long should we wait before we approach our good Reverend Bob Haddon to tell him that we know he is actually, the Good Reverend Bob . . . Hadly?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Washington, D.C.

If George could trophy his proudest accomplishment he would. The White House. So many times he wanted to waste the man power and fix up the white structure that for nearly two terms was his home. Fix up the entire D.C. area and the monumental structures. Symbols of our forefathers who shaped the laws that shaped America into a great nation. Arlington cemetery laid totally overgrown. Thick and dense, in years to come it would end up being a forest instead of a tribute to those who had lost their lives in battle. George considered himself very patriotic. Just because he wanted to rule the world along with the country didn't lessen his patriotism. He worked hard all his life in law school, the courts, small political positions all the way up to the presidency. All he ever wanted to do was make the world a better place . . . plus, run it. But that would have been a given had his plan to cut down earth's out of control population growth not have gone array.

He ignored the mysterious notes and letters telling him the plan would not work. That the virus was infallible. He chuckled at the notes that said they came from 'the future'. The phone calls he refused to take. He dismissed them all as paranoid anonymous warnings from someone in the society who gained a conscious and just wanted to stop it. And though he did safeguard--just incase--by cryogenically freezing not only more scientist, but others as well, George moved the society ahead with the plan. It was too perfect not to. They had worked on it too much, too long, for it not to be.

Total loss of forty to fifty percent. How much easier on the food demand it would have been. And that percentage was based on averages. A twenty-five percent loss in the more industrialized nations, seventy-percent loss in the over populated and third world countries, and total annihilation in the parts of the world that just didn't have the technology to help themselves. Pandemonium. Chaos. Breakdown of government branches all across the world. The Society would emerge from the ashes. A saving grace to a world gone bad. Heros. But the society emerged to a dead world.

But not completely.

There still was a whole world out there. A world with people. Civilizations. And unfortunately for George, he only controlled about twenty percent. He was rebuilding. He had too. Even dead, overgrown and filled with animals he wanted to change, he still loved his country. And with the other eighty percent out there rebuilding as well, George couldn't take a chance on losing the land he dedicated his whole life for. Because if he was gaining enough technology to soon go over there and stop them, then the chances were, they were regaining the technology as well. And as history proved. One man's land is another man's projected domain. And George wanted to make the other man's land *his* domain first. And he would do everything in his power to get it.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Maura Wilson. She was young and thin. Fragile features that were complemented by her shoulder length blonde hair that always was worn neatly pulled back. A face that looked even younger than her fourteen years. Seldom if ever, seen walking the streets of Beginnings, since she turned thirteen she left her home with Gemma only for school, church and bible instruction

Gemma sheltered the beautiful young woman and with good cause. She didn't shelter her from the children. Nor even Denny and Josh who recently were allowed to visit--chaperoned--for an hour in the evening. She sheltered Maura from the men.

Joe knew this and Joe had Gemma's trust. One of few men in the community who did. But even with Gemma's full trust, it took a lot for Joe to convince Gemma to let him walk Maura to bible instruction. Gemma gave in.

Joe laid his hand on Maura's shoulder as they stood outside the chapel. "I'm right out here. I'm waiting for you. But you do not tell Reverend Bob that. Correct??"

"Yes Mr. Slagel." Maura nodded.

"You tell nobody what I asked you to do. This is very important."

"Yes. Did Reverend Bob do something wrong??"

"No-no." Joe shook his head and laughed. "It has to do with the Neville competition. He's a big threat for taking it, being the religious hero and all. And I just want to check on this one rule." Joe winked. "You let me know what he says and that is that."

"All right." She spoke angelic.

"No you go in there. Rev. Bob is out at the fields. You're a little early, that gives you time."

"You're waiting for me right? Mother always waits for me."

"I'm waiting for you. But . . ."

Maura giggled. "You're playing the game so I can't tell."

"Exactly." Joe held the chapel door open for her. "Thank you."

^^^

She felt bad walking into Rev. Bob's office alone, but she was asked a favor. And since Maura encountered the cheating ways of Denny and Josh in a recent game of Candy Land. She wanted to help out Joe by making sure Rev. Bob played fair.

So once in his office, she did as instructed. She grabbed the yearbook. Opened it to page twenty-seven. Sat on the couch and waited.

Reverend Bob walked in. "Maura, you're early."

"Yes. I was bored. I was looking at your picture."

"You were?" Reverend Bob saw what she was looking at. "Maura let me . . ."

"Why is your name different here?" Maura pointed. "Should it be?"

"Do you know that name?"

Maura shook her head. She really didn't recognize the name.

"Well." Rev. Bob grabbed the yearbook and closed it. "I changed my name some years ago. Many years ago."

"Is that allowed?"

"Yes it is. But it takes a lot of money."

“Why did you change your name?”

Rev. Bob looked at the yearbook and to an innocent Maura. “If I share with you this story. You can not tell a soul.”

“I won’t.”

Rev. Bob sat on the couch next to her. “I’m going to tell you and I’m going to trust you. You remember Maura what the Book of Matthew says about trust. Don’t you?”

Maura nodded. “Those who can be trusted will be given more.”

“Exactly. God expects us to be trustworthy. I expect the same from you. We wouldn’t want to disappoint God now would we?”

The expression on Maura’s face dropped. A nervous lump formed in her throat. She swallowed it and listened to Rev. Bob speak.

^^^

The ‘Joe’ park in the center of town was busy for mid day. It seemed everyone in Beginnings was taking advantage of the extremely warm fall weather. Taking a break from their work day, strolling on the winding path that wrapped around like a maze in the so small park. Even Henry took advantage of the break. He sat on the little wall, finally getting a spot after Jenny gave it up. He held Nick in his arms, staring down at his son. A son he didn’t know as much as he should.

Henry knew his reason for getting Nick out of the nursery for a break. Ellen. How much he missed her. How much Nick was a part of her. He stared into the face that seemed like his own and then he stared into the eyes that were Ellen’s. A rarity. Blue eyes. In Henry’s mind, Nick was absolutely perfect.

He remembered the high hopes he had for him and Ellen when the baby was born. And then Henry remembered all the problems that followed there after. Problems he started alone. And problems that eventually tore him and Ellen apart. He had his chance and he blew it. The passing of time was what Henry hoped would heal those wounds. But the wounds stayed open and though Henry didn’t want to, he knew it was time to help them along in the healing.

“Henry. God.” Dean’s frantic voice neared.

“Oh hey Dean.”

“I got scared.” Dean sat next to Henry and immediately took Nick. “Hey you.” Dean spoke to the baby and Nick smiled. “Henry, I went to the nursery and didn’t see Nick. I panicked.”

“I wanted to spend time with him.”

“Oh.” Dean handed the baby back to Henry. “Here. Sorry.”

Henry took Nick. “That’s O.K., Why did you think I took him?”

“I don’t know. I thought something was wrong.”: Dean looked at Henry. “Is something wrong?”

“I miss Ellen.”

“Yeah I do too.”

“No Dean I miss her. I really miss her. I let some time go by. I tried to be her friend again. You know.” Henry swayed his head. “Like we were when we first started out. Even though that wasn’t what I wanted. But I tried. I stayed back when you and Frank shared her after Brian died. She lived with me and I stayed back. I stayed a friend.”

“I know this.” Dean was somewhat confused by Henry’s rambling.

“I don’t want to stay back anymore.”

“Oh.”

“I know you’re married to her and all. I’m happy for you. It was a long road coming. But . . . but Dean, I would really like for you and I to sit down and talk about the understand now.”

“Henry?” Dean questioned. “Understanding?”

“Yeah. An understanding.” Henry smiled. “You know the common thing that occur in Beginnings. I’m still dedicated to her Dean.”

“Yes I know. But . . . but.”

“But what?” Henry asked.

“Henry.” Dean lowered his head. “I’m sorry. There’s not gonna be an understanding in this marriage. I’m not doing it.”

Henry started to laugh. “You’re joking.” He paused. “You’re not joking.”

“No.”

“Dean, are you letting it be Ellen’s choice?”

“No Henry. I’m not gonna let it be Ellen’s choice. I’ve waited forever for this opportunity and I’m not sharing. Not at this time.” Dean started to get up.

Henry stopped him. “Dean. Come on. You can’t be serious. You can’t . . . you can’t in a society like this have her all to yourself. No one does.”

Dean only responded with a closed mouth and raised eyebrows.

“You’re really serious.”

“I have to go.”

“You’re not even going to consider it?”

“Henry.” Dean stood up. “If . . . if I allow an understanding. If Ellen chooses to have one. I think, I think in light of all that’s gone on, I’m going to encourage her to let the understanding or secondary relationship go to a Slagel. It should be a Slagel.”

Henry was stunned. But his shock only hesitated him for a second. With Nick in his arms he jumped up and stopped Dean again. “Dean . . .”

“Henry I have to . . .”

“No.” Henry stated strongly. “No.” The wind whipped his hair around and Henry’s face was stern and angry. His voice stayed at a low volume but rasped in his emotions. “Dean this fucked up.”

“Henry, I’m not going to discuss this any further.”

“Yeah you are.” Henry strongly told him. “You are. It’s fucked up Dean.” Henry lowed his face close to Dean’s. “Do you realize that? I shared her with you.” Henry’s neck muscles clenched and every word he spoke was sharp and with angry hurt. “I shared her. I had an understanding with you when you needed her. I gave you so much freedom with her. I nearly lost my best friend over it all. There was never a doubt in my mind what was right. It wasn’t fair to have her all to myself. Don’t you think I wanted that? Huh? I did. But it wasn’t . . . it wasn’t right. *This* isn’t right.”

“I’m not obligated to share Ellen with you.”

“I know you’re not.”

“So why are you acting as if I owe you.”

“You do.”

“What!?” Dean had a hint of laughter to his tone. “I owe you nothing.”

“Bull shit!” Henry’s voice raised. “You owe me the chance to at least

try with her. You owe me the opportunity I gave you. If Ellen doesn't want me that's one thing. But you telling her she can't be with me is a whole other thing. It's wrong."

"It's the way it is." Before anymore words could be said between them, Dean walked away.

The warm wind picked up some and Henry held Nick close to his chest, covering the baby's ears as he watched Dean walk away. His heart beat so strong in his anger that he didn't respond to the tap on his shoulder until he no longer saw Dean. Henry turned to the tap. "Bev."

"I heard."

"It's none of your business."

"I can make it my business. And you know it." Her eyes shifted to where Dean was. "I messed it up for you Henry. I did that before I realized that Dean was a bigger asset to have. And guess what?" Bev looked at Henry again. "I'm gonna make it up to you." She giggled. "I may need your help. But I'm gonna ruin Dean and Ellen." She winked. "Just you wait and see. Prepare to pick up the pieces Henry."

Henry said nothing, he stared at her, then Bev grinned, rubbed Nick's head and walked away.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

"You are gonna have to just stop the whining." Ellen instructed Grace. "You act like it's the end of the world."

"My ear is ten times bigger."

"Than what?" Ellen leaned into Grace, examining her ear.

"Than it was before."

"Well you shouldn't have carried me."

"You should not have punched me in my ear."

"Toughen up." Ellen stood up straight and took off her gloves. "I'm not whining."

"Why would you whine?"

Ellen shook her head and rolled her eyes. "I'm dealing with this stuff coming out of your ear. All done. Take the medication I prescribed and wait it out. That's what Dean says." Ellen walked over to the other side of the examining room and to Grace's chart. "I'm leaving tomorrow. If it gets worse we'll have to bring you up to Beginnings."

"Are all the women as crass as you?"

"Nope. I'm the top bitch." Ellen grinned and grabbed the chart. "You're done. I'll check it tomorrow before I leave."

"Doctor." Grace called out.

"Yes?"

"Could you retrieve the guards to escort me back?"

Ellen snickered as she walked out. "No. Walk back alone, what is wrong with you?" She stepped out into the other room pulling the door closed. Ellen handed Grace's chart to Blue. "All done."

"I'll call for a guard." Blue said.

“Why is that?” Ellen asked.

“Why will I call for a guard? Women do not walk the streets alone.”

Ellen snickered “Did you see her? She has the ‘Elephant Man’s’ ear. Who’s gonna get her.”

“You think you’re funny. Laugh again.” Blue instructed and pointed. “Or do you need me to call you a guard.”

Ellen turned around and looked at Craig who stood by waiting. He waved and Ellen turned away again and faced Blue. “Why is he still here?”

“Following you. Wants to talk to you. Do you want a guard.”

Ellen looked over her shoulder back to Craig, then again to blue. “No, he’s harmless. Just annoying. He reminds me of my brother Richie.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Did I tell you my brother owed me two thousand seven hundred and thirty-six dollars. Never paid me a drop back.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I have to leave.” Ellen grabbed her bag. “I have processing to finished.” She facially winced as she stepped to the door.

“Last chance.” Blue called out. “A guard?”

Ellen shook her head and walked by Craig. She stepped out the door and he followed her. “Swell.” She walked a few steps, spun around and barked at him. “Why do you keep on following me?”

“You do.”

“I do what?”

“Get as upset as him.”

“Who?”

“The Captain.”

Ellen fluttered her lips. “Yeah but there’s one big difference. The Captain won’t kick your ass, I will. Either that or I inject you with something really lethal.” Ellen winked and walked again.

“Hey.” Craig trotted to catch her. “Can I go to Beginnings.”

“No.”

“Come on. I hear we’re a part of it. Can I go?”

“No.”

“Why?” Craig asked.

“Because we just don’t let everyone in. And we won’t let you in.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Ellen said. “I’ll tell you why. You’re lazy.”

“How can you tell?”

“I haven’t seen you do anything remotely related to work around here. You have done nothing but follow me around since the crack of dawn. And for no reason.”

“I have reason.”

“What is it.” Ellen neared Hal’s apartment building.

“I want to know about you and the captain.”

“Why do you want to know about me and the captain.”

“Curious.” Craig stood waiting for an answer. “Please?”

“If I tell you what you want to know, will you leave me alone?”

“Yes.”

“Ask.”

“Thanks.” Craig looked up and thought. “O.K. tell me why the

Captain?"

Ellen huffed out. "Hal is sweet, sensitive, kind and attentive. O.K.?"
Ellen grabbed for the apartment building door.

"The captain?"

"Yes. And." Ellen hesitated before going in, lifted both her hands up, spread them far apart, raised her eyebrows with a smile and left.

Craig scratched his head and curled his lip in wonder. "The captain?"

Seldom did men ever get under Ellen's skin, but there was something about Craig that did. She didn't know why. He seemed nice enough. She merely chalked it up to the fact that Hal had her brainwashed about Craig before Ellen even stepped foot in Bowman.

Hoping that she got rid of Craig--at least for a little while--Ellen walked into Hal's apartment, wanting to relax before she had to dart off to processing the men that would return with her and Danny the next day.

She shut the door to the apartment that felt cold. Seeing the reason for it, she moved to the open window and closed it. Ellen laughed to herself when she thought how typically Slagel it was for the apartment to be cold. Frank hated being warm and never did their home exceed the temperature of sixty-five degrees unless Ellen made it that way.

Wiping the chill up and down from her arms she saw what her and Hal were looking at the night before. It sat on the coffee table, the small oak box. Still open, still exposing the pictures inside. Ellen moved to the sofa and sat down. She pulled the box closer to her and grabbed a handful of pictures. She smiled as she shuffled through the Slagel memories and her smile stopped and fell when she reached a picture of Frank. She hadn't seen it in there when her and Hal viewed them. There were so many pictures. Setting down the stack of photos, Ellen held on to the one picture, leaning back on the sofa and propping her legs on the coffee table.

Frank.

His eyes stared back in that picture as if he were actually looking at her. Her heart pounded looking at him and an ache filled her throat. "Oh God Frank." The emptiness and hurt she tried to keep buried came flooding back to her. Worry. Sadness. Missing.

She breathed slowly out through her slightly parted lips wanting so badly for the picture she held in her hands to be Frank in her arms. Her life's best friend was so far away from her, yet a part of her felt him calling her every minute of the day. And there wasn't a minute of the day that Ellen's mind didn't drift to Frank. If wishing him back would do it, Frank would have returned long before. Wishing for him back so badly that she still found herself--though she let no one see her--staring out the window while she worked in the clinic. Looking for him. Waiting for him to walk over that grade.

She hid her feelings well. She had to. That was the only way to bring him back. And she would do anything, no matter what to help bring him back to her. But the truth was, no matter how much Ellen pretended to move on, acted the part for the big 'plan', she would never move on until Frank came home. She would never be the same.

She slowly brought the close up shot to her lips, kissing the picture gently then staring at it again. Letting her mind imagine, letting her mind feel, that somewhere, wherever Frank was, at that exact moment he was thinking and

missing her.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank's frustration and hurt carried in his breath vocally from his throat as he snapped forward in his chair, ran his fingers through his hair and stood up. "Ellen." He closed his eyes. His face held pain. "I can't keep doing this." Harshly he rubbed his hands over his face as if he were trying to rub his thoughts away. His mind had to be elsewhere, focused. But at that moment, it wasn't. Too many moments were spent with his mind in places it shouldn't be. Searching for Ellen. Imagining her. Hearing her voice. His inner soul told him that wherever she was, she was fine. Frank believed that, he had too. She was too much a part of him, that even the distance of many miles could not hinder him from being able to feel her. And Frank swore he did.

He was so tired of waiting. Frank just wanted to walk out the door of his office and straight off that base. He could make it home. He knew he could and then he would find Ellen. But his gut told him that his every action, every move with the society somehow effected Ellen. And her and his children were top on his list of priorities. Protecting them. And Frank now was in a position where he could do his best to help his family. Like John Matoose was for George. Frank was now the unsuspected insider. He could gain the knowledge needed to start bringing down the insurmountable force that seemed to beat against his people, his home, his family, everyday. Frank's family was his top priority. Ellen, was a top priority. Frank knew what he had to do. In order to do so correctly, he would use the thoughts of his family to make him stay put, to stay in the control he had to be. And Frank would use those same thoughts of his family, to go on and make each day he was away from them, though painful, more tolerable.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

"Exhausted." Sgt. Ryder answered the question Hal posed to him as they stood side by side on a street corner in Bowman looking up.

"Me too." Hal said. "Do you suppose it's him?"

"Most definitely. You saw him at that switch station."

Hal nodded slightly still peering his views upward. "It doesn't seem quite fair though. We should have him here. In Bowman."

"I don't know about that. But then again, we don't have anyone like him. Beginnings has a carbon copy."

"True. But . . . what do you think about training him?" Hal asked.

"If I wish to keep any sanity. I refuse, absolutely refuse to place that eccentric man on a horse with a long, lethal, sharp object."

"I uh . . . I see your point." Hal lifted his hand up in a wave. "Danny! How's it going?"

Danny, strapped to the top of a telephone pole, looked down, grinned

and gave thumbs up to Hal and Sgt. Ryder who watched him.

^^^

“O.K., what’s going on.” Joe asked out as he walked into a noisy tracking. He saw both Henry and Mark looking at the monitors. “Sector thirty-two again?”

Henry tossed his hands up. “Joe, I’m lost. I can’t figure it out.”

“Yes, you can Henry.” Joe told him. “Keep trying.” Joe stepped closer to the monitor. “Christ.” He watched the tracking and the flash of light seemingly go crazy. Flashing, beeping. Dots of light flying across the screen. “Looks like what ever it is isn’t taking in the whole area.”

Mark shook his head. “Instead of the one mile radius. It’s pretty much stuck to twenty square feet. That’s why it’s going nuts. Too many rabbits.”

“Or one kid.” Joe looked at Mark. “Call you wife and find out where Marcus is. Got it?”

“Joe.” Mark laughed in ridicule. “That is not my son up there. I know he’s the Bam-Bam of Beginnings, but he would definitely show a much larger life signal.”

“You have a point.” Joe patted Mark on the back. “But still, call her. Humor me, Thanks.” Joe shifted his eyes to Henry who watched the tracking signal. There was a look upon Henry’s face that Joe seldom saw. A look of confusion on what to do.

Henry saw Joe staring and he didn’t know why Joe had such a huge grin on his face. “Joe?”

“Huh.” Joe shook his head and removed the smile. He had gotten lost momentarily in the enjoyment of Henry’s confusion.

^^^

Painfully, with one eye closed, Dean shut of his ear with his finger. “God.” He cringed at the high squeal that came from his daughter as she dove onto Josh while they had a free for all wrestling match in the livingroom. “Quiet!” Dean commanded as he neared the ringing phone. “Josh! Keep them quiet.”

Was Dean actually in his home? He thought he was. He felt like he was. Yet not one person heard him. Hoping that the noise would stop, he picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Hey Dean!” Danny excitedly said.

“Danny?” Dean chuckled.

“Yeah, guess where I’m calling from?”

“Uh . . . Bowman. Hold on . . .” Dean covered the mouth piece of the phone. “Knock it off!” he yelled to the screaming maniacs. “Now!” Finally, silence, not less a few agitating giggles form the crew. “Sorry, Danny, go on.”

“Dean, you really shouldn’t do that. Not when I’m like fifty feet from the ground on a telephone pole. You could have startled me down to my death.”

“Why are you on a telephone pole.”

“That’s where the first working phone is. Guess why I called you?”

Your number was the only one I remembered. And I wanted to tell you Ellen's doing great. Aside from that little physical confrontation with Gergerace. And I got the phones up and running here. Sort of. I'm getting there.. But we have a problem. No one knows their telephone numbers." Danny started to laugh. "I have this great game planned for tonight. Imagine. A silent town. A single phone ringing out."

"Sounds like the a scene from the Omega man."

"Oh! Dean!" Danny shrieked with excitement. "You're the man. Thanks. I bet I get Neville points for that."

"Under what category?"

"Recreation of Neville moments."

Dean laughed. "Well you may want to recreate Neville's coming to the rescue. Call Henry on his phone. Tracking is all out of whack."

"No way."

"Yes way."

"No Dean, I'm not saying that as 'boy am I surprised'." Danny said. "I'm saying that because I invented that and there's no way it's out of whack."

"Call them."

"I will." Danny paused. "Uh . . . Dean. What's the number."

Just as Dean started to tell him he was told by Danny to hold. Dean pulled the phone away at Danny's loud yell.

"Hey Sarge!" Danny yelled out. "Write this number down! Go on Dean."

Dean took a second to snicker in amusement and he then gave Danny the number.

^^^

"It's gonna have to be done." Joe told Henry while in tracking.

"No Joe, I can't."

"Well we can't wait until Danny get's here."

"Joe please . . ."

"Henry, I'll send Robbie up there with you. O.K.?" He saw the hesitation on Henry's face. "They're rabbits for Christ sake."

"Killer rabbits Joe."

"Yeah, yeah." Joe heard Henry's phone ring. "And answer that."

"It just rang!" Henry pulled out the phone. "Hello." Henry's eyes smiled. "Danny." He looked at Joe. "It's Danny. Danny, man am I glad to hear from you. How's it going? I see you have the phones up."

"I'm having some problems Henry. But don't spread that around." Danny told him. "We can talk about it later. Anyhow, I hear you have problems."

Henry let out a breath. "Boy do I ever. Tracking is picking up these killer rabbits that are huge and move really fast in the field. There has to be a lot. You should see this screen Danny, it looks like . . . remember the old, old, old video game space invaders. That's it."

"Shit. What's the computer reading." Danny asked

"One object. Well now it's saying ten. Each moving at sixty-four miles and hour across a twenty-some square foot radius."

“That’s absurd.”

“I know.” Henry said and nodded his head listening to Danny. “I did that. A-ha, did that too. That too. That too. Yeah.” Henry started to laugh. “I can check . . . you think? Danny if this works, I owe you.” There was a cringe on Henry’s face that quickly turned to a thinking smile. “You know what. That might not be a bad idea. Tonight? I’ll speak to Robbie. I’ll get back to you on this on first.” Henry hung up the phone.

“Well?” Joe asked. “What did he say?”

“He has a theory.”

“Christ.” Joe rolled his eyes.

“It’s a good one.” Henry looked down to Mark. “Mark, pull a history. Danny thinks there may be something in the field, shiny that might be reflecting the sun. If it’s only happening at daylight hours. Trees below, the flash of light reflects, hits the tracking. Bam.”

Joe nodded impressed. “Pretty good. That could explain why your adjustment didn’t work from this morning.”

“Could.” Henry said. “But . . . it still doesn’t explain what chased me in that field.”

Joe wanted to bark, yell at Henry, but he didn’t. He just waited with Henry for the history results. And if Danny’s theory proved plausible. Joe wanted to send two men up that field to solve the problem. And he knew definitely one of them would be Henry.

^^^

Trish always prided herself on someone that kept their word. And when she promised to help someone out, she did. So on her walk home, when she saw Robbie, she decided to seize the opportunity. “Robbie.” She called to him catching up to him as he checked security keypads.

“Hey Trish.” Robbie punched in a code, it buzzed. He opened the door, shut it then looked at her. “What’s up. How’s that kid of yours.”

“He’s fine. Looking more and more like his dad.”

Robbie snickered.

“Not funny, Anyway, can I speak to you about something.”

“Can you walk while we do.”

“Sure.” Trish followed him to the next building. “It’s about Jess.”

“What about him?”

“Well, him and I were talking this morning and he said something.”

“What?” Robbie began to check the bakery’s keypad.

“He needs a friend Robbie.”

“I am his friend.”

“Not like what he needs.”

After the buzz and checking, Robbie wrote results and moved on. “What do you mean.”

“He wasn’t much of a crowd guy in the old world. He was a one on one guy. You know, the type that always had that best friend. Like Henry and Frank were. He needs that male bonding friendship thing Robbie. I guess, you know, without any women to turn to, who are you gonna discuss your problems with if

you don't have that one close friend you can turn to."

"I see." Robbie walked to the next building. "Is he having problems?"

"No. But does he need to have a problem to have that friend?" Trish asked. "Someone to go to the social hall with so he doesn't just become one of the numbers there. Most of the men pair off and you know it. Most men have a best friend. Jeff is Mark's best friend. Joe always hangs out with Jason. Hap and Forrest."

"Me and . . . no one. Huh?"

Trish smiled. "Maybe it's a sign. Maybe it's time you Robbie Slagel started bugging one person in this community when your bored instead of all of us at the same time."

Robbie snickered as he worked. "Maybe you're right. I like Jess. Maybe I need to start hanging out with him more often. I mean, I hang with the band but . . ."

"But . . ." Trish finished his sentence. "After practice who does Denny hang with? Josh. Paul? He hangs with James. You . . ."

"I bother everyone." Robbie tucked his clipboard under his arm. "Perhaps I'll start bothering Jess. I just assumed, you know, since we live together, we were friends." Robbie shrugged.

"Well you know he's from Canada."

Robbie hesitated in his walk. "What does that have to do with it?"

"I don't know exactly, but I bet it does have something to do with it. Anyway, he would like to assume you guys are friends, but he just didn't want to cross that line. Robbie. You are an original. All of you originals, whether you mean it or not, project yourselves up here." Trish raised her hand above her head. "When you're new here, you guys seem untouchable."

"Well that may be true in Henry's case. But not mine. I always am down to earth with all the new people. But just incase you're right on this. I'll talk to him. At the very least I want him to see him and I *are* friends . . . hold on Trish." Robbie adjusted his headset radio. "Yeah dad? Shit. O.K., I'll be right there." Robbie looked at Trish. "I got to go. Thanks for letting me know this."

"No problem." Trish watched Robbie walk away. "Oh Robbie!" She called him again and waited until he stopped. "If things work out I want the credit." She waited for his signal of agreement and happily and very pleased with herself, Trish moved along and headed home.

^^^

Kramer, Kansas

Kyle and the two other UWA soldiers plopped down to the ground to rest.

Link couldn't move. He looked at the bottom of his boots. "What the hell? Walk?"

Kyle shrugged. "He said we can do it."

"We're in fuckin Kansas man. Walk to North Dakota. What the hell were we thinking and what the hell was Mr. Slagel thinking telling us we can walk."

"We made it to Kansas." Ted added.

“Barely to Kansas.” Link said. “We need to find some transportation. We gonna die before we reach home. You men know this don’t you.”

“Yeah.” Kyle stood back up. “But we got to try now don’t we?”

Link stood up as well. “I guess you’re right. How long do you suppose it will take us?”

Kyle shook his head. “Frank said a few days. Week tops.”

“Man.” Link twitched his head in disbelief. “We must be moving slow. All right, let’s pick up the pace. I can do this for a few more days.”

Onward they trudged again, not taking many breaks until night fall. They walked in the direction they were supposed to and they walked hearing Frank tell them it wouldn’t take them long to get home. It was a good thing they didn’t know Frank’s calculations were way off, or maybe they wouldn’t have had so much determination.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Quit being such a baby.” Robbie griped at Henry as they headed out to the sector the signals came from.

“Me a baby? Why are you driving all the way here. Huh? If you’re not scared then why didn’t you park the jeep at the end of the road back there?”

“Because I’m lazy and I want to finish my work day.” Robbie brought the jeep to the end of the field and shut it off. “All right. What exactly are we looking for?”

Henry stepped from the jeep. “Danny says it has to be a piece of metal or glass. And it probably is no smaller than a fist.”

“Easy enough.” Robbie started to the field. “Let’s find a needle in a hay stack.”

“And killer rabbits.” Henry followed pulling out his gun.

“There are no killer rabbits Henry. Hey . . .” Robbie snapped his finger. “Do you suppose we get Neville points for this.”

“I would think. We are taking our lives into our own hands.”

“Where exactly are we supposed to be looking at?” Robbie asked.

“This field.”

“Shit.” Robbie looked at the high grass that came to his thigh. “There is no way something buried in this is reflecting the sun.”

“Come to think of it you’re right.”

“I am. It has to be . . .”

Henry saw Robbie stop walking. “What?”

“Shh.” Robbie held out his hand. “Do you hear that?”

“Robbie, I swear to God if you’re teasing me just to scare me, I’m gonna kill you.”

“No listen.” Robbie looked around. “And smell.”

Henry sniffed. “Smells like Dean’s lab. Aw! I knew it. He is . . . flies?”

“Exactly.” Robbie said. “Lots of them. Look.” He pointed to his left. “Could they be causing it?”

“Holy shit.” Henry exclaimed when he saw what appeared to be a black cloud hovering just above the tips of the grass. “It could if they’re flying in a

swarm. I haven't seen that many flies since . . . shit."

Robbie looked at Henry. "The plague." Immediately Robbie took off running toward the flies.

"Robbie!" Henry called out. "Wait, you shouldn't do this." Grunting and figuring he didn't want to be too far from Robbie, Henry took off after him.

Robbie swatted the flies that pelted him in the face. He shut his eyes hard and opened them again.

"What . . ." Henry stopped, covered his mouth, turned his head and gagged.

"Something has been feeding up here . . . big time." Robbie looked down to the grass. A large deer, eaten nearly to the bone was only one reason for the flies. The other reasons scattered about the grassy field. They appeared to be remains of rabbits, but so little of the furry creatures were left, it was hard to tell. "Well Henry, if these are bunnies, there goes your killer rabbit theory."

"Unless their cannibals."

"Rabbits are not carnivorous."

"Yeah, but Dean's rabbit's may be."

Robbie swayed his head. "Is he really messing with their genes that bad."

"I'm telling you he is." Henry warned. "Let's head back."

"Yeah that might not be a bad idea. Seeing how we haven't a clue what's been dining up here." Robbie turned from the carcasses and walked with Henry. "We'll tell my dad, something is running around up here."

"It's kind of scary." Henry said. "Can whatever it is, get into Beginnings?"

Robbie paused. "We're gonna have to bring that up. But that is a scary thought." Both Robbie and Henry stopped walking when they heard the ruffling of the high grass. Robbie turned his head slowly to look back. His eyes widened when he saw the grass moving and moving fast. All different directions it swayed.

"Robbie?"

"Henry?"

A pig like squeal echoed out. It sounded as if more than one. High and loud. The ruffling grew louder and closer sounding like a mini stampede..

"Robbie?"

"Shit."

"Run?"

"Run!" Robbie took off and Henry followed. The jeep wasn't far away and they raced through the grass hearing the cries, hearing themselves being followed, and never looking back to see what it was until they made it safely to the jeep.

Robbie turned over the ignition and screeched the jeep forward. Henry faced backwards, "I saw something."

"What was it?" Robbie drove.

"Animals. Some sort of bald animals."

"Pigs?" Robbie asked.

"It looked it." Henry answered.

"Shit what if Dean gave that stuff to the pigs."

"Oh my god. Pigs are carnivorous."

"And now fast too." Robbie commented and shifted gears. "Henry, I

think if we didn't before. You and I are getting Neville points for this.”

“Yeah.” Henry relaxed, leaning in the passenger's seat and grabbing his chest. He caught his breath. “And we should get a lot of points too. We almost could have been dinner for the killer pigs.”

Robbie stopped the jeep. “Henry? Listen to us . . . killer pigs?”

CHAPTER FORTY

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank could hear the eruption of laughter echoing in the darkness of the sector of base where only he used to live. The laughter drew closer as he rounded the bend to his home that evening. He saw them sitting in a group as he walked down the sidewalk. Eight of them. All men. Frank gave a 'hello' glance only as he walked by the group gathered in the lawn.

"Colonel Slagel." Leonard Mason a peace ambassador, stood from his lawn chair. "Would you care to join us in a drink this evening."

Frank stopped walking and turned back to the men. "Thank you very much for the invitation. But revelry is at zero five hundred and I'd like to get to bed. Some other time perhaps."

"Perhaps." Leonard said. "I look forward to seeing how things run here tomorrow."

"I uh . . . look forward to showing you. Goodnight." Frank nodded once and moved on. He wanted to look back, he felt their stares as he walked away. He knew they watched him because they had stopped talking. The eight new arrivals spent so much of their time getting situated, what was happening on base was secondary. But Frank knew it wouldn't be that way for long. For as much as they probably wanted to learn about him, that was how much Frank wanted to find out about them. Especially the abundance of lab equipment he saw them move into the one building, and the six scientist team that unloaded it. Something was up with that. They were moving too much in too fast for something big not to be happening soon.

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Beginnings, Montana

Joe gasped, in that after-swig of his moonshine, and set down the glass, shifting his eyes to Dean. "You got to be shitting me. You believe this shit about killer pigs."

"Yes." Dean nodded. "Only they aren't anything new. Maybe it's a pack of wild boars. They're carnivorous. They're predators and they move fast."

Joe lofted his hand and looked to Robbie. "There you have it. You guys were semi right. Now, what's the chances of them coming in."

"Down the cliff?" Dean fluttered his lips in sarcasm. "Slim to none. The fall will kill them."

"Good." Joe grabbed the bottle and poured another glass. "Can you get me some tranquilizers Dean?"

"For the gun?" Dean asked. "Sure. I can have it ready in the morning. Are you going after them, they make a good meal."

"What is it with you and the meat product around here?" Joe questioned. "No. I just want to arm security when they start making rounds up there. And . . . yes. I don't want to kill them. Christ if we have meat running around up there we might as well capture it if we see it, right."

Robbie made a loud buzzing sound. "Wrong. My men won't go up

there.”

“Sure they will.” Joe said. “To be on the safe side, I want morning, noon and night rounds up there. They can take a jeep. Look at the field, turn around and come back. And . . . shoot a boar if they see one.”

“They’ll never do it.” Robbie disagreed.

“They’ll do it.” Joe said with certainty. “I talked to the Neville committee. You’re gonna end up with volunteers. It’s a ten Neville point bonus for each round made up there.”

“Fuck. I’ll do it myself.” Robbie said.

“See what I mean?” Joe held out his hand. “Volunteers.” He turned his hand over and checked out his watch. “And where in the hell is Henry?”

Robbie answered. “Getting ready. Tell Dean about Rev. Bob. I uh . . . I see Jess, and I want to talk to him.”

Joe snickered. “You go on.”

Dean watched Robbie stop at the end of the bar to get his drink. “What’s going on with Rev. Bob. What did Maura find out.”

“A lot.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, but she isn’t talking. She said the Book of Matthew preaches trust and she can’t break Rev. Bob’s trust.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope.” Joe sipped his drink. “She did tell me that Rev. Bob changed his name. He even showed her a legal document.”

“Did he tell her why?” Dean asked.

“Oh sure he did.” Joe answered.

“But she’s not talking.” Dean stated.

“Nope. And . . .” Joe watched Robbie move to Jess. “I’m uh gonna go get entertained and eavesdrop. I’ll be right back.”

Dean was confused by Joe’s remark and especially by Joe grabbing his drink, getting up and walking across the social hall. He quietly and unnoticed, sat at the table behind Robbie and Jess. Before Dean could figure out what was up with Joe, he saw through the corner of his eye, Henry walk into the social hall. At first Dean thought it was his imagination, the immediate feeling of tension that came in with Henry. But he soon realized it wasn’t when Dean smiled and waved to Henry and Henry just glared, set down the knapsack he carried and took a seat at a table.

“Hey Jess.” Robbie set down his drink, straddled a chair and joined Jess who sat alone.

“Hey, what’s . . .” Jess leaned to his side and peered behind Robbie. “Why is your father sitting alone. Joe!” Jess called him. “Did you wanna join us.”

Joe lifted his hand slightly. “No, no. I’m fine. You boys talk.”

Robbie inched the chair closer to the table. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?” Jess asked.

“I spoke to Trish this afternoon. She explained the whole entire thing to me.”

“Oh.” Jess stared down at his drink. “You’re mad.”

“Yeah I’m mad.” Robbie said. “We live together. You should have

come to me with this. I assumed that's the way things would be. I asked you to share my house with me right?"

"Yes, but . . ." Jess' hand played with the rim of his glass.

"No buts. I'm all for it." Robbie told him, turned around when he heard his father snicker then refaced Jess.

"Really?" Jess asked. "Well that is . . . that's great. We'll even ease our way into it."

"No need. We're half way there already. Right?"

"Right."

"Good." Robbie grabbed his drink and stared into it. "I shouldn't drink this, Take this from me." He handed it to Jess.

"Why."

"I have to fly."

"Emergency?" Jess asked.

"You could say that." Robbie looked back at Henry. Dean was pulling a chair out at Henry's table.

"I wanna talk to you." Dean sat down across from Henry.

"Sure what's up?"

"You seem mad." Dean asked. "Are you? Are you mad at me?"

Henry contained himself. "Dean come on. What do you think? You would be mad too."

"I guess you're right. But I want you to know something Henry. I will never forget what you did for me when I needed Ellen. I won't."

"But you did."

"How can you say that?"

"I can say that because you have an outlook on a situation that just isn't right. This afternoon you were wrong.. You were very wrong."

"Why am I wrong for not wanting to share my wife?" Dean asked.

"Because it's wrong in this day in age. I did it. I didn't want to. We all do it. It is all a fact of life." Henry tried to explain.

"I'm sorry Henry. I don't want it to be my fact of life."

"Yeah but it was not a problem when she was with me. Sharing her was not a problem when she was with Frank. No. *I'm* sorry Dean. I love her. Love her. And forgive me but I am very angry right now with you. I put everything I felt aside while you two worked things out. I waited, I was patient Things are settled now. I need her back in my life.

"I'm not saying you can't be her friend."

"But you are saying if it moves towards more than that, then it would be wrong?" Henry stated nearly in question.

"It . . . it would be cheating."

Henry closed his eyes painfully, a slow laughing breath emanated from him. "How can you say that?"

"Because I am her husband. I *can* say that."

"Then I can say this. I was the nice guy Dean, I have always been the nice guy. And I'm tired of it. When you stop listening to her, stop paying attention, which you always do and will again. I'll be there . . . again. I will. I have to and I want to.

Dean twitched his head, he didn't like what Henry had said. "Why are you taking this 'gloves off' attitude. I don't want this to cause a war between

us.”

“It doesn’t have to. Can’t you see.” Henry spoke softly with passion. “Don’t let it. Just give me your O.K. Please. That’s all I want is your O.K. to try, just try. Please Dean give me your OK.

“I’m sorry. I . . . I can’t.”

Henry closed his mouth tightly and stood up. “Then I’m sorry too that this has to be like this.”

“Be like what?” Dean stood up and went to speak some more but Robbie approached.

Robbie poked his head in between the two men “Henry, ready?”

“Yes.” Henry answered.

“Good. It’s getting late. Let me grab Jess, I’m getting him to go.”

“I’ll meet you at the hanger.” Henry reached down for his knapsack and looked once more at Dean and headed to the door.

“Henry.” Dean stopped him. “Where are you going?”

“Danny ran into difficulties. He needs me.” Henry raised his eyebrows. “I’m going to Bowman.”

“Tonight?” Dean quizzed him with edge. “It’s dark out. Danny can’t wait until morning for you?”

“Oh yeah he can.”

“So why are you going to . . .” Dean nodded. “Ellen.”

“Yep.” Henry tossed his bag over his shoulder, looked once more at Dean and walked from the social hall.

“Henry!” Dean ran out after him. “Stop.”

Henry stopped but didn’t turn around.

Dean moved to him. “This isn’t right.” He walked around Henry to face him. “This is wrong. You can not be going after my wife.”

“See!” Henry’s voice raised and though he brought the volume down, the tone remained. “This is where the problem lies Dean. Right here. Your thinking. I am *not* going after your wife! I just . . . I just want to be with my friend.”

After a moment of silence between them, Henry moved on.

^^^

“571-8776.” Danny yelled down to Hal who stood with a clipboard at the foot of the telephone pole.

“Got it.” Hal wrote it down. “Continue.”

Danny waited until he heard no noise. He placed the pen light back in his mouth, looked down to the phone book he held, and dialed the phone.

Ring. Ring,

Danny grinned as he listened to the phone ring in the dead silent town but, no one answered. He scratched it out and put an ‘N A’ next to it. He dialed another number. Static. He marked that one out of service. And then he dialed again. He listened to the ringing and then finally the call was answered. Danny dropped the Pen light into his hand. “What’s your name? Good. Robert, your number is 571-9087. Got that. Good. Hal!” Danny called down. “Robert’s number is 571-9087.”

Sgt. Ryder walked up to Hal. "Coming along nicely."

"Yes it is." Hal showed Sgt. Ryder the clipboard. "The ones that are working are working fine. So far. We just have to be quiet so we can . . ." Hal raised his head to the sky when he heard the helicopter approaching.

"You were saying?" Sgt. Ryder asked.

Hal shook his head with a smile. "Wait it out., That's what I was saying. Isn't this great Elliott. Help is arriving for something so trivial as a phone."

"But to Beginnings it's not trivial." Sgt. Ryder told him. "And we are now part of them. They only want us to have what they do."

"Feels good, doesn't it?" Hal asked.

"And not just to have the help or the phones." Sgt. Ryder said. "It feels good to be a part of Beginnings."

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank closed the file folder and it barely shut. Stuffed with notes that he took, files that he found and information he gathered. He rubbed his eyes and stood up from his kitchen table bringing the folder with him. He stopped in the dining area and stared at the 'farm' picture on the wall. How he hated that picture. Setting the folder down, he removed the picture and placed it to the floor, when he did a square foot piece of wood teetered in the wall. Frank removed that exposing a hole and in the hole that he and Richie made, he hid his folder and rehung the picture.

How long had he been working in his kitchen. An hour? Two? He made his way into the livingroom and reached for the lamp, when he did, he saw it on his coffee table. Frank had been so engrossed with his other work he never saw it when he walked in.

A square homemade envelope lay there. Richie's handwriting on front. *'Frank, found this in my stuff.'*

Frank missed spending the day with Richie. But he knew it was for the best that they didn't hang around much, or at least when anyone knew. He picked up the note and when he did, from it fell a picture. It landed face down on the coffee table.

The second Frank lifted it and turned it over was the second his heart dropped. "Oh wow." It was a face he longed to see. It was a picture of Ellen. "Look how blonde." His long finger ran down her hair. The picture was old, but it was still Ellen. The face, that to Frank, never changed or never aged. The smile upon Ellen's face stared up at him and he smiled back. A warm feeling swept up Frank, lighting his whole face with a grin and causing his emotions to gloss over his eyes.

His lips twitched some in his overwhelming of 'missing and loving' her at the moment and a lump formed in his throat. It was difficult, but Frank swallowed, held on to that picture and never took his eyes off of it as he went upstairs to bed.

Once in his bedroom Frank laid on his bed. His legs extended, the picture held tightly in his fingers and not too far from his view. He loved the picture and was so grateful to Richie for giving it to him. He needed that picture. And filled with feelings and emotions for Ellen, so over powering, Frank unzipped his pants, pulled out his erect penis and masturbated.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

His hands brought up the blanket over a sleeping Alexandra's shoulder. Dean bent down kissing his daughter for what seemed like the hundredth time. He walked from her bedroom and looked at his watch in the hallway's light. Shaking his head he moved to the livingroom. Why hadn't Ellen called yet? She was supposed to have called nearly an hour before.

He sat down on the couch and picked up his phone, he checked to see if it was working. It was. Again, Dean looked at his watch. He thought about the fact that Danny had some problems. Maybe the phone lines went back down. So with that thought in his mind, he checked the radio. It was working as well. Surely Ellen would have radioed if she couldn't call. The night before she had him on the radio forever, missing him, telling him how much she loved him. Not wanting to hang up. She had radioed him so many times during the day that it hindered on driving Dean insane. But where was her call now?

"No." Dean spoke out loud, placed the radio down and shook his head. He picked up one of the many work folders that spread on the couch and coffee table. He told himself that he was making too much out of it. Too much. Ellen had a long day. She was tired. She fell asleep. Her not calling had nothing to do with the fact that Henry had now been down there for hours. Dean wouldn't let himself think that way, even though that's where his mind kept heading.

He kept feeling his insides twitching in a sort of antsyness, shifting his eyes from the phone to his work to his watch. He nearly jumped from his skin when his front door opened.

Josh kicked off his shoes with a 'thump' and shut the door. "Hey Dean."

"Josh." Dean, not like he didn't already know the time, looked at a watch he was tired of looking at. "Where have you been?"

"Um . . ."

"It's Twelve-thirty."

"It is?"

"Yes."

"Wow." Josh scratched his head. "I'm late."

"Yeah, you are. You're supposed to be in this house no later than twelve." Dean told him. "Those are the rules."

"But I thought that didn't count if I was at Pap's."

"It doesn't. Were you at Pap's?" Dean asked.

"Yeah. It was boring walking around, so Denny and me like went to his room and hung up these really big paper pictures of guys with guitars and long hair. Uncle Robbie brought them back from the old music store in Miles."

"Posters."

“Huh?”

“That’s what they were called. Posters.”

“Did you hang posters on your wall?” Josh asked Dean. “Robbie said he did, and my Dad did.”

“I think I did.” Dean laid down the folder. “Yeah, I did.”

“Did you ever hear of the Power band? That’s the guys that are on the poster.” Josh began to chuckle. “Uncle Robbie said they were from all you guy’s era. He said they were pretty cool. And Big. But they looked normal size to me.” Josh snickered again. “Paul said next music run, he’ll find one of their songs.”

Dean was lost. “The Power Band?” He shook his head. “I don’t recall them. My era?”

“Well you’re like way older than Uncle Robbie, so maybe not your era. No, he said some guy name Frank Sinatra was from your era. That’s right.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I am not that much older than Uncle Robbie. And . . . I’m sure if he listened to The Power Band I would have heard of them. The Power Band.” Dean enjoyed the break from worrying about Ellen. His mind dizzled in trying to remember this band. Had it been that long? Was he that out of it back then? “Will you let me know when Paul finds this song. I’d love to hear it.”

“O.K., I’m going to bed. Night.”

“Night.” Dean bit his bottom lip and slowly leaned back on the couch. “The Power Band. Why am I not remembering a band that was big? The Power . . . Aw!” Dean had to laugh. He shook his head and stood up. “Josh.” He poked his head around the hall.

“Yeah?” Josh hesitated before going into his room.

“Does the poster say, ‘AC/DC’?”

“Yeah. The power band. Gees Dean. Night.”

“Night.” Dean watched Josh struggled with opening his door to his room, pushing and pushing and slipping through a small crack. Shaking his head, he returned to the couch, s soon as he sat down he sw the phone. “Hell with it.”

Reaching for the phone and looking at the number that Danny said would be Hal’s, Dean dialed. He listened to it ring and then instead of a hello, he was greeted with a loud bang and a thump. Then after a few seconds a very groggy sounding Hal.

“Yeah?” Hal spoke.

“Hal this is Dean, were you sleeping?”

“Um . . . yeah.” Hal’s voice was raspy.

“I’m sorry to wake you. I am.”

“No. No, that’s O.K., I don’t hate phones again yet. What’s uh . . . up?”

“Is Ellen all right. She was supposed to call me over an hour ago. And she didn’t.”

“She’s fine. Want me to get her?”

“No don’t wake her.” Dean said.

“No. If I don’t she may get mad. Let me just go tell her your on the phone.”

“Thanks.” Dean smiled, he listened to Hal walk heavy. Where he was sleeping Dean didn’t know. He could hear Hal knock on a door and call Ellen’s name out and then he listened to the foots steps get closer.

“Dean.”

“Is she sleeping?”

“You know what? She must not have gotten back from her walk with Henry. I’ll write a note to tell her you called. But don’t worry, they’re fine here in Bowman.”

“I’m uh . . . I’m not worried.” Dean swallowed hoping his ‘gulp’ was not heard over the phone. “Please tell her I called and to call me no matter what time she gets in.”

“O.K.”

“Sorry to wake you. Bye.” Dean hung up the phone then brought it to his lips. He closed his eyes, shook his head and set down the phone. Telling himself he has to be up anyhow to finish his work, Dean looked at his watch one more time and grabbed a folder.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

Ellen giggled leaning into Henry as she slumped down in the red cushion seat in the Belmont Theater in Bowman. “Even the end credits are great Henry.”

“Everyone is watching them.” Henry looked around behind him and Ellen into the packed movie theater.

“You do know everyone is gonna think you and Danny are the coolest.”

“We are.” Henry whispered.

“This was great. I hated this movie when it was out, but it was so great.”

“Danny wants to . . .” Henry paused when the room filled with applause and the credits ended. “I’d better go shut down up there huh?”

“Can I go with you?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah.” Henry on the end seat, slid out into the aisle, waiting for Ellen. The men in Bowman that packed the theater all had positive comments to say as Henry walked by them.

They made it to the projection booth where Danny was. “Hey Danny.” Henry walked in with Ellen.

“Ellen. Henry! My Man.” Danny grinned. “We are heros now.”

“And we get Neville points.” Henry stated.

Danny stood by the spinning reels. “So like what do you think it would take to dismantle this place and bring it to Beginnings?”

“There’s a theater in Miles city. Why don’t we take that one apart.” Henry said. “You know Danny I could do this for you.”

“You sure?” Danny asked. “I mean, you got this up and running.”

“No go on. El and I are just hanging out and talking anyhow.”

“O.K. Thanks.” Danny walked from the projection machine. “Night El. Night Henry.”

Ellen smiled. “Night Danny.” She folded her hands behind her back and moved to Henry as he took over the projector. “This was the best evening I had in a really long time.”

“Really?” Henry smiled at Ellen brightly as he took the movie reel. He wrapped up the end of the film and placed the reel in the large awaiting canister.

“It was so old world like.”

“El, as soon as I saw this place I wanted to get it running. Sorry it took so long.”

“Are you kidding? You and Danny together were amazing. I was surprised all those men showed up.”

“Yeah it was packed.” Henry shut off the projector. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

Henry held out his hand motioning to the door. “You lead the way.” He followed Ellen out and from the office to the lobby then out into the street.

“We need to go to a coffee house now Henry.”

“I wish there was one.”

“There is.” Ellen said. “But they’ve gone out of business.”

Henry smiled as they started walking down the street. “Aren’t we walking the wrong way back to Hal’s?”

“Um . . . yeah. I’m sorry. I wanted to take a walk. You don’t mind do you?”

“No. I’d love it.”

“Hold my hand Henry?”

Henry’s heart fluttered. “I’d love to hold your hand El.” He took her small hand into his and he slipped his fingers with hers. “This place reminds me of Ashtonville.”

“It does. And . . . this walk reminds me of the one that you and I took. Let’s go up this street.” Ellen pointed to a residential street. “I think that’s why I like Bowman.”

“Because if this street?”

“No.” Ellen snickered. “Because it reminds me of Ashtonville so much. I think . . . I think there is nothing more in this world that I would like to do than to go back there.”

“If I could get you back there. Would you want to go?”

“How are you going to get me back to Ashtonville Henry.” Ellen swung his hand some as they walked. “It’s too dangerous to drive and we’d never be able to bring enough gas supply anyhow.”

“El . . .” Henry stopped walking . “If I figure out a way to get you there. Will you go?”

Ellen spoke near whisper and with so much wanting. “I would love to go to Ashtonville.”

Henry smiled slightly. “Then you will. I’ll figure it out. I’ll get you there. But there’s one condition.” He held up the hand that held onto hers, extending his index finger.

“What is that?” Ellen asked as she faced him.

“You have to go with *me*. When I figure out how to do this for you, *I* want to be the one that does it with you. Deal?”

In such awe Ellen looked at him. “Oh Henry. If you can get me back to my home. To see my children’s graves. Their rooms, their things. I . . . I wouldn’t want to do it with anyone else but you.”

“Then I’ll do it El.” Henry smiled.

“Henry, if any one else were standing before me telling me this, I’d have a hard time believing it. But . . .” Her eyes shifted as she looked up into his. “It’s you. And if anyone can get me back there. You can.”

“You don’t know what that means to hear you say that.”

“Why?” Ellen asked.

“El.” Henry closed his eyes. “I thought you lost all faith in me.” His eyes opened when he felt her hand on his cheek.

“Not all Henry.”

He slid her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her palm. “Then I will work as hard as I must to get back what was lost. I promise you that.”

“You don’t have to work hard Henry. You just have to be you.”

“Thank you El.”

“You’re . . . shit.” Ellen stepped back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot to call Dean. Shit.”

Henry looked at his watch. “I can’t see what time it is.”

“Well I know it’s after eleven that’s for sure.”

“Call him” Henry unhooked his phone from his belt. “Here.”

“You think he’s awake?”

“Doesn’t matter. If he’s expecting you to call, he’ll want to talk to you.”

“Thanks.” Ellen began to dial, the phone barely rang one time and Dean answered,. “Oh! You’re awake.”

“El, what took you so long?” Dean asked.

“Oh Dean, you’re not going to believe this.” Ellen began to ramble. “Henry is here right? Well him and I were walking the streets of Bowman which is so much like Ashtonville. Anyhow, we were walking and he saw the old movie theater. Henry immediately found Danny and you know those two, then don’t stop until they get what they’re working on done. They got the movie theater running. Dean! I watched a movie in a theater. Not a very good one but a movie. How do you like that.”

“Wow.” Dean spoke with little enthusiasm. “So are you back at Hal’s now?”

“No, Henry and I are walking around. You know us two when we get together. Sleep is never an option.”

“So Henry is with you now?” Dean asked.

“Yep right here.” Ellen smiled at Henry. “I’m using his phone. He told me to call you. He said you wouldn’t be sleeping. We’re walking on some dark street off of the main . . .”

“El, put him on.” Dean interrupted.

“What?” Ellen questioned.

“Put him on. Please. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Ellen drew up an odd look. “O.K.” She held the phone out to Henry. “He wants to talk to you.”

Henry had question on his face as he took the phone. “Hey Dean.”

“You made your point.” Dean said so serious.

“Excuse me?” Henry was confused.

“I’m really pissed at you right now Henry. I’m so pissed. I can’t believe you of all people are doing this shit.”

“Dean look, the movie, the walk, just know it has nothing to do with what you and I were talking . . .”

“Bullshit.” Dean snapped at him. “That’s bullshit and you know it. You wanna be upset about me not having an understanding with you, that’s one thing, You wanna be mad at me. You do it. But this is a dick move Henry and

I'm not gonna forget it. You wanted to take the gloves off. They are off." Dean hung up.

Henry blinked as he pulled the phone away from his ear.

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked. "Is he mad that we are walking? I heard you say about . . ."

"No." Henry shook his head and turned off the phone. "No. I didn't fix something in the clinic that I was supposed to and you know Dean, he was rambling about how I can fix up a movie theater and not fix what I was supposed to back home."

"Oh." Ellen waved her hand. "He'll get over it." She started to walk and noticed Henry didn't. "Henry, come on."

Henry stared at the phone. "El." He extended it to her. "Maybe you should call him back."

"Why?"

"Just . . . you should call him to say goodnight. I shouldn't have been the last one he talked to, that's all. It's not right."

"Henry, I'm sure . . ."

"El." He laid the phone in her hand. "Will you please just call him and tell him you love him."

"He knows I . . ."

"El."

"Ok, then can we walk?" Ellen asked.

"Then we can walk."

"He's gonna think there's something wrong with me. I pestered him all day." Ellen smiled at Henry and dialed the phone. "Hey Dean?" Ellen's voice was chipper on the phone. "We didn't say goodnight. And I didn't tell you I loved you."

Henry stepped back with his hands behind his back and moved a few feet from Ellen to allow her privacy on the phone with Dean.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

September 20

Binghamton, Alabama

The tromping of boots against the asphalt was like the steady beat of a song. Frank paced before the seventy five men he had running in place. They held their rifles in their hands. On one, they raised their rifles above their heads, two they brought them down, on three they extend them forward and four they brought them back in. So unison, so synchronized, they were quick and moved in double time to Frank's steps.

"Squad leaders count it out!" Frank ordered as he walked before them.

"One." Tromp-tromp.

"Two." Tromp-tromp.

"Three!" Tromp-tromp.

"Four." Tromp-tromp.

Frank smiled. "Keep it going!" He snapped his finger on their every count out.

"One." Tromp-tromp.

"Two." Tromp-tromp.

"Three" Tromp-tromp.

"Four." Tromp-tromp.

"Let me hear it from the ranks!" Frank called out.

And then the men began. Together, loudly, and in time . . .

"Ugachuga. Ugachuga. Uga. Uga. Ugachuga!"

"I can't stop this feeling . . ." Frank talk-sang. "Deep inside of me." Frank grinned. "Take it back Gentlemen and with enthusiasm."

They took two steps back in their formation, snapped to attention and called out loudly. "One, two. Yes we can. Colonel Slagel is the man! Ooh-rah!"

"Dismissed!" Frank bit his bottom lip and hid his smile, turned around and lost the happy look when he saw the Peace Ambassador Leonard standing there.

"Colonel Slagel. A little unconventional, don't you think?"

"It's the way I have always trained my men. You work them, break them, show them you're human. They respect you more and they're all yours. I did this too many years in The United States Army. How about you?" Frank raised his eyebrow and grabbed a cigarette from his chest pocket as he walked.

"I mean no disrespect to your method of training." Leonard followed Frank. "However."

Frank stopped walking. "However?"

"Yes. However." Leonard held what looked like a manual to putting together a stereo. "This is the way the Society expects their men to be trained. Have you read this?"

"I'm sure I have. But . . ." Frank pointed to his own temple. "I have amnesia so I'm not really remembering anything post the plague. Sorry."

"Is that possible?"

"What." Frank moved on.

"Having selective amnesia like that."

"Like what?"

“Like you said you have.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

“Huh?” Frank puffed his cigarette.

“Never mind.” Leonard held out the book to Frank. “Maybe you would like this.”

“For?”

“For refreshing your memory on our training regiment.”

“Why?”

“Because you forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Frank asked.

“How to train these men.”

Frank stopped walking.

Leonard was a good five feet ahead of Frank before he realized that Frank was no longer with him. “Colonel Slagel?” He saw the glare Frank gave him. And though he tried not to show it, Leonard was a bit frightened. “Well, yes, um . . . perhaps not.” He rolled up the manual. “I have something else to discuss with you.”

“What?” Frank started walking again.

“We’re expecting a very important scientist to be joining us here in a weeks time. In fact, he will head up biology for the society, but will work and live here for a while. I need you to prepare the best housing available.”

Frank laughed and stopped walking again.

“Something wrong?”

“His house is gonna look like your house, my house and anyone else’s house that lives in a house on base.”

Leonard really wanted to scratch his head. “Uh . . . yes. So you’ll see to it then.”

“Oh yeah.” Frank nodded. “I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you. I’ll let you be.”

“Thanks.” Frank bobbed his head forward as he watched Leonard walk away, and then without Leonard seeing, Frank calmly lifted his middle finger and smirked.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe set down his coffee on the counter in the clinic lab, leaning into it next to Dean. “So you’ll get up to Jason’s lab soon.”

“As soon as I can. But I haven’t a clue Joe on how to run a history on his quantum Regressionator.”

“Maybe I can get Henry to go with you.”

Dean grumbled.

Joe looked up in surprise. “Next. Traps.”

“Regis.” Dean said.

“Excuse me?”

“Speak to Regis.” Dean suggested. “He used to hunt.”

“I’ll do that. But I’m gong to need ample supply of those tranquilizer

pellets.”

“You’ll have them. As soon as El gets back we can . . .”

“Did someone say my name.” Ellen’s voice carried into the lab.

Dean smiled and spun around to see her. “El.” He lost his smile when Henry walked right in after her. He hesitated, shifted his eyes, then walked over to her smiling again. “You’re early.”

Ellen embraced him. “Yeah, Me, Henry and Danny, brought the pick up so the others will be along shortly.” She kissed Dean and laid her hand on his face. “How are you.”

“Better now.”

Henry cleared his throat. “Joe. Danny went straight to tracking. He wanted to know if you could meet him up there.”

“What about you?” Joe asked.

“He wanted to talk to you.” Henry shrugged.

“O.K.” Joe gathered up his things. “Dean, I’ll speak to you later.”

“Thanks Joe.” Dean released Ellen from his embrace as Joe left. “We have so much to catch up on. How busy are you?”

“I have to get the new guys situated when they arrive. The field workers are coming today and those who are going to be setting up the new Bowman, are coming in another day or two.”

Dean tilted his head in question. “Why is that?”

Henry stepped forward to answer. “Danny scouted the towns best suited for tracking and we have a lot to get ready. Supplies and stuff, since these men are going to be living there. There isn’t any reason to make them come up until we’re ready to put them to work.”

Henry was the last person Dean wanted to hear from, but he did have the answers. “I see.” Dean nodded. “Who’s going to be in charge of this crew? If I can ask.”

“Construction and rebuilding, Danny is going to oversee. Him and I since it is partly mechanics.” Henry said.

“Thanks.” Dean had no emotions in his voice. “Um Henry, I’d like to talk to Ellen alone. Please.”

“Oh sure.” Henry reached out and laid his hand on Ellen’s shoulder “Thanks for the Bowman tour. I’ll talk to you later.”

“O.K. Henry.” Ellen smiled. “Bye.”

Henry took a step to kiss Ellen on the cheek but stopped. It was something so simple that he did when ever he saw her and had done for a while. Yet, Henry didn’t do it this time. He just smiled and waved and walked to the door. “Dean.”

“Henry.” Dean nodded his head once.

Ellen watched Henry leave then looked to Dean. “What’s going on?”

“Excuse me?” Dean asked.

“With you and Henry. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know what your talking about?”

“Really?” Ellen folded her arms. “Care to tell me why the temperature dropped when you two looked at each other.”

Dean took a deep breath. “Things are a little strained between me and Henry right now. That’s all.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Dean shrugged “Personal.”

Ellen laughed. "I'm your wife."

"Yep you are."

There was a quirk about the look on Ellen's face as she tilted her head to the right and raised the corner of her mouth. "Am I missing something?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "Him and I have just been butting heads. It happens in a community this small. We'll get through it."

"Good." Ellen smiled. "Now, can the work just wait a few minutes, I'd like to go see the kids."

"Can the uh . . . kids wait a few minutes." Dean stepped to her grabbing her hands.

"Why would we make the kids wait for work?"

"We're not." holding Ellen's hand, Dean walked to the back of the lab.

"Dean?"

"El."

"What are you doing?"

Dean lead her to the room in the back.

Ellen lagged behind and moved hesitantly slow. "Why are we coming back here?" She didn't get an answer only a tug into the room. "Oh, I get it. Sorry, I didn't pick it up. You should have accentuated the words, 'a few minutes' I would have known exactly what you were talking about."

Dean stopped, smiled as he looked at her, kissed her quickly, pulled her further inside and closed the back room door.

^^^

Total chaos is what tracking looked like when Joe walked in there. Mark sat in a chair slumped and rolled out of the way. The monitor table pulled out from the wall. Wires everywhere. Computer disks and Danny Hoi on the floor.

"Danny."

"Oh hi Joe." Danny looked up at him. "I'm not finding anything."

"You don't think Henry did all this already?"

"Um, probably yeah." Danny answered.

"And?" Joe asked.

"And I'd rather do it myself. It's my baby, so . . . I'd rather do it myself. Thanks."

Joe looked over to Mark who lifted his hands in defeat. "Danny, did you stop to think it may be something in the field?"

"Yeah I did." Danny picked himself up from the ground and brushed off. "But I talked to the guard who did rounds up there and he said he saw nothing. Yet . . . during the time he said he was there we continued to receive signals. Which leads me to believe. Malfunction."

Mark let out a loud grunt. "Thank you! I have been saying this for days. But no! Henry insists that there are killer rabbits or what is it now, pigs running around up there."

Danny snickered. "I believe something may have been up there to help set off the malfunction. But it helped exaggerate it. That's all. No creature God created moves this fast and is this small."

"Really?" Joe asked. "What about a creature man created?"

Before Danny could say anything Mark held up his hand. “Unfair! No Joe. Unfair. My kid was home. Ask my wife. And . . . and . . . he hates deer meat. Robbie said that’s what was killed up there. Marcus likes his meat cooked. He hasn’t eaten anything alive since last year.”

“Good to hear.” Joe raised an eyebrow. “Danny how long you going to be working on this.”

“Just gonna put it back together.” Danny lowered down to the floor. “Go home tonight and really sit there and think about it. Why?”

“Well, you need to get me that game plan you have for the new towns. We have to get things together.” Joe said.

“O.K., I’ll do that. Let me finish up here.”

“Good. See you in a bit.” Joe moved to the door.

“Oh Joe. Before I come up there’s something I need to discuss with Dean. Then I’ll be there.”

“Not a problem.” Joe opened the door. “Mark.”

“Joe.” Mark grumbled Joe’s name. “Danny, can you possibly take any longer.”

Danny looked at Mark and grinned. “I could, but seeing how I have things to do, I won’t.” Danny began to reconnect. “So, where was I? Yes. Gergerace. Man, this woman you have to see her. I want front row seats to hers and Joe’s first encounter.”

“Danny if she’s that bad. Maybe all they have to do to her is lock her in the same room with you and Henry.”

“Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m messing with the electrical wiring that is attached to the equipment you’ll be touching. You may not want to insult me.”

“Oh.” Mark looked serious. “Sorry.”

“Kidding.” Danny grinned and returned to his work. “Um . . . maybe not. Where in the hell does this wire go?”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Preparations are being made now.” Stewart told George as George sat behind his desk. “Research files of our recently deceased scientists are being moved to Binghamton right now. Housing is being set up for him.”

“Good.” George nodded.

“Now you’re sure that all this trouble isn’t for nothing. This Dr. Hayes will not be leaving the society.”

“I’m positive.” George stated. “Things are well underway in Beginnings to ensuring that he will have what he wants here and. . . he’ll want to stay.”

“Good. Now I spoke to Dr. Garrison. He said that it is possible that seeing this doctor may trigger Frank’s memory.”

George was not surprised by this news. “I appreciate you looking into it. But I have it covered. Dr. Morris told me if it does, it will not only be facially evident on Frank’s face that he recognizes Dr. Hayes, but physically evident as

well. His body will sway and topple as if he got hit with a wall of bricks.”

“So Leonard knows these signs to look for?”

“He does.”

Stewart let out a breath. “Good. I’ll just reiterate that to him when I talk to him.”

“You do that.”

The phone in George’s office rang. George looked at it, then at Stewart.

“Sorry.” Stewart quickly picked it up. “President Hadly’s office. Oh, just a minute.” He extended the phone to George. “For you.”

George rolled his eyes. “Of course it is. Who is it.”

“Your favorite person.”

George grinned and snatched up the phone. “Hey.” He spoke into the receiver. “How are things going there? Good. Good.” He shooed Stewart away and leaned back. “Not much longer. I was just talking about how you are getting things ready there . . . yes, we’re getting things ready on this end. Alabama is nearly ready for Dean’s arrival.” George shook his head. “Patience. Patience. Timing is everything. Now when is it that the leadership officially switches hands?” George nodded with an even bigger grin and carried on his conversation.

^^^

With the Ugachuga song stuck in his head, Richie bounced and sang as he walked. Totally oblivious and in his own world as he moved down the housing section of the base. He looked at the clipboard he carried then to the house totally overgrown with weeds. The same house connected to Frank’s well kept one. He shrugged, took a step forward, and nearly shrieked when he felt a hand cover his mouth, his body lifted from the ground. An arm braced him tightly around the waist and carried him at a top speed directly to the back of the house.

He breathed out heavily when he was set down. Richie spun to see. “Frank.”

“Well.”

“I haven’t been in there yet.”

“Can it be done?”

“I don’t know yet Frank. I just got your orders to make this the new guy’s house.” Richie tossed his hands up. “And . . . these places have firewall Frank. What is this peephole shit you want me to make. Is there something about you I don’t know about.”

“Ha, ha, ha. I need to know exactly what he’s up to. If we can’t do the bugging thing with his house . . .”

“You’re gonna watch him shower.”

“Richie!”

Richie laughed. “Sorry. Let me go see what I can do. O.K.?”

“Thanks and leave me a note or something.” Frank told him. “This guys is supposed to be big. And if he’s that big, he knows a lot. If he knows it. I wanna know it.”

“Then we’ll try.” Richie held up his hands, “That’s all I can do. But . . . if he’s that big, I guess you can’t easily get rid of him, huh?”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Are you kidding. Accidents happen Richie. As

soon as we find out what he knows. We'll take him out,. No problem."

Richie didn't say anything. He just walked to the house swaying his head at Frank's stock response of 'no problem'. It never was a problem to Frank when he easily eliminated someone that knew too much. But in Richie's mind, how much longer could an outnumbered Frank get away with it.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The last computer to shut down was off and Dean picked up the folders he had ready to take home. He slipped off his lab jacket and carried it to the coat tree.

"Got a second?" Danny Hoi popped his head into Dean's lab.

"Um sure." Dean looked at his watch. "Then I'm, out of here."

"Early day?"

"You could say that. I'll work at home. What's up?"

Danny grinned and walked over to the counter to meet Dean. "Did you have bills in the old world?"

"Yes. We all did."

"Good. Then you know how to pay them,. Right?"

Dean snickered. "Of course I know how to . . . shit."

"No. No. It's not that bad." Danny laid on the table a signed favor slip from Dean. "You signed two of these. Both, huge if I can added."

"Unfortunately." Dean picked it up and saw what Danny wrote. "Danny." Dean turned serious. "No." He handed it back. "Anything else but this. No."

"But Dean . . ."

"Danny, it's wrong. No." Dean stayed firm.

"You got it all wrong." Danny told him and handed the favor slip back.

"You have Ellen's name written on here. How can I have it all wrong?"

"Because you think I'm asking for sex."

Dean who was about to hand the slip back, stopped. "You're not?"

"No." Danny shook his head. "Not at all. I'm asking for Ellen." He snickered. "For a day."

"A day?"

"Yes. All day. No interruptions from you. Female companionship is what I want. All day."

"No sex?"

"Only if she wants to put out." Danny saw that Dean didn't like his comment. "Kidding Dean. That's all I want. I want to watch a movie with her. Make and eat dinner with her. Talk. I'm tired of hanging out with men. And the women here don't really go for me. Henry's ruined them on that." He leaned to Dean and winked. "Now they think all Asian men are like him. So can I?"

"When?" Dean asked.

"When ever is good."

There was a certain amount of relief in Dean's tone. "I guess. That wouldn't be a problem. Sure Danny. But . . . really, you have to talk to Ellen. I can't give her out."

“O.K.” Danny nodded. “I mentioned it to her already, but I’ll talk again. She thinks it will be fun. Thanks Dean.” Danny moved to the door.

“Danny.” Dean held up the favor slip. “This?”

“Keep it.” Danny waved and moved out.

Dean continued to gather up his things. He smiled thinking about how he sweated Danny’s ‘huge’ favor. But it dawned on him Danny still had one more. A part of Dean felt like he owed the Mafia money. A part of him feared that return favor.

“Dean.”

Dean looked up as he picked his folders up. Henry stood there. “I’m on my way out.”

“I wanted to talk to you. Can we talk.”

“Henry, no. O.K.” Dean moved to the door.

“Dean this is ridiculous. You know that. We shouldn’t be fighting.”

Dean stopped cold. “You went to Bowman. Early. You went there specifically to be with Ellen. Did you not?”

“I did. But . . .”

“But no buts Henry. That was wrong. She’s my wife. I told you no. So you went another route.”

“See Dean, maybe I did start out going to Bowman for . . .”

“Henry.” Dean silenced him. “Start out. End up. It doesn’t matter. Your intentions to start trouble were there.”

“All right. You’re right.” Henry told him. “That was wrong. I was angry with you. So now can we please just sit down and talk.”

“Sure we can Henry. But not now. I’m busy. And . . .” Dean cleared his throat. “You may want to think twice now about asking for an understanding with me. Things have changed.” Dean handed Henry a slip of paper. “Danny pulled his favor.” With a quick grin, Dean walked out.

Henry’s heart dropped when his eyes moved down to the favor slip and he saw written in the favor slot was the name Ellen. “No.” Henry crumbled the favor slip.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Hal was getting pretty good at it. Answering his phone quickly and within two rings. “Captain Slagel.” And then there would be nothing. Oddly, he would look at the phone and hang it up., “Sorry Elliott, Where were we?”

“Tower spotted the scouts coming over the hill.” Sgt. Ryder said in Hal’s office.

“Which group?” Hal asked then held up his hand when the phone rang again. “Captain Slagel. Hello? Hello?” Shrugging, he hung up the phone. “Sorry. Which group.”

“We believe . . .”

“Hold that thought.” Hal grabbed the ringing phone. “Captain Slagel speaking . . . hello? Shit.” He placed down the phone. “We should really contact

Danny and tell him things are not working.

“Perhaps we should.” Sgt. Ryder hid his snicker. “Now, as I was . . .” He cringed. “Go on.”

Hal picked up the phone. “Captain . . . Craig! You asshole.” Hal slammed down the phone.

“Savage camps.”

“Excuse me.”

“Just thought I’d get that information out of my mouth before you fly out the door to kill him.”

“Savage camps. That’s the scouts?” Hal asked.

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Be right back.” As predicted by Sgt. Ryder, Hal flew out of his office to search out Craig.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie was grateful that Auto World’s lifetime guarantee breaks didn’t deteriorate like the rest of society. Of course Robbie would be more grateful if Frank was around to replace the breaks on the jeep. Fixing automobiles was never a chore for Frank, it was a hobby. There were others in Beginnings who could easily do it, but since Frank liked it, he made it part of the responsibility of the head of security. Robbie didn’t quite understand why that was. He guessed Frank saw some demented connection between fixing jeeps and protecting lives. Robbie could hear Frank’s reasoning. Justifying, if the jeep doesn’t work it could die out on a hill, roll down it uncontrollably and into a tree, therefore taking the life of the driver when he was forcefully ejected from the seat. Whatever the reason Frank gave for the privilege of being Beginnings auto mechanic, Robbie was ready to kill him.

Her voice sang out into the garage. “Robbie!”

Robbie’s hands stopped working on the tire. Sarcastically and mimicking Bev’s tone, he called back. “Bev-IE.”

She giggled and stepped to the jeep. “Robbie, have you seen Johnny.”

“Nope.” Robbie sniffed, rubbed the back of his hand under his nose and worked. “And you’re wearing perfume.” He sneezed. “Shit.”

“Are you allergic?” She asked.

“Bev, every Slagel I know is allergic to perfume.” Robbie sneezed again and held out his hand. “Step back near the door and air out.”

“Johnny too?”

“I uh . . .” Robbie rubbed the tickle in his nose. “I guess. Don’t know.”

“Oh, I’ll wash it off then. Have you seen him.”

“I said no.” Robbie dropped the tool. “Fuck. I hate this shit.” He rolled his eyes when he heard her giggle.

“You’re cute.”

“Yeah I am.”

“I have to find Johnny.”

“Then look for him.” Robbie said.

“I have been.”

“Have you tried the cryo lab. It’s feeding time.”

“I did. Andrea hadn’t seen him.”

“No.” Robbie grunted as he made an adjustment. “The cryo lab, not the clinic lab.”

Bev tsked and gave attitude. “I did check there. Andrea said he wasn’t there.”

Robbie stopped working. “At the cryo lab?”

“Yes.”

“Andrea was in there?”

“Yes.”

“Go uh . . . check again. I’m sure that’s where he is.”

“O.K.” Bev shrugged. “If you see him, you’ll tell him I’m looking for him. Right?”

“Yeah sure.” Robbie swayed his head after Bev’s ‘thank you’ and watch her leave. He hesitated before going back to his work, speaking to himself in wonder. “Andrea in the cryo-lab. Andrea isn’t supposed to be at the cryo-lab.”

^^^

“Fuckin door.” Johnny punched in his code, shook the cryo lab door and banged it with his foot. “Shit.” It wouldn’t open. “What is going on?”

“You’re just being delayed in your wait for me.”

Bev’s voice startled him and Johnny jumped a foot in the air and back. “What are you doing down here?”

“Looking for you. Having trouble?”

“It won’t take my code. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Johnny,” Bev laid her hand on his back. “Don’t be this way to me. You’re making me feel really bad. And used.”

From the keypad, Johnny shifted his eyes to Bev and raised his eyebrows.

“Johnny.” Bev spoke his name softly and slipped between him and the door. Her hands went flush on his chest. “I was really, really nice to you yesterday.” Her hand ran down his chest and to the front of his jeans. “Feel like returning the favor?” She bit her bottom lip.

“I feel like feeding the rabbits.” He stepped away from her, and grabbed his radio, ignoring the disappointing glare Bev gave him. Johnny placed his radio on all call. “Dean. Dean you there. Dean come in. Ellen. Dean, anyone. Hello? Dean. Ellen.”

Bev smiled and touched him again.

“Quit that.” Johnny told her. “Dean?” He released the button. Static. “Shit.”

Andrea’s voice came over. “Johnny, Dean’s home. Ellen’s processing the new guys. Try Dean’s phone, he must not have the radio on.”

“Thanks Andrea.” Johnny turned off the radio.

“Why are you looking for Dean.” Bev giggled. “Wanna bring him in too.”

“Yeah right.” Johnny said. “I need his code or the rabbits don’t get fed. And my phone’s above.”

“If I tell you how you can get a working code in less than ten seconds,

will you be with me tonight.”

“You know how to get me a code in ten seconds. One that works?”

Johnny asked.

“Yep.”

“You want me to call Danny. That’s it.”

“Nope.”

“Henry?” Johnny guessed at the ones he knew had codes.

“Nope.”

“Not Danny or Henry?” Johnny laughed. “There’s no one else.”

Bev gave him a snide look. “Bet me.”

“Ten seconds?”

“Yep.” Bev spoke seductively.

“Your on. Ten seconds? I’ll do you if I can get a code in ten seconds.”

Johnny said snidely.

“Radio Andrea. Use hers.” Bev said like the Miss ‘know-it-all she acted to be.

“Ha!” Johnny scoffed in a make fun manner. “Andrea doesn’t have a code.” Johnny started to walk away. “Sorry babe.”

“No, Johnny, I’m sorry.” Bev walked by him. “If she doesn’t have a code. How else was she in here this afternoon. See you later.” Bev walked backwards wiggled her fingers, turned around again and walked away.

Johnny picked up the radio. There was no way Andrea had a code. No way Dean would give her one for the simple fact that he didn’t want Andrea going in the lab without his knowledge and then lecturing him on the sanctity of life. Johnny kept repeating in his mind, the phrase ‘no way’. Bev had to be wrong, she had to be. Johnny hoped with all his might she was, mostly because he didn’t want to be faced with the possibility of welshing on a bet for the first time in his life.

^^^

Her pouting mouth was closed tightly as Maura folded her arms and tried not to look at Joe who sat in her living room with her.

“Are you listening to me?” Joe asked.

She nodded.

“Maura, it is . . .” Joe stopped when Gemma set down a cup on the coffee table for him. “Thanks Gemma.”

Gemma took a moment, worry crossed her age filled face as she watched Joe on the couch with her adopted daughter. “Joe, please don’t badger her.”

“Badger her how Gemma? Christ.”

“Joe!” Gemma scolded. “Do not use that tone around her. Please.”

“All right. All right. I apologize.” Joe looked back at Maura. He began to speak but stopped when he saw Gemma still standing there “Gemma, do you mind?”

“I would prefer to stay.” Gemma said.

“And I would prefer you didn’t.” Joe told her.

“I don’t like you alone with her Joe.”

“Like I’m gonna molest her. Get the hell in the other room and leave us

be. Go.” Joe pointed.

Gemma looked offended, but listened. She guessed there was some safety in Joe. “No badgering.” She pointed and walked out.

“Yeah, yeah.” Joe returned to Maura. “Now, where were we?”

“What is molesting?”

“Um . . . it means uh . . . ask your mother what it means.”

“O.K.” Maura spoke so timid. “I will.”

“You do that.” Joe told her. “Now, back to what we were discussing . .

.”

“I can’t tell you. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

“You can. You can. You can.” Joe insisted. “The game is so important. Please?”

“So is trust.”

“I trusted that you would tell me.”

“And Reverend Bob trusted that I would keep his secret.”

“And I’m trusting you will tell me.”

Maura didn’t even look in debate. Joe’s beckoning wasn’t making a dent. “I can’t. The bible says we should be trustworthy. Those who can be trusted will be given more. Book of Matthew.”

Joe huffed. “The bible.” He stood up. “Well let me give you something to think about little girl. The bible also states, ‘Those who harbor secrets that ill effect others shall be those who burn in eternal damnation . . . Proverbs.’” Joe moved to the door opening it. “Ponder on that and then talk to me.” He gave a firm, serious nod and walked out pulling the door closed with him. Perhaps it wasn’t right to lie to Maura, to give a bogus passage.. But he needed his information. And if manipulating her fear in the bible was the way to do it, then it couldn’t have been all that wrong. Maura was young, she would get over it.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Beginnings, Montana

There was brotherhood of etiquette breached in Dean's mind as he walked into Jason's lab unannounced and uninvited. But yet Dean did go into Jason's lab as requested by Joe. The first thing he did was put into motion the plan to cover his ass if Jason came into the lab. With him he brought the Withers folder tucked with in his lab jacket. He looked around Jason's lab for familiar stack of folders that he always saw Jason carry about and Dean slipped that folder right in with the rest.

"There." Dean let out a breath feeling highly uncomfortable. "Now . . ." He rubbed his hands together. "Where the hell do I begin?"

Before he could answer in his mind, the door to Jason's lab opened and Dean's heart dropped as he thought how it was just his luck to be busted so soon.

Henry walked in.

"Henry." Dean ran his hand through his hair. "What . . . what are you doing here?"

"Joe sent me up to help you."

"I don't need help." Dean walked obviously clueless to the Regressionator.

"Oh really?" Henry moved to him. "You know about pulling up the history?"

"And you do?"

"I know more than you do Dean."

Dean scoffed in laughter.

"I know you're a dick." Henry stepped into Dean's way and to the Regressionator.

"A dick?" Dean stopped laughing. "Where do you get off calling me a dick Henry?"

"Where do you get off trying to piss me off?"

"How do you figure?" Dean asked snidely.

"What? You're gonna deny it?"

"Deny trying to piss you off? Yeah."

"Then what do you call shoving Danny's favor slip in my face?"

"I call it, trying to make you feel bad."

"And you think you're not a dick." Henry said and faced the time machine.

"I didn't say I wasn't a dick Henry. I just wanted to know where *you* got off calling *me* a dick. When you started this whole ball rolling." Dean's tone heated.

"I asked for an understanding with Ellen!" Henry argued loudly.

"And I turned you down and you got pissed!"

"I got pissed because of your attitude about it."

Dean tossed his hands up. "What attitude! You gave me the attitude first and then went down to Bowman to start trouble."

"The reason I went to Bowman early and what happened when I was there, are two different things."

“That is such bullshit and you know it. You went there to start trouble and get me worked up.” Dean pointed at Henry as they stood face to face. “You Henry went down there with every intention of being with my wife.”

“She’s my friend!”

“And you want more!” Dean’s face and loudness of his voice began to match Henry’s. “And because you can’t have more, you stomp like a child and decide you’re just going to take it!”

“I never went down there with any intentions of taking her from you! I went down there to be with her.”

“Be with her!?” Dean moved dramatically as he argued. “And you can stand here and tell me you went there without intentions of starting trouble. I told you Henry. I told you no! I have my reasons. She is my wife! If I don’t want to share her, I don’t have to. Not you. Not anyone, can make me do it. And out of respect for our marriage, you should not push the issue! But you did.”

“You wanna know what your problem is Dean?”

“Yeah, Henry tell me what my problem is.”

“I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“You have it in your little man mind . . .”

Dean’s laugh interrupted Henry. “Look at you trying to be Frank. Talk like him. Act like him. Have Ellen like him.”

“Shut up and let me finish.” Henry’s pointing finger came awfully close to Dean who had stepped closer to him. “You’re afraid!”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid of doing the same things you did before that caused Ellen to turn to someone else. And you know what Dean. You will. You’ll repeat your mistakes, because you’re too selfish not too.”

“Fuck you Henry.”

“Fuck you Dean.”

“And I am not here to fight with you.” Dean turned to the computer of the time machine. “I’m here to find out information and leave. So why don’t you go.”

“No, Dean. Why don’t you go. You’re way out of your league.”

“Me!” Dean reached for the keyboard. “Who’s the scientist?”

“Who’s the one that sets up everything for your scientist ass?” Henry moved into the keyboard. “Now step aside. I’ll do this.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Quit letting your pride get in the way. Let me do it. I know what I’m doing.” Henry placed his hands on the keyboard.

“And I don’t?”

“No.”

“Move Henry.” Dean moved Henry’s hands and laid his on the keyboard.

“No you move Dean.” Henry nudged Dean slightly.

“You move.” Dean stepped into Henry and laid his hand on he keys pushing Henry’s away.

“Dean.”

“Henry.”

“Move.” Henry grabbed Dean’s hands. Dean quickly retracted his hands from Henry and moved them to the keyboards again, when Henry reached

for his hands, Dean smacked Henry's.

Henry gasped and smacked Dean's hands back, within seconds the struggle over who would get to the keyboard became a game of hostile Patty Cake between the two grown men.

It was the one word Joe always used to bring about order. Unfortunately, it wasn't Joe who spoke it in the quantum lab. "Boys." Jason stepped inside.

So startled Dean and Henry were, that they spun around facing Jason, placed their hands behind their backs and looked as guilty as two ten year old boys who were busted reading a dirty magazine in a drugstore.

Jason took a step further in, clearing his throat. "What's going on. Why are you guys in my lab."

Moving an inch away from Henry, Dean spoke up. "I came up to look for the Withers file."

"You did?" Jason nodded. "And why didn't you ask me where it was when I saw you twenty minutes ago?"

"I saw you twenty minutes ago?" Dean nudged Henry when he heard Henry tsk. "You know what? It didn't dawn on me until I needed it which was ten minutes ago."

Henry huffed at Dean's awful lying.

Dean snarled at Henry.

Jason looked at Henry. "And why Henry are you in my lab."

"Helping Dean."

"Helping Dean?" Jason question. "Helping Dean to look for a file?"

Dean let out one single snicker. "Good Henry."

"Like you did any better." Henry whispered. "Asshole."

Jason ran his fingers over his thin mustache, he spoke calmly. "Now that you two proceeded to lie badly and give it away with your childish bickering.. What is going on?" He didn't receive and answer. "How about I take a wild guess." He walked to his main computer of the time machine. "You are trying to get in here? Why?" Still no response. "Wanna take a trip. I thought you boys learned?"

While Jason was speaking, Dean and Henry, both let their minds work separately and both of them thinking they had an explanation started talking. Only, it was at the same time as the other.

Jason closed one eye in a wince at the meshed together voices. "Hold it." He held up his hand. "Using logical deduction. Obviously you don't want to dismantle or vandalize my Regressionator. Because Henry knows this computer is not the link to do that. And Dean, you obviously aren't looking for a file seeing how my files are over there." Jason indicated to the stack. "Now. What is in this computer that you two have to pelt each other's hands like little girls to get to. A bet? No." Jason shook his head. "I think it's something in here. Now seeing you aren't planning any trips. I'm gonna gather it's information on one of two things. The two things contained in this computer. You either wanna see the programming or you wanna see the history. I'll make you a deal. I'll give you one. I've got nothing to hide. You tell me. History or programming. Which is it that I give you?"

Henry and Dean looked at each other and then to Jason, speaking at the same time. "History."

“Here.” Jason laid down in front of a sitting Henry and Dean, a homemade book. “This is the log. It coincides with everything in that print up. And even though you know the history is only printed up until the safeguarding of the time machine, my notes do go further.”

The long table Dean and Henry sat at was covered with papers. Dean pulled the log book to him. “These are all you time trip notes.?”

“Yes. And some that Forrest logged as well. It’s stuff I don’t put into the computer.”

“Thanks.” Dean put the log book between him and Henry as they reviewed. Test trips, real trips, trips Dean and Henry didn’t know about.

“Thank you for this.” Henry said.

“I have nothing to hide. You have any questions, just ask away.” Jason told them.

Dean raised his eyes to Jason. “You do know we can’t tell you why we need this information. We can only hope you won’t say anything to anyone.”

“I haven’t yet.” Jason stated.

Henry looked at him in wonder. “What do you mean, you haven’t yet? We’ve only been here a half hour.”

“I haven’t said anything about my thoughts which I think are the same as yours. That’s why you’re wanting to view it. I have to say, I thought Joe would be the one to finally come up here.”

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked.

“The possibility that there is someone working on the inside for the society.” Jason said. He noticed the immediate pale expressions. “What? You don’t think that crossed my mind. It did. What makes me think it is the way that one trip back in time went. The one on March 6th, where I went as the constant. I got shot. Frank, Robbie and Greg were chased. It was so much like a set up. I got curious.”

“And why didn’t you say anything?” Henry asked.

“Because I know the fingers would point at me.” Jason explained. “Just like now. I was frozen with the society. However, if any of you would stop to think. That trip I joined. If I was with the society, why didn’t I just return alone, look frazzled and act as if all went wrong. No one would be the wiser. No one. It was after that trip that I thought someone set us up. Someone used the time machine.”

“Did they?” Dean asked. “You don’t have any trips logged.”

“See.” Jason leaned over Dean’s shoulder. “The computer history that tells of the trips, that’s the manual history. That is what I put in. This . . .” Jason picked up a stack. “This history just shows the usage of power in the Regressionator. See.” Jason pointed to the date in the log book. “Time trip, but if you look on the power history, you have a power usage.”

Dean nodded and flipped a page. “Wait. Right here is the March 6th time trip.” He moved to the log book. “The power history shows a power usage on March 4th. But you have nothing logged.”

“That’s because I didn’t make a time trip on March 4th.”

“But the power usage says it happened.” Henry said.

“No.” Jason shook his head. “The history showed a power usage consistent with a time trip. We also get the same reading when ever there is a

storm and we lose power momentarily. You can see in the history how often we have power usages and how often they don't coincide with a trip."

Henry checked it out. "I have to see if there was a storm March 4th. We keep track of the weather history."

"There wasn't." Jason interjected. "I already checked. My opinion. Someone came in here and used the Regressionator. This same someone warned George and we got set up. I originally made the machine user friendly in the event something happened to me. Instructions were handwritten so anyone, even Josephine could come up here and take a trip. Unfortunately I did not password protect until I discovered this particular incident. And now the password is obsolete. Safeguard is there."

"Did this suspicion play into your safeguard design?" Henry asked.

"Oh most definitely." Jason answered. "I didn't want to dismantle it completely, but I didn't want us to abuse time travel." Jason shrugged. "So with this person in mind, I decided just to make the process, as you know, extremely difficult. A crew would have to man the time machine and so forth in the present. Before, one person could come in here, set up the machine, go and come back without notice."

Henry nodded in understanding. "Now, if they go back in time . . . one, you can't do it alone, and two, if you go back in time and spend an hour there, you're missing here for an hour as well. Wise move. But why didn't you bring this particular suspicion to Joe's attention?"

"Why would I?" Jason answered. "There isn't any proof someone used the machine. The only proof there is, is this, the power usage. But how good of proof is that when we get the same reading every time the lights go out." Jason shrugged. "Not very. And going to Joe, is bringing accusations against someone, anyone in the community. I don't like to accuse. I just figured it wouldn't be long before Joe started questioning the presence of someone else working for George."

Dean teetered between listening to Jason and reading. "Wait. What is this. There are biweekly trips here. Logged." Dean read from the power history, to the manual history, to the log. "It says on all of these, '*J*' and '*J*' *Camel run*. What is that?"

Jason snickered. "I kind of took the time machine for a little spin for cigarettes."

Henry gasped. "How abusive. Oh my God! Wait . . . wait until I tell Joe." He gasped again and looked at the log. "Jason?"

"Yes?" Jason replied.

"It states here the inclusions on your trip." Henry kept his eyes on the log.

"Yes Henry." Jason explained. "It tells what the trip was and the inclusions are what we took through the machine."

"I understand what inclusions meant but . . ." Henry read. "It states. 'Money, bikes, history disk, letter?'"

"Oh." Jason nodded. "Yes." He closed his eyes. "Blackmail."

Both Dean and Henry looked at him. "Blackmail."

"Yes and don't tell Joe. He doesn't know. Andrea busted the time trips. She was smart enough to figure out that we just kept having too many packs of Camel filters. And knowing that Joe would just blow her off and I would be a tad frightened, she blackmailed me." Jason snickered. "It actually is kind of

funny. All she wanted was to mail a letter to Jake, her husband. I thought it was nice. A little note saying that she loved him. No more. That's all. She put nothing in it that she was from the future."

"So you read it?" Dean asked.

"Them." Jason corrected.

"More than one time?" Dean questioned again.

"Twice and no I didn't read them. It was Andrea. She is one of the most honest women I know. I trust her, why would she lie?"

Upon Jason's answer Henry and Dean looked at each other.

After reviewing until they couldn't review anymore, Henry and Dean left Jason lab, together and a little less hostile towards each other.

"Dean? What do you think?" Henry asked as they headed to Dean's jeep.

"What do you mean?"

"About all that Jason said."

"Hard to say. On one hand he handed us everything. He was open. Volunteered any information we wanted."

"Like he had nothing to hide."

"Exactly." Dean climbed in the jeep and waited for Henry. "But . . . on the other hand. He could have done that and just lied really well."

"You mean about the letters. That's what is sticking to me. The letters. That could have actually been a means of informing the society of our actions." Henry said.

"Could have been. And he could have used Andrea as a cover up story."

"But . . ." Henry paused to think as they started to drive. "But if he had to cover up for the letters, why list them as inclusions at all. We'd be none the wiser."

"Valid point."

"It's so hard to tell Dean. He could be lying. But why pick Andrea of all people right? Andrea. I mean, don't you think his picking Andrea is a little ironic considering she is our number one suspect right now."

"Too ironic. But there is one thing that stops me from believing him fully."

"What is that?" Henry asked.

"It was something Jason said. Did you pick up on it? I did."

"And it was?"

"When he was explaining why he didn't come to Joe with his proof. He said, 'I just figured it wouldn't be long before Joe started questioning the presence of someone else working for George.' Someone else, Henry. He used the words 'someone else'."

"As in more than one."

"Exactly." Dean nodded as he drove. "And what bothers me is, how is Jason supposed to know there is *someone else* working for George, when as far as we know, like everyone else in the community, he doesn't even know about John Matoose."

Henry let out a slow breath, then stared forward in silent thought as

they drove.

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Danny Hoi didn't know what made him start thinking about the old singing duo of Sonny and Cher. He guessed perhaps it had to do with Cindy and Marv. How tall Cindy was and Marv was so little. But Danny found himself singing old songs that he hated whenever he used to hear them.

In the cryo lab tunnels he finished reprogramming a new code into the main door. Since he gave Johnny his code for access to get into to feed the rabbits, Danny felt better having his own. That way Danny, and himself alone could be pegged for being in there when that code was used.

He buzzed himself in and flicked on the lights. He smelt a little of that foul smell that Henry always bitched about but he ignored it. Science fascinated him and so did those huge rabbits Dean harbored in his lab. Waving to them, Danny stepped to the cage as five out of six pounced against the metal that held them in.

"Wanna get out?" Danny snickered and brought his finger closer to the cage in a swirling point. "Ha, ha, you can't." He tormented the furry beasts. Quickly he pulled back his finger and jumped, when he heard the snarl and saw the rabbit reach its pink nose and wide mouth between the cage and snap for his finger. "Holy shit." Then Danny laughed again. He stared to the back and stopped, looking at the last rabbit who did nothing but lay there and stare. "Bored with your life?" He asked it and took a closer look. "Oh." Danny shrugged. "Dead. I'll have to tell Dean." Making a courtesy notation in his notes, he moved to the back lab. The private lab. Danny loved going there. It was to him, so sci fi. He always expected legend Vincent Price to leap from around the bed and scare the hell out of him, then drop him in a vat of wax.

Laughing at his own horror classic thoughts, Danny punched in his code and walked into the secret lab. He moved to the case and pulled it from the wall. He turned on his neat little pen flashlight and placed it in his mouth as he squatted behind the freezer case. "Temperature normal." Danny initialed the clipboard attached to the case, then made his own back up notation on his clipboard. Just as he did, he saw a spider crawl up the back of the freezer, huge and furry. It startled Danny and he shrieked, plopping on to his rear and dropping his pen light. "Shit." He snickered and saw the beam of the light as it came from under the case. Going all the way flush with the floor, Danny extended his arm under the freezer grunting and feeling. As his shoulder met the case, Danny stopped reaching when he saw it on the back of the gauge.

Forgoing his penlight, Danny sat up some and bent the temperature gauge out from his stand. On the back it was there, Tiny, black and adhered. A magnet. "Shit." Danny took it from the back and watched the needle fluctuate up and down from the release of the magnetic pull. The gauge stopped in normal range and Danny looked at the magnet he held in his hand.

He pushed the case out further, retrieved his pen light. Straightened the metal stand of the gauge and returned the case to its normal position. Upon standing up he checked the lock, the freezer was secure.

Tucking the clipboard under his arm he started to leave that back room, still looking at the magnet. He was relieved to see the temperature was still

normal, but puzzled at his discovery. Obviously it was placed in the back of the gauge to hinder any knowledge of fluctuation in temperature when the case was opened or closed. He made a comment in his notes and left the back lab. Danny dismissed the first question that came to his mind. The question of who all had access to the code to the back lab. In Beginnings, no code was ever secure. Someone always gives their code away, no matter how many times they had been told they shouldn't. Danny was culprit. After all he gave Johnny his code that afternoon. But two questions did pop into Danny's mind. Two questions he really wanted to know the answers to. One, how long had the magnet been in place impairing a true temperature reading. And the second. Who in Beginnings would have the mechanical knowledge to know that not only placing a magnet on the gauge would stop it, but know that it only worked on certain types of gauges.

With this question on hi mind, the magnet in his hand, Danny waved to the rabbits--even the dead one--and left Dean's cryo-lab.

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Quitting time. Leaving the leadership in progress and Joe still had to do the cleanup. His desk looked straight,. Files put away and he readied to leave and go home. Or so he thought.

"Got a minute?" Danny popped his head into Joe's office.

"Just that. What's up?" Joe asked.

"This." Danny laid in Joe's hand the magnet.

"O.K."

"I found that."

"Good for you." Joe gave it back.

"No, Joe. I found that on the back of the temperature gauge on the freezer in the clinic." Danny saw Joe didn't quite understand. "Joe. That magnet stopped a valid reading from occurring. It made the needle stick. And not move. And speaking of which, Dean has a dead rabbit in his lab so if you could break the news to him, I'd appreciate it. Man are those rabbits getting so fat I . . ."

"Danny. Stop." Joe halted him. "Halt the temperature gauge?"

"Yeah. Makes the needle stick. What do you suppose Dean is up to making those rabbits so . . ."

"Danny." Johnny stopped his again. "Is the case working?"

"Oh yeah. Temp is good. But, if it did go bad. We don't know."

"Do you think someone got into that case?"

"Um . . ." Danny looked in thought. "Couldn't say. Only Dean could say by opening it up. But . . . we wouldn't know see, because they could have that case opened forever, the temp could drop and we wouldn't have known because of that magnet."

"I'll have Dean check right away."

"Thanks Joe." Danny moved to the door. "And possibly let's but some alarm contacts on that case. That'll be just between you and me."

"I'll get Henry on it right away."

"Joe, between you and me O.K.?"

Joe looked oddly at Danny. "Why would you not want Henry involved?"

"I don't want anyone but us involved. No one is to know that case is armed. Someone with some knowledge rigged that gauge for a reason. And if you want to find out who it is, then the best way to find out is to keep the knowledge of the alarm system to a minimal."

"I understand. Let me give that some thought."

"Thanks Joe." Danny waved and opened the door. As he did, Henry and Dean stood there. Danny snickered. "Sonny and Cher." He laughed again and walked out.

Henry gave a weird look to Danny "I hope he's not calling me Sonny."

"Henry." Dean snapped at him. "I think he was making me Sonny. I'm the shorter one."

"Then he's saying I'm a woman." Henry walked into Joe's office.

"You have that long black hair like Cher." Dean said.

"I don't want to be the woman. You should be the woman. Even though I didn't like Sonny, was a shame how he ran into that tree wasn't it. But . . ."

Joe had enough. "Henry! Dean! I'm leaving is this important. Because I really don't want to stand around hearing you two debate on which one of you is Sonny and which one of you is Cher."

Henry sat down. "We got information at the quantum lab today."

First Joe was going to get annoyed because Henry and Dean just sat and made themselves comfortable. But when he heard that bit of information, Joe perked up. "What did you find out?"

Dean wanted to have his say first, he spoke before the words came out of Henry's open mouth. "Jason gave us the history print up and his . . ."

"Wait." Joe held up his hand. "Jason gave you? Why is Jason giving you anything. You were supposed to sneak the information."

"Dean!" Henry pointed. "He started fighting with me."

"Me?" Dean laughed "No Henry you called me a dick. You started it first."

"You could have let it go. I was making a mere observation."

"I was going to let the fact that you called me a dick, go? Right."

"Grow up Dean."

"You grow up."

"Boys!" Joe yelled. "Why are you two bickering so badly."

"Him!" Henry pointed again. "He's a . . . a . . ."

"Dick Henry?" Dean questioned. "Go on say it. It's your favorite word for me."

"Dick."

"Asshole."

"Boys!" Again, Joe yelled loudly. "Knock it off and get to the point, Jason gave you the . . ."

"Joe." Henry held out his hand. "Dean got physical with me. Look he sprained my finger when he smacked me."

Joe raised an eyebrow to Dean. "You smacked Henry's hand?"

"He pushed me."

"I see." Joe nodded. "And then did you both stomp your feet and begin a flicking match?"

So accusing Henry sounded. "He would have Joe, he's so immature."

"Oh I'm immature?" Dean turned in his chair. "Who's the one starting

trouble because I won't share Ellen?"

"I'm not starting trouble Dean. You're just over reacting."

"Over reacting."

Joe cleared his throat loudly. "I'm going to leave if I have to listen to this shit for one more second."

"He won't share Joe." Henry said. "And I even gave him his sight back."

Dean's hand slammed on the arm of the chair. "I knew it. I knew one day you would throw that in my face. That is so like you. When you had that huge nasty cold sore on your face, I helped you get rid of that. You don't hear me throwing that back at you."

"Ha!" Henry ridiculed. "I hardly see a comparison Dean. I gave you back your sight. I'd rather have a cold sore than be blind."

"Oh yeah! Obviously then you didn't see how bad you looked."

Slam!

The loud shutting of Joe's office door made Dean and Henry turn around and it alerted them to the fact Joe had left.

"See Dean." Henry stood up. "You made Joe leave." He hurried to the door. "I'm gonna catch him and tell him the news first."

"Don't Henry." Dean warned. "We decided to do this together."

"Too bad. I changed my mind. Ha!" With that as his final word, Henry flung open Joe's office door and bolted out. Not wanting Henry to beat him to the punch, Dean quickly ensued behind.

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One main thought ran through Robbie's mind as he made final evening rounds in the community. George better get his ass in gear, and call Dean so they could get a move on in bringing Frank back home. Because Robbie was really getting tired of being head of security. Especially when he had to do rounds like he was stuck doing at that moment. He worked all day. He didn't want to work nights too making sure all buildings, front and back were secure. Besides mind-bitching about Frank and George--and Henry, just because--Robbie bitched about Dan. He was supposed to be doing these rounds. He volunteered to do them when Steve called off for the knee problem Robbie thought was borderline ridiculous. There was no reason Dan couldn't do the rounds. Just because he got hit with a sudden case of intestinal flu didn't mean he couldn't work. There wasn't a bathroom anywhere in center town that would be too far for Dan to run to.

Making his final sweep was when Robbie saw it. The back door to the chapel open. It was odd because the back door of the chapel was never used. No lighting back there made it unsafe--walking wise. It was ajar and according to Robbie's schedule of time, no one was to be in there. Thinking, 'finally a problem to perk things up' Robbie walked in through the door. He passed Rev. Bob's office. The light was on and the door was open to there as well. He peeked his head in and as he retraced it outward he noticed on the desk that the yearbooks were no longer there. 'Bonus' kept racing through Robbie's mind, anticipating telling his father of the guilt move of the yearbooks. But first, Robbie had to do his job. Stepping toward the main part of the chapel Robbie heard the voices. He would have gone further in but instead he moved back.

“I should be leaving now.” Andrea said. “I’ll go back out the back.”

“There really isn’t any need Andrea. But let me walk you. I’ll leave that way too.” Rev. Bob told her.

“Thank you.”

“*Shit!*” Robbie heard them coming and quickly darted back into Rev. Bob’s office.

“Remember Bob.” Andrea spoke as they passed his office. “Some secrets are best kept hidden.”

“Thank you for telling me that Andrea.” Rev. Bob blindly reached into his office, flicked off the light and pulled the door closed. He checked for the lock.

In the dark office Robbie stood cringing at what he heard. There could be a hundred explanations for what conversation transpired between Reverend Bob and Andrea. And Robbie promised himself he would keep that in mind. But first he would finish his rounds and find his father to inform him of what had just transpired.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Hal’s elbows rested on his desk and his fingers massaged his temples as he stared down at the marked maps before him. “Two.” He raised his eyes to the scout that stood before him. “This one here. Wyoming, too small. In Calgary Canada, this one bothers me.”

“Too close to Beginnings.” The scout stated.

“That’s why they keep getting hit. How many did you say there were?” Hal pulled the scout’s notes close to him and squinted his eyes blocking out the tension headache that built.

“Too many to count. It looked like an Indian reservation. Tents. Fires. Animal hides drying out.”

“And what made you and the other scout draw the conclusion that this was a savage camp.”

“Sir?”

“Sorry. Wildcats.” Hal studied the information.

“They had found a man sir and . . . Besides the look we know well, the fact that this man cooked on a fire like a pig gave it way. He was still partially clothed.”

Hal swallowed. “The whole town?”

“What was left of it. As you can see in our report . . .” The scout pointed. “They had pretty much wiped out the buildings outside of Calgary and set up camp.”

“Why there?” Hal thought out loud. “Why there.”

“Mountainous range. Safety. Well hidden. We wouldn’t have found them had we not followed a pack of four back there. They . . . they speak their own language sir. All the details are in my notes.”

“And they didn’t appear to you to be moving?” Hal questioned.

“No sir.”

“O.K.” Hal handed the scout his notes back. “I head to Beginnings in

three days. I need you to work on a very detailed report of both camps. The Calgary one and the smaller one you discovered by accident. I need your observation, approximate head counts. What you saw as weapons. Lifestyles. You hid for two days. You know this. So, as much as you can come up with. I will give you better maps to draw what you and Tom saw as well.”

“Yes sir.” The scout took his notes and nodded. “I will give you what I have daily and should you have any questions just ask. That way I can have the completed report ready for when you leave.”

“Thank you.”

Giving Hal a departure salute, the scout left the office.

Hal looked at the map that remained in front of him. Hal was aware of Savage camps and he knew Beginnings was aware of them also. But Hal was willing to wager, like him, Beginnings had no idea of the organization and size of camp so close to the border of the state they call home.

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Binghamton, Alabama

He remembered the melody well, but the words were a little lost. In Frank’ mind, as he lay on his bed, still awake he replaced those words. He would do anything at that moment to make the visual in his mind more real. Him and Ellen.

He held her in his arms, a memory that had happened years before. Dancing slowly to a song everyone griped was on the jukebox. A song Frank thought was annoying at first, until he started to pay attention to the words. And then the song became special.

Though a tad different in his head, the words still meant the same and the memory frustrated Frank even more. He flung the covers from him and slipped out of bed adjusting his boxer shorts. He moved across the dark room and turned on the light. Rubbing his eyes then scratching his head Frank walked over to his dresser. He caught glimpse of his reflection and his hair that was tossed about. “Fuckin’ hair.” As he patted it his eyes shifted down. He saw what he wanted resting against the mirror. With the song so strong in his head Frank lifted the photograph that he sought out, needing to see. He pulled it closer to his view. His eyes closed only briefly and he let out a long heavy sigh staring at it. “I miss you El. I miss you so much.”

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Beginnings, Montana

Ellen’s head sprang up and then her body slowly rose from her seat on the couch. How odd. She was just thinking of that song and now she heard it? Or was it her imagination? Ignoring Dean and Henry’s call of her name, in a trance-like state Ellen followed the music. It took her from the livingroom into the hall and to Josh’s room. She did hear it. Josh was playing that song. How did he get

it?

Her hand gripped on to the archway outside of Josh's room as she drifted into the slow song that played. Without realizing it, while thinking of Frank, her head leaned into the door frame. She closed her eyes. Thoughts of Frank hit her as she got lost in the music. The feeling of missing him was so strong at that moment her chest actually ached.

Ellen was entranced. She never heard the music stop playing or Dean and Henry call that it was 'her turn' in monopoly. She never heard the bedroom door, if she had, perhaps Josh's shriek of surprise when he saw her wouldn't have started Ellen into screaming just as loud as him.

"Mom." Josh grabbed his chest. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry." Ellen tried to calm her racing heart. "Josh, where did you get that song from?"

"Dad's things. Why?"

"No reason. I just . . ." Ellen's eyes widened in horror. "Oh my God Josh, look at that room."

Quickly, Josh stepped into the hall and slammed the door. "What about it."

"Josh it's horrible. I want that cleaned."

"O.K." Josh shrugged. "I'll do it now."

"Thank you. And I'd better get back to the game." Ellen pointed. "Clean the room before Dean sees it."

"Yep." Josh nodded, waited until Ellen disappeared into the livingroom and he went back into his room totally forgetting about the glass of water he left his domain for in the first place.

Henry watched as Ellen took her seat on the couch and reached for the dice, rolling them. "You don't get a double turn El."

"I know." Ellen moved her piece. "I won't last too much longer anyhow. I only have forty-six dollars left."

Dean readied to take his turn. "That's because Henry cheats."

Henry was appalled. "How do you figure that?"

"You bought up all the property right way." Dean said.

"It within the rules Dean." Henry scoffed. "Read them and you owe me forty dollars rent."

"See." Dean tossed him the money. "You bought everything you landed on. Now no one can build houses but you. Because neither me or El has a grouping."

Henry snidely took the money. He took his turn pleasingly landing on his own property. "Too bad. If you weren't so cheap you would have bought some property the first time around."

"I ended up in jail." Dean argued. He watched Ellen take her turn. "El, you Ok?"

"Yeah." Ellen rolled. "Shit. How much Henry."

"Only twelve El." Henry held out his hand happily.

"Look at you." Dean said with disgust.

"What?" Henry responded.

"Why are you still here?" Dean questioned.

"I'm visiting El."

Dean rolled and moved his piece. "Ha! No Henry rent. And you've been here since dinner. Go home."

Henry gasped. "Oh my God are you rude. Tell him El, he's rude."

"Your rude Dean."

"Don't listen to him El."

"Listen to me El." Henry told her. "He isn't very nice."

"Ellen take your turn."

"Don't yell at me." Ellen slowly took her turn.

Dean tossed up his hands bewildered.

"See how you are Dean." Henry pointed. "That green monster called jealous is making you really mean."

"I am not jealous Henry. Who am I jealous of?" Dean asked.

"Me." Henry rolled then moved his piece.

Dean laughed.

"Seriously Dean." Henry stated. "Next thing you know, I'm gonna have to start calling you Cindy."

Dean hesitated in his turn. "What?"

"Cindy." Henry said with fact. "You know instead of Marcia, Marcia, Marcia. You'll run around going . . . Henry, Henry, Henry."

Dean couldn't help it. He laughed harder. "That wasn't Cindy who said that. It was Jan."

"It was not." Henry argued. "It was Cindy. She was the baby of the family and was jealous of her older sister."

"Henry learn your Brady Bunch. It was Jan. She had the middle child syndrom. You can relate to that. You had it."

"I hope you aren't insulting me Dean. I can't help it I am a middle child."

"I'm correcting you. It was Jan."

"Cindy."

"Jan." Dean raised his voice.

"Cindy." Henry saw Ellen stand up. "El, who was it."

"Laurie." Ellen spoke softly and walked into the kitchen.

Henry scratched his head. "Laurie?" He looked at Dean. "Was she a Brady?"

"Wasn't she the cousin that came to live with them?"

"No that was Oliver." Henry said. "Laurie?" Like a light lit above his head, Henry shined. "Oh no El." He saw he return with her coffee mug. "You're thinking of the Partridges, Laurie Partridge. I don't think she even knew Marcia." Henry finally took his turn again. "I never liked that show. You Dean?"

"No. Reuben got on my nerves."

"Oh my God, that is so true. El isn't that . . . El Are you sure you're all right?" Henry asked her.

Ellen smiled. "I'm fine. I wanna quit though. My head hurts. You guys finish." She picked her pile of money and handed what was left to Dean. "You can have this."

Aghast, Henry's mouth dropped open when he watched Dean take it. "Now, see, that's cheating."

"No it isn't Henry." Dean combined Ellen's money with his. "We're married. Read the rules. When playing with your spouse and your spouse leaves

the game you can take over everything they have. Community property.”

Henry immediately grabbed the box lid.

Ellen’s mind was elsewhere and she knew exactly where that was. Not on a board game, but on Frank. Wanting to be alone with her thoughts, she leaned down to Dean on the floor to kiss him. She paused when she heard the knock. “I’ll get it.” She walked over to the front door. Upon opening it, she saw Robbie and Joe. “Hey.”

Joe stepped in and kissed Ellen on the cheek. “You look tired.”

“I am. I’m going to bed. Why are you guys here.”

Joe pointed to Dean and Henry. “I need to speak to them.”

“Good luck.” Ellen said. “They’re stuck in the seventies.” She smiled at Robbie, knelt down and kissed Dean, said goodnight to Henry who didn’t hear her and walked slowly off to bed.

Robbie shut the door. “Kids in bed?” He moved to the couch and sat down.

Dean looked up. “Yeah. What’s going on.”

Joe explained. “We have something to discuss with you. Henry. Henry? Henry!”

Henry looked up from his box lid. “I’m not finding that rule Dean. Anywhere. Oh hey Joe. When did you get here?”

Joe grunted, reached out and took the box lid and tossed it aside. He held out his finger to Henry before he could whine. “Seems we’ve had very informative night in Beginnings Gentlemen. We had the Jason information. We had the revelation of the rigged temperature gauge and now . . . we have what Robbie is going to tell us. Robbie.”

Robbie usually grinned when he knew something no one else did. This time he didn’t. He looked so serious and a little sad. “Seems like the investigation may be taking more of a turn than we thought it would. Unfortunately it’s in a direction none of us want.” With solemnness to his demeanor, Robbie began to inform all of his newest revelation.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

September 23

Beginnings, Montana

In the little Beginnings cemetery, Dean and Ellen sat on the grass at the foot of the tiny grave of Brian. The sun was bright and it warmed them some whenever the fall wind wouldn't kick up.

Ellen released the strands of grass from her hand as she faced Dean. "Do you realize that it was one year ago today that Frank found out you and I had slept together?"

Dean looked shocked to hear this. "You're kidding right?"

Ellen shook her head. "Nope. One year."

"Whoa." Dean looked at the grave. "A lot has happened in that one year."

"Yeah it has."

"El, do you remember when you wanted to get pregnant with Brian?"

"Very well. Dean, you were so appalled that I came to you and asked you. You were funny now that I think about it."

"No." Dean grinned. "What is funny is how I actually agreed to it."

"We wouldn't have had the time with Brian if you didn't."

"Yeah." The smile fell from Dean's face. "I have to tell you El. It was one of the hardest things I did. You know, pretending he wasn't mine. Especially when we knew he was."

"But you got to know him as your son. And we didn't even think that would happen."

"Who would have known Frank would have let me.."

"Frank." Ellen's head dropped.

"I know you've been missing him." Dean reached out and grabbed her hand. "I miss him."

Ellen raised her eyes. "You do?"

"Hell yeah. You don't think I miss fighting with him?"

"IS that why you fight with Henry now?"

Dean's mouth opened some. "You uh . . . you could say that. El, since we moved to the Frank subject. I need to talk to you."

"Sounds serious."

"It is." Dean nodded once and moved closer to her. "I feel . . . I feel it won't be long before George places that call." He watched her expression totally change. "We have to face it. I will be leaving Beginnings soon."

Ellen closed her eyes. "I hate the thought of that. I hate the thought of you going out there. Trusting your life to him. How do we know?"

"We know because Frank called that one day. Frank's alive out there El. They have him, and me going is the only way to get him back. You know it."

"I know." She spoke sadly.

"And even though I know it's gonna be another war between the two of us over you. I really can't wait to see him."

"You do know I owe you for doing this." Ellen looked deeply at him.

"You don't owe me anything. I'm not just doing it for you. I'm doing it for the kids, for Joe, Robbie and though I'm not allowed to tell Frank about him,

Hal.”

“He’s going to be surprised.” Ellen said.

“Yeah he is.” Dean smiled. “Especially with Hal being at the break-in to the society camp. Hal can be so dramatic.”

“Look at his uniforms. But they are cool.”

After a moment of silence, Dean spoke again. “There’s something else I need to talk to you about.”

“I don’t like the tone.”

“It’s important.” Dean’s fingers played around with Ellen’s hand. “Even though, you and Robbie and Joe, know why I am leaving Beginnings, the people in the community do not. They can not. They can not even suspect that I am up to something.”

“I know this.”

“Good. I’m glad you do. Because here’s what you need to do for me.” Dean’s voice softened. “You are to act like everyone thinks. You are to turn your back on my memory because you think I went to the society.”

“Dean I can’t do . . .”

“El, no arguments, OK? Listen to me. The people in this town, they’re tough. They are not going to trust a single thing I have worked on since I am gone. If you stay dedicated to me, they won’t trust you either and el . . .” Dean moved his face close to hers. “We worked too hard on what we have to let it go to waste. To not be trusted. Now maybe some of the stuff . . .” He snickered. “But for the most part, our work is for the good. And you have to continue it. You have to act as if you do not want my name spoken around you. Dean who? Hurt? Not Ellen. Not you.” Dean swayed his head. “You have to get cold. You have to act cold. Do you understand?”

Ellen slowly nodded in agreement.

“You have to move on fast as if you are saying. ‘I’ll show him’.”

“Dean, come on that is pushing it. You’ll be back.”

“I know.” He kissed her. “I will and This whole thing will be over when I am. Frank will be back, the community will know why I left, and we’ll pick up where we left off. Until then . . . you disowning my memory. You disowning me and moving on is the only way to secure people’s trust. They have to continue to trust you El in order to trust our work. You may have trouble gaining trust. You may have trouble at first, but I know you’ll show them.” He winked. “I know you won’t let it bother you.”

“Fuck them if they don’t like me.”

Dean laughed. “See, that’s sort of the attitude I need you to take. But only against me,. As far as Beginnings is concerned I betrayed them I don’t want people looking at you and thinking, ‘ok, Dean did, when is Ellen going to turn?’ Understand.”

“Yes.” She spoke in a low whisper. “You have put so much thought into this.”

“How could I not? I’m leaving my home. My children. The woman I love all for . . .”

Ellen had to interrupt the serious moment with a snicker. “All for a man you’ve done nothing but fight with for seven years.”

The corner of Dean’s mouth raised and so did his eyebrow. “Hey, you’re right. What the hell am I doing this for?” he joked, scooted closer to Ellen and pulled her to him.

“For normalcy again.”

Dean stared out to Brian’s grave. “With all that’s gone on, that could never happen. But we can try. We can try.”

Ellen rested her head on Dean’s shoulder. They stayed there for a little bit more, before returning back to their work.

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“Now see. That just don’t seem fair.” Marv the part time security guard drove the jeep in toward sector thirty-two. The area located on the cliff behind the under developed section. “How can Ben from fabric have gotten Neville points.”

“I’m telling you.” Dan radioed him back. “He pricked his finger trying to free Todd’s shirt from the sewing machine and he got points for acts of heroism and getting injured.”

“Oh that is so lame.” Marv bitched.

“Why are you griping. You’re getting points for going out there. You got pulled in the lottery.”

“True. But still. Ben is right up there near Robbie and you. I’m telling you he bribes Trish.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. Did you see that new shirt she wore. Ruffled like Neville’s. She said she made it.”

“How do you know she didn’t?” Dan asked.

“Please.” Marv scoffed. “You’ve seen Jeff’s uniform when she sewed the button on his cover., Crooked when he fastened it up.”

“True.”

“And I’m here.” Marv turned off the jeep. “Be back in ten.”

“Hey when you head it that field, watch out for the killer pigs.”

Marv laughed. “Uh!” He screamed. “Joking.” He turned off his radio and hooked it on to his belt. “Here piggy, piggy.” He amused himself heading into the field. His short body lost in the high grass “Oink. Oink.” He snorted a few times. “This little piggy went to market.” He slapped his own leg in such hysterics. “Wait, here’s one. Little pigs, little pigs let me come . . .” Marv stopped walking, stopped talking when he heard the shuffling of grass. One quick movement of the weeds and he jolted his body to the sound. “Hello?” Another sound and Marv saw the tops of the grass sway. He lifted the tranquilizer rifle, turning slowly and walking backwards to the jeep. He hadn’t taken two or three steps when he watched the grass in the field move as if a wind picked up and touched only in the brush. Faster he moved backwards reaching for his radio. The moment he reached to press in the button and bring it to his mouth was the moment he heard the squeal. “Shit. There *are* pigs up here. Son of a . . .”

A swishing of the grass. A single high cry squeal. Marv turned to run and then Marv . . . disappeared with a painful scream into the high thick grass.

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With a wide grin and a cigarette clenched between his teeth, Joe warmly shook Hal's hand and gripped his son's arm upon Hal's approach to the utility buildings. "Goddamn I hope I never lose this feeling when I see you."

"Hey Dad." Hal leaned down and kissed Joe on the cheek. "How's the last day going?"

"Smooth. No problems. Let's go in my office." Joe pointed the way. "Did you bring those men?"

"You know it. Danny all ready?"

"He's getting things together." Joe opened his office door. "Supplies and such. He's gonna set up mini tracking. But it's not going to be linked to us yet. At least they'll see trouble coming ahead of time. And they can give us a call." Joe walked behind his desk. "Sit down."

"Thanks." Hal smiled and took a seat.

"Jess told me to ask you about those Bowman updates for Our newspaper."

"Have them." Hal patted his chest. "So what is this 'Beginnings Day' event I was asked if I was attending?"

"Sort of like our community thanksgiving. Big party. First Monday in October."

"And they're all getting ready now?"

"What can I say, they're party morons. They have nothing better to do." Joe leaned back. "So how long am I graced with my son's presence?"

"I'm leaving in the morning. I don't want to uh . . . use up any reasons that I'll need to be here for when we start prepping for the Frank rescue."

"Valid point. So are staying at the Comfort Inn tonight."

"Yep. Dean and Ellen's house. What time is the party."

"What party?" Joe asked.

"Your retirement party?"

"Hell." Joe waved his hand. "I'm not having a party."

"Dad, you mean you're going out quietly."

"Pausing quietly. I'll be back. Trust me. And I'm not allowing anyone to throw me a party. Christ I hated in the old world when you would take a guy out to lunch for his last day, everyone pitches in gets him a gift and he changes his mind. Nope, rather just be quiet until I come back."

"And how do you think Henry will handle the leadership position."

"He'll be fine." Joe said. "I'm around and when I am not. Robbie is. Should be smooth. Now . . . enough catching up. Business. What do you have for me about the savages."

"You aren't gonna like it."

"Try me."

"The maps and reports are with my things, but in a nutshell." Hal began to explain. "Two bigger ones. One in Wyoming housing about a hundred savages. The other about three hundred miles north west of here in Canada. Big dad."

"How big?"

"Three hundred maybe. My scouts said they go in and out of there so much it was hard to keep count."

"Any signs of movement?" Joe asked Hal.

"None. But . . . how long till the warm weather sets in . . ."

“And they migrate.”

“Exactly.” Hal pointed. “Question. Will they make Beginnings their destination or Wyoming.”

“The Wyoming camp could be their scout party moving ahead on a planned trail to somewhere.” Joe shrugged.

“Are they that smart.”

Joe nodded. “Smart enough to take out our tracking. And if their smart enough to do that, my main concern lies with if they break through the tracking and make it to our perimeters. I can very easily see four of them dying at the beams while the others race through.”

“Man power is good to take them out.”

“Man power is very good. We’ll keep an eye on them through surveillance and start watching for movement.”

“Excellent.” Hal looked at his watch. “Well I better get going to meet Danny. We’re supposed to take the men and supplies down to Jordan.”

Joe stood up. “You’ll be by for dinner right?”

Hal grinned and his eyes closed slightly.

“What?” Joe looked at him oddly.

“Just hearing you say that makes me remember how many times you would say that to me when I was a teenager or in the service and stationed close to home. You’d say it every time you’d see me. God, you used to make me feel guilty for thinking about turning you down.”

“Do I still?”

“Hell yeah.” Hal moved to the door. “And I will be by for dinner. Thanks Dad.”

Joe walked around his desk, leaning on it and with a look of pride on his face, he watched Hal leave. Momentarily, Joe pondered why he felt so good when he saw Hal. Why he liked his son so much. Hal was doing well. He built a strong community. Hal was strong and had qualities that Joe admired. Joe decided he was going to enjoy the feel of basking in his son’s achievements. Because he realized that in time, the ‘feel good’ would fade. ‘Captain Slagel’ or not, Hal was definitely one of his sons. And it wouldn’t be long until Hal annoyed Joe just as much as the other two sons he saw all the time.

^^^

“Survival training?” There was so much doubt in Leonard’s voice as he asked Frank.

“Yeah. Survival training.” Frank rocked back in his chair.

“For this long?”

Frank laughed. “Well you can’t call it surviving if you go out there for an afternoon.”

“Where did they go?”

Holding up a finger Frank leaned into the desk. “I gave them minimal supplies and took them uh . . . about seventy-five miles south.”

“Lt. Merrick agreed to this?” Leonard asked.

“Asked for it. Loved the idea.” Frank closed his eyes and twitched his head to the right. “Gosh I miss him.”

“And it doesn’t worry you that they haven’t returned?”

“Um . . . no. I sent a secret scout after them. They’re fine.”

“Can I speak to this scout?”

“Secret scout.”

“Yes. Can I speak to him?” Leonard questioned.

“No.”

“Why?”

“He’s the secret scout. Sorry.” Frank cupped his hands behind his head and leaned back. “You know if they aren’t back in a week, I’ll go get them.”

“And what of . . .” Leonard reviewed his papers. “Lieutenant Harris.”

“What about him?”

“Is he on survival training?”

“Absolutely.”

“Lt. Harris went on this seventy-five mile survival training mission?”

“No man is immune to it.” Frank stated with fact.

“And they must survive in the wilderness? Walking back?”

“Yes.”

“What if they run into trouble?”

“Survival training.” Frank had all the answers.

“And you expect Lt. Harris to keep up?”

“If he wants to be an officer.”

Leonard seemed a bit disturbed. “Colonel Slagel. Lieutenant Harris was given the ranking for his brains. Obviously not his skills considering he has a prostheses for a right leg.”

Maybe Frank’s lip shuddered a little, but eh was certain Leonard didn’t see his shock or hiding of laughter. “Lt. Harris insisted on going.”

“I see. When does the next batch of survival trainees go out.”

Frank raised one eyebrow looking at Leonard, imagining him in the large hole him and Richie dug for those ‘survival trainees’ . “Um soon.”

“Well hold off on them until the regiment of CME’s arrive. The president is sending a hundred maybe two, to serve as camp guards while you train the other men for strategical purposes.” Leonard began to leave.

“Wait.” Frank called out. “I have this amnesia thing. CME’s?”

Leonard hesitated in his walk out. “Cyborg mechanically enhanced soldiers.”

“Oh!” Frank closed his eyes, snapped his fingers and smiled. “That’s right! That’s what they’re called. Whoa. Over a hundred SUT . . . such . . . such . . . a wonderful plan.” Frank grinned again.

“Glad you agree. Good day colonel.” Leonard didn’t return the smile, he just left the office.

Frank snarled as Leonard left. “Asshole.” He brought his fingers to his lips and began to bite his nails. “Shit. That many SUTs?” He spit out a nail bit, rocked some more in his desk chair and submerged himself into a ‘Frank’ thinking mode.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Shaking his head, Jess rolled the tires up the small grade to the level

section. "This is ridiculous." He complained out loud. He hoisted them up because rolling them wouldn't be an option through the bush and crate filled wall Robbie created first instead of last. He emerged into the new clearing made. One not two days early was made free of high weeds, trees and anything that made the area remotely look like one day it could be a forest.

The clearing wasn't that big, half the length of a football field. Located on the hill used for the security training area. The new clearing lay beyond the wooded area that lined behind the barrack style housing. Quite the trip to be carrying items. But Robbie assured Jess, they were there to stay. And after the Neville competition was over with, he was sure they would incorporate the new obstacle course into part of their security regiment.

Jess somehow didn't buy it. Robbie was creating a nature meets plague ravished and looted street appearance. Jess couldn't figure out how the three cars Robbie busted the windows to and brought in off the highways could be at all useful to Frank when he returned.

Jess spotted him, actually Jess heard Robbie first. The metal banging that carried up on the hillside as Robbie's foot slammed over and over into an open car door. Seemingly trying to free it from its hinges. He chuckled at Robbie's determination and vain attempt to do something nearly impossible. Then Jess stopped walking when the door flew off. "Shit."

"Hey." Robbie ran the back of his hand over his forehead. "Man, is that all you can carry?"

"Um yeah Robbie. You made me carry them nearly a half a mile up a hill. You are gonna hurt yourself."

"Nah." Robbie shook his head and took the tires. "This is looking pretty good huh?"

"Yeah." Jess watched Robbie lay the tires down in that part of the obstacle course. "Robbie."

Robbie brushed off his hands as he stacked the last two tires. "Yeah?" He moved to Jess. "Ready to head back?"

Jess walked with Robbie to the crate and bush wall. "The whole point of running through the tires is to trip you up a little. Not a lot. Why are some of them stacked three high?"

Robbie shrugged. "Have to add the challenge."

"Not all men in this community are over six feet."

Robbie grinned. "Yep. I know." Robbie slipped his tall body through his homemade wall.

"What if Dean was competing. He'd never be able to do it."

"Yeah he is little." Robbie snickered. "I'm surprised we actually have jeans that fit him."

"We don't." Jess commented. "Any of the jeans he wears that aren't really old are huge on him and are baggy in the butt."

"Whoa." Robbie joked as he walked side by side with Jess. "Noticing Dean's butt are we."

Jess smiled. "Hey, how can I not."

"Telling ya Jess, Ben from fabrics will kick your ass if you go after his dream man."

"Ben?" Jess spoke in such a upbeat, kidding manner. "Ben has nothing on me. Please."

Robbie slowed down in his walk when he saw a jeep pull up to the

security training area. “Hey look, speak of the devil, it’s Dean.”

“What’s he doing up here.”

Robbie shrugged. “Don’t know. But . . .” He nudged his shoulder into Jess’ as they walked. “Now’s your chance. He has that cute butt.”

“Nah.” Jess nudged back. “I’d rather save myself for you.”

Robbie laughed and walked ahead of Jess. “Hey Dean.” He trotted up to him. “Joining the elite force?”

Dean had a snicker on his face as he walked up to Robbie, his hand in the front pocket of his baggy jeans. “Is Robbie training 101 any better than Frank training 101.”

“Hell yeah. I’m the man.” Robbie smacked himself in his own chest. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you.” Dean said. “I was looking for you at the same time as Joe. He needs to speak to you. And when Henry said you were here I . . .”

“Aw!” Robbie whined loudly. “Henry is such a snitch. I swear.”

“Well, we won’t discuss Henry. But . . .” Dean held up his hand. “I’d like to discuss something else. So I told Joe I’d come up here to get you. Thought maybe I’d ride you to Joe and we could talk.”

“Sure.” Robbie nodded. “Jess keys are in the other jeep.”

“What jeep?” Jess asked.

“The one I drove up.” Robbie stated.

“You drove up. I thought you walked. I walked.”

“Then you’re a glutton.” Robbie laughed. “It’s parked behind the barracks.”

Jess tossed his hands up. “Thanks Robbie.”

“Ha.” Robbie grinned. “Let’s go Dean.” He stepped to the jeep with Dean, stopped and took a step back to Jess, winking. “Don’t be jealous, I know you want him.”

Jess, with a smirk, flipped Robbie off. He stood there shaking his head with a chuckle, as Robbie and Dean pulled away. Grateful that he at least didn’t have to walk back down to Beginnings, Jess got a second wind and energetically trotted to the behind the barracks. He stopped cold. “Shit.” He tossed back his head. “That shit.” Jess shook his head. Robbie had lied. There was no jeep.

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There were several things that ran through Robbie’s mind as he rode with Dean back to the line of utility buildings. One, what Dean had to tell him had to be serious. Dean had that look on his face and he was silent as if he was getting it together in his mind. Two, did Robbie do something wrong. And three, Dean had to be the slowest driver Robbie ever rode with in Beginnings.

“Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“Are we pretending we’re teenagers and cruising for chicks because we just aren’t finding them up here.”

Dean laughed but a nervousness came through. He slowed the jeep down to a stop.

“Uh-oh..”

“What?”

“You aren’t gonna hit on me are you.”

“No, I’m . . .” The shock of what Robbie asked Dean hit him. Dean swayed his head to Robbie.

Robbie raised his eyebrows a few times.

“Robbie, stop that.”

“Kidding you. What’s up.”

“I need to talk to you very, very seriously for a minute. I need you to be serious.”

“O.K.” Robbie turned in his seat to face Dean. “Go on.”

“This conversation has to be had because I just don’t know when I am going to leave. It could be today, tomorrow, or even next week. I need to have this settled.”

“Dean, is you need reassured that I can come up with a plan that will get you back. Don’t worry. I’ll stake my life I can sneak a team in there and get you and my brother out.”

“Thank you.” Dean gave Robbie a closed mouth look. “I need reassured. But not about that. I need reassured about Ellen.”

“You don’t want me to touch her.”

“No! Touch her. I mean, no, I mean.”

“Huh?”

Dean grunted in frustration of himself. “Two things I need from you. I am coming to you Robbie because I think, no I know, your the only one to do this.”

“I’m lost.” Robbie tossed up his hands.

“When I go. Things may get bad for Ellen. They may get real bad. When it gets around that I left Beginnings for the society, the people in this community aren’t gonna take to well to that. They may not trust her. They may look at her differently. Treat her differently. Not want anything to do with her as a doctor or scientist. All those meds we made, all that work. May not be taken. But even more than the work, I worry about her and my kids. You know. And . . .” Dean’s fingers tapped on the wheel in antsyness. “You are such a strong figure in this community Robbie. Whether you believe it or not. People love you. They trust you. They really, really like you.”

“You want me to make sure people know Ellen is not part of the society. Help them to realize to trust her. It’ll be easy Dean. I’ll convince them she didn’t know. Jenny won’t turn her back on Ellen, and that is a key to the women here. Don’t worry.”

Dean smiled slightly. “With you telling me that, I just may not worry. Now . . .”

“There’s more?”

“Yes.” Dean took a deep breath. “I told Ellen today I want her to act as if she hates me when I leave. Act as shocked as everyone else. Be convincing. Disown me. Move on.”

“Good idea.”

“Glad you think that way. I need you to do the same.”

“Be convincing, hate you? Disown you?” Robbie fluttered his lips. “Piece of cake, I already do.” He nudged Dean’s leg. “Lighten up. I’m joking. Of course I’ll play the part.”

“And help her move on?”

“Of course. To where?”

“To you.”

Silence. Dead silence.

Robbie cleared his throat. He took a long shuddering breath in. “To uh . . . to me?”

“Can you play *that* part as well Robbie?”

“Act like her new lover?” Robbie’s corner of his mouth raised in a partial grin. “Dean . . .”

“I’m serious. This has nothing to do with being lovers. This has everything to do with taking care of her while I’m gone. You can’t just pretend to be there. You have to be there. Will you be there for her?”

“Dean, you didn’t even need to ask that. I mean, I had every intention of watching out for Ellen and your family.”

“Everyday.”

“Yes.” Robbie nodded. “Everyday. I’ll fill in. But tell me why you are coming to me? Any other man in this community could play the part. Any other man can, Henry also. Why me?”

Den leaned back slowly in the driver’s seat. He stared out at first then swayed his head to Robbie. “Because in the event that I don’t return, or Frank doesn’t return. I want to know that Ellen is in strong hands,” Dean closed his eyes. “That someone capable is taking care of her and my family. That someone that truly cares for her will be there. Also . . .” Dean opened his eyes. “You’re a Slagel. You are part of her heritage. And even though you have no child bathing skills, and you have this weird way of showing kids how to make food fun, you’re the only man I know that can raise mine and Frank’s kids the way they should be raised. If Frank and I aren’t here. You are the only man I want raising my kids.”

Robbie didn’t know what to say. He really didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t any idea Dean thought that highly of him and it shocked Robbie to the point that no words came out of his mouth when he opened it.

“Robbie? You’ll do this for me.”

Robbie only nodded.

He sighed out a breath and then Dean reached for the gears. “Whew that’s over with.”

“Dean, just know I will give my all and do my best to protect and watch over your family.”

“Thank you.”

“But only until you and my brother return.” Robbie paused and smiled. “Then you two can go back to fighting over them.”

An emotional chuckle came from Dean after his serious talk. He shook his head, shifted the jeep in gear and drove toward the utility buildings. This time a little faster.

^^^

“Here he is.” Joe said of Robbie when he walked into Joe’s office with Dean.

“What’s going on?” Robbie asked as he shut the door. His eyes shifted to his father then to Dan who stood there nervously. “What?”

Joe raised his eyebrows. Speaking seriously. “Tell him.”

Dan bounced a little. “Robbie . . . you know how Marv won the opportunity to earn Neville points.”

“Yeah.” Robbie placed his hands on his hips and nodded.

Dean took a double take. He watched Robbie listening to Dan. The stance, the facial expression. If he had a goatee and dark hair he’d be his brother.

Dan swallowed so harshly it was evident. “Well . . .” He cleared his throat.

“Go on.” Robbie motioned his head again. “Didn’t he make the rounds?”

Dan looked at Joe. Then back to Robbie. “Marv . . . Marv didn’t come back Robbie. We lost radio contact with him.”

“You checked the community?” Robbie asked.

“I’ve been checking since he failed to radio me back.” Dan said.

“Which was when?” Robbie inquired.

“Three hours ago.”

From looking down to Dan who was five inches shorter than he, Robbie lifted his head slowly. He had a stone cold expression on his face as he moved his eyes to his father and back to Dan. Then Robbie, without saying anything, took the keys that were still in Dean’s hand and he barreled out of Joe’s office.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Still clenching his pain filled hands, Richie look side-eyed at Frank. “What?”

“Salicain.” Frank stated sitting with Richie in a wooded area off base. “You have to get into that lab and find a vial marked Salicain.”

“I have to seek medical attention for my hands Frank. Look.” He showed Frank the huge blisters on his palm.

“Oh quit being a baby. Think about how all those callouses that you’ll get, will protect them the next time.”

“A fire wall. Frank. I broke seven drill bits making your peep holes in this scientists home.”

“And the secret door?”

Richie huffed. “That was the easy part. I still don’t think your big body will fit through it.”

“Then *you* will.”

Richie closed his eyes. “Now what is this Salicain and why do I have to get it.”

“Salicain is this drug that paralyzes you.”

“How do you know this?” Richie asked.

“Because they used it on my father, George did. And they did it at a really bad time in my life. Right after I found out Ellen and Dean had the affair.”

“Man, must have been a rough time for you.”

“Yeah. And you know Dean didn’t help matters. He moved her right into his house.”

“The man’s an asshole Frank. I don’t even want to meet him.”

“It’ll be painful.”

“Like my hands.”

“Oh knock it off.” Frank slapped his hands down on Richie’s palms that were being showed to him.

“Ow Frank. You ass.” Richie retracted his hands to protect them. “So what are we gonna do with this Salicain.”

“Get that Leonard guy under control. I can’t just shoot him.”

“Gees, Frank,. Why not?” Richie said sarcastically.

“Oh no Richie, I can’t. I’d like to, but I can’t. Too risky.”

“And hitting him with this drug isn’t?”

“Fuck no.” Frank shook his head. “They’ll think he took a stroke. That’s what it makes it look like. You get it and I hit him with it. Easy.”

“For you to say. Do you realize what you’ve been doing? Shooting Society leaders. Officers. Freeing soldiers to make them walk on foot. Seventeen hundred miles.” Richie paused in amazement at Frank’s scoff. “A big scientist is supposed to be coming here. And you have me drilling peep holes and making secret passages in his home. Now you have me sneaking into a lab to get a drug called Salicain.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “You got it.”

“Oh, we are gonna be so busted one of these days. We’re gonna end up with a bullet hole in our heads like Lt. Merrick and everyone else that has fallen victim to the Frank rampage. Busted Frank. We’re gonna get busted.”

“Nah Richie.” Frank stood up from the ground. “You’ll be busted. I’m too smart.”

“That’s what you think.” Richie stood also, following a laughing Frank. “Then whose idea was it to come out here and cover up this mass grave thing you have happening.” He looked back at the mound of dirt that was covered with bushes and such.

“Mine.”

“No it wasn’t . . . Frank.”

“Mine.”

“Frank . . .” Richie huffed out and hurried to catch up to him, speaking softly under his breath as he followed Frank. “I wonder if Beginnings even wants him back. Frank!”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

He knew it, Robbie did, as soon as he reached the area that Marv was supposed to be checking. The jeep was still parked where he had left it. That was all the proof Robbie needed.

Stopping his own jeep, Robbie grabbed the shot gun from the back and held it braced between his hands. He ignored his fathers call, only once responding to it with a very soft ‘Shh’ as Robbie headed into the field.

He wanted silence, both in his headset and around him. If something had gotten Marv then Robbie didn’t want it to hear him. Trying his hardest not to make a sound, Robbie moved through the high grass toward the black cloud

of flies that he saw ahead. His heart prayed that it was the carcass of an animal and not what his gut was telling him the flies were feasting over.

His soft tromping foots steps and the buzzing of flies were the only things heard. Robbie would take a step and stop. There was a slight echo to his walk as if someone or something was moving at the same rate as him. Step. Stop. Robbie heard it again. A slight rustling of the weeds. Hearing that and moving to the flies, Robbie pumped the chamber of the shot gun holding it ready.

Closer and closer he drew, his heart pounding the whole way. He could smell something, a rotten smell, the smell of iron predominantly strong. Robbie let every sense he could kick in as he moved causing a disturbance amongst the insects. And his senses did kick in when he felt a slight change in the ground under his boot. Stopping cold so close to where the flies were, he slowly lifted his boot to see what his foot had landed on. And when he looked down, Robbie felt the throbbing in his throat. What appeared to be an eye, veins and muscles still attached, lay on the ground. His left hand reached out, fingers extending and grabbing on to the high grass and separating it.

Squawk. Flap. Nailed!

Robbie was as startled as that vulture he frightened. It flew at him, pecking at his cheek in a offensive move before squawking once more and flying off.

Shaking his head, Robbie brought the back of his hand to under his eye but before he could wipe away the blood that flowed, his hand stopped. And Robbie stared cold, emotionless into the field to what he saw laying there . . . Marv.

^^^^

Jordan, Montana

There was no way, Hal thought, that the town of Jordan was going to look like what he had accomplished in Bowman. No way. He looked around at the busted store fronts. The concrete in the streets that nearly disappear beneath the weeds that poked through it. A dead town, no life and Hal cringed in thinking that he was going to be living there.

In the midst of serious thought as he watched the Beginnings truck unload not only his men but supplies they would need a well, Hal did smile. He knew if he pondered long enough the powers that be would send him a sign that this move was a good one. And they did.

Hal grinned.

Looking absolutely miserable as he carried gear was Craig. If nothing else, Hal and Bowman would now be, Craig-free, at least for a couple months.

^^^^

Beginnings, Montana

There were too many questions surrounding Robbie's hurried return

back into Beginnings and race into town. No words did Robbie speak, no emotion graced his face. He had a look of determination and that was the report that Joe got from everyone that tried to stop him. He didn't respond to radio calls, he said nothing.

Joe was not going to be one of the numbers waiting for Robbie to say something. His gut told him something when he got word Robbie was leaving town again and Joe, following his instinct, headed up to the perimeter exit by the underdeveloped section. And Joe was right. Robbie pulled up in a jeep, he stopped it and stepped out.

"Down the U.D." Robbie stated into his headset.

Joe didn't see it at first and then he did. "Robbie." He approached his son. "What is going on."

"Dad, grab Henry meet me right here in ten minutes."

"Marv?" Joe questioned. "How bad is it?"

Robbie held up the black plastic. "I have a body bag Dad. I probably would be better off with about twenty lunch sacks. I'll be right back."

"I'll go with you." Joe called out as Robbie moved through the final perimeter.

"No!" Robbie held his hand to his father. "Just get Henry and Stay . . . stay right here."

"Be careful."

Robbie gave a single nod to Joe and walked at a quick pace, rifle in one hand, body bag in the other through the final perimeter.

^^^

Hillside, Nebraska

It was a late afternoon nap and one well deserved for Kyle, Link and Ted. Not much was left of their shoes or their bodies as they found a soft place to lay and break for longer than they usually did.

Link had some trouble sleeping, fear of what could get them kept him awake, Ted's snoring didn't help either. And just as he slipped into that in between world, he heard the confusing sound of it and he sprang up. Was it real? Or was the sound like one of those voices that slip into your brain and say your name just as you fall asleep.

He rolled on to his knees and scurried himself up listening. "Shit. It is." Half out of it and exhausted, he mustered every bit of his strength to race after the horse sound. It had to be one of two things. Wildcats or . . . Link dropped to his knees. It was the later. UWA scouts.

"Hey!" Link called out waving out his hands. "Hey!"

The four horse stopped and turned around. When Link saw that he was recognized, his head and arms dropped to the ground in complete and utter gratefulness.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The body bag made a weird sound as Robbie laid it in the back of the jeep with Joe's help. It didn't plop like a dead body, it sounded more as if it were a half filled sack of potatoes.

Joe watched as the bag just conformed to the small back of the jeep area "Jesus Christ." He looked at a horrified Henry.

Robbie reached for the zipper, his hands still stained with blood. "You can say that again Dad, have a peek." He unzipped the bag some, not much.

Joe's jaws clenched and twitched. His eyes widened and his face lost all expression.

Henry stumbled back covering his mouth. He spun frantically and faced the other way in his vomit frenzy.

Robbie closed the bag. "Get Dr. And Dr. Hayes out of their Ozzie and Harriet World Dad and get them to the morgue. Those two are handling this. I have a feeling they're gonna know exactly what did this and if not, they're the only two in this entire community sick enough to not let it phase them."

Joe raised his eyes to Robbie. He didn't say anything, only reaching for his radio to get a hold of Dean and Ellen. Not much ever shocked Joe, but this certainly did.

^^^

Their pace was fast and there was also something upbeat about Dean and Ellen's walk from their home to the clinic as well.

"El. You have to stop looking so excited."

"I know." Ellen kept her arms close to her. "But you have room to talk."

"You're right. I can't help it."

"Me either. This is the first real autopsy in so long you and I get to perform together. On a person."

"And it must be good if Joe is calling us in. He sounded . . . weird."

"Yeah." Ellen agreed as they approached the clinic. She stopped as Dean held the door open for her. "He said it wasn't pretty."

Dean grinned."Yeah."

"Dean, the smile."

Dean bit his bottom lip, thought horrid thoughts and walked into the clinic with Ellen. Joe, Robbie and Henry waited. "What's going on?" Dean asked.

Joe was about to speak when his eyes shifted to Ellen. "Why do you look so happy Missy Jane?"

Ellen quickly folded her arms and widened her eyes. "Who me? Not me. I'm not happy."

"Yeah-yeah. Robbie, tell them."

"I took the body down to the morgue and got him on the table." Robbie said. "All is set up for you Dean."

"And I want a complete report or . . . a complete report is needed." Joe pointed. "Conclusive as best as you can get."

"What happened to him?" Dean asked.

Joe lifted his shoulders and let them drop. “That’s what you’re gonna tell me.”

Ellen leaned into Dean. “Look how pale Henry is. It’s bad.”

Dean cleared his throat. “We’ll uh . . . get on it right away. El?” He took hold of her arm and led her away.

Joe watched them. He saw their enthusiasm, they did terribly at hiding it. “Morons.” He shook his head. “Henry you have to see what you can do setting up another fence somewhere to cover the open perimeter. My God we can’t take a chance of whatever got him, getting in here.”

“Joe we would have done that years ago, but you know how hard that is.” Henry explained. “The perimeter is attached to the top of the cliff on both sides. The only area not covered is that cliff, they’d have to rope down or roll. What ever animal it is would die if it rolled down.”

“I guess your right.” Joe said.

“And we have to be careful putting fences in the U.D., the kids play out there. The only time we could safely run a perimeter beam in that area would be at night.”

Joe let out a slow breath. “I guess we should just wait and see what Dean and Ellen say. Then we can inform everyone the details of Marv’s death. We also will know what kind of animal we’re dealing with and what we have to hunt down.” Joe looked down at his watch. “And . . .” He clapped his hands together. “I have one more thing to say. Henry . . .” Joe laid his hand on Henry’s shoulder. “It is officially your problem now. I’m retired. Later gentlemen.”

“Joe!” Henry called as Joe walked away. “Joe you can’t just . . .” Henry looked at Robbie. “He left. There has to be a rule or something stating you have to deal with problems arising while you’re leader. I don’t want to deal with this.”

“Tough Henry.” Robbie raised his eyebrows. “It’s yours Mister . . . community leader.” Repeating his father’s actions, Robbie laid his hand on Henry’s shoulder. “Good to have you aboard Chief.” Like his father again, Robbie turned and left.

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“So official like.” Ellen fixed the headset on Dean’s head that was attached to a recorder. “Look at you.”

“You too.” Dean nodded to Ellen, both of them in hospital scrubs.

Ellen stepped closer to the table, she peered at the blue sheet. “Want the honors?”

“You can have them.” Dean motioned his hands out.

“Thanks.” Ellen moved closer. “Something looks odd about this.” She reached for the blue sheet, hesitating when she noticed at the bottom of the table a small bin covered as well. “This doesn’t look right. Does it.”

“Let’s just take a look.”

“O.K.” Ellen pulled away the sheet. “Oh wow!”

“Oh shit!”

Their shocked and excited ‘ohs’ went back in forth in an overly dramatic call in repeat manner as they both stepped away from the long table. What Ellen exposed was not the body of Marv as they remembered. What

looked more like a side of beef butchered one too many times, lay on that table. Wide and stretched it was. The only recognizable remains that linked the body to a human, were the left side of Marv's face, his right forearm and hand, and both feet. Bones exposed, flesh shredded and hanging out. The torso cavity looked as if something had exploded from within it.

Ellen let out a weak sounding whistle. "Well."

"Well." Dean walked to the table with her.

"This doesn't look like your usual animal attack now does it?"

"Could be a lion."

"Or tiger."

Dean snickered. "Or bear."

"Oh my." Ellen held in her laugh. "We should do this."

"We should. Let's get serious."

"O.K." Ellen looked at Marv. "Dean, should we be feeling really bad at this moment?"

"Um . . ." Dean cleared his throat. "As citizens of Beginnings, we should be in mourning. But as scientists, there isn't any room for emotions."

"You are so right. And I have to tell you. As a citizen of Beginnings, I'm gonna have a hard time mourning. I never liked him much."

"Me either. Weird guy."

"Bad hair." Ellen touched with the tip of her fingers the section of hair right above the exposed brain. "He reminded me of that guy. Bad singer slash mayor."

"Sonny Bono." Dean peered closer to Marv. "Yeah he did."

"Look at his face Dean." Ellen folded her hands behind her back. "Kind of smashed. I wonder if Sonny had that look after his tragic accident." She snapped her finger. "Oh! How coincidental. Sonny died in the woods and so did Marv."

With a thinking 'hmm' Dean stopped looking at Marv's face. He shook his head and snapped back to medical thoughts. "We should be getting to work."

"Yes we should. Let's be professionals now." She handed Dean a pair of gloves, then she herself placed a pair on. "Your recorder set?"

"Hold on." Dean pressed in the button. "Ready. What's in the bin El?"

"Let's see, shall we?" She walked to it reaching for the cloth and lifting it. "Oh. Body parts."

Dean peeked. "Yep."

"Who am I Dean?"

"Ellen." Dean looked at the body.

"No Dean, look at me . . . Dean who . . . Dean look at me, Dean. Look . . . Dean. Dean."

"El. All right. Go on."

Ellen cleared her throat and lifted the cloth from the bin again. Drastically she gasped and swallowed twitching her head to the right and closing her eyes. "The uh . . ." She cleared her throat again. "The victim appears . . . who am I Dean?"

"I give up."

"Gees Dean." She dropped the cloth. "I'm Richard Dreyfus in the movie JAWS." She giggled. "I feel just like him. Watch. Or how about this scene?" She grabbed Marv's right arm and bent it up. "Remember *that* scene? The beach?"

“Ellen cut it out.”

Ellen made her voice high pitched. “Hi Dean.” She waved the hand.

“Ellen we have to be serious. O.K.?”

“O.K.. Let’s do this . . . Dean?”

Dean slowed in his exam. He looked at Ellen. “What?”

“This is the exact spot you laid at when you died. I can still see how pale and blue you . . .”

“El.”

“Yes?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I really don’t want to discuss my death right now.”

“O.K., just flashing back in this creepy place. Go on.”

“Thank you.” Slowly Dean let out a breath as he began to examine Marv, speaking into his recorder. “September 23rd autopsy on Marv Davidson. We have a thirty-two year old male, height five foot nine, weight, approximately 150 . . .”

“Probably close to ninety now.”

“El.” Dean silenced her. “Victim appears to be . . .”

“Richard.”

“El.” Dean reached for a pair of tweezers as his eyes zoomed in.

“What do you see?”

“Get me some specimen trays. Saliva is found predominantly across the thoracic region . . .” Dean reached down his other hand and shut off his tape recorder. “El, look at this.”

“It’s not something I need to be the bionic woman for does it?”

“No come here. Hit that light.”

Ellen set down the specimen trays and turned the spotlight on. “What am I looking for.”

“Look at these bite marks.” Dean pointed to the sternum.

“Straight through the bone.”

“Yeah. Jagged too.”

“Definitely an animal.”

“Looks that way. From what I’m seeing and I’m not really giving it my all, it looks like several bite marks, several different bite marks. We should really get some shots of this.” Dean commented. “That way we can actually work for a while on it.”

“Want me to run and get the camera?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah. But first, tell me what is in that bin.”

Ellen lifted the sheet. “Looks like a large portion of the stomach, definitely the spleen, uh . . . a portion of the small intestines, an eye. An ear and. . .” Her hand reached in feeling. “I think this is a really, really tiny piece of the heart.” She pulled it out.

“Yeah it is.” Dean told her. “What do you notice about Marv.”

“Aside that he looks thinner and . . .” Ellen saw Dean’s scolding face. “All the fleshy areas are gone.”

“Exactly.” Dean said. “He wasn’t just torn to shreds and killed . . .”

“He was eaten.”

“Go get that camera so we can get some shots before we start removing all the parts that are left.”

“Right away.” Ellen backed up and removed her gloves.

“And more specimen trays as well.” He heard Ellen say something as she left, but Dean was too engrossed in the breastbone or what remained of it. Dean moved the shattered bone some, lifting it so as to peer into the empty cavity behind it. He could see the spine as well. Looking around at the gutted and cleaned out torso, Dean’s eyes saw the slight difference in shading and he stopped. He adjusted the light above his head. “What do we have here?” Without looking, he reached up for his tweezers bring them and his hand into Marv’s body cavity. He pulled it from its lodging in the third thoracic vertebrae. It was small, very small, but if Dean’s knowledge served him right, he knew exactly what he found a piece of . . . a tooth. It wasn’t a very strong tooth or sturdy. And it didn’t look as if it were a piece to a large tooth. But what baffled Dean at that moment, wasn’t the tooth, but how something that possessed it could have done as much damage as it did. Unless what did the damage wasn’t the teeth, but the being itself. Perhaps torn apart with paws or hands. But seeing how Frank wasn’t in Beginnings, the theory of someone torn to shreds by hands, was eliminated

Dean paused in his postmortem exam to laugh at his Frank thought. He set the piece of tooth in the specimen tray and decided before going any further, he’d wait for Ellen to return. He wanted that camera present and he wanted to tell her about his amusing thought. So, alone in the room with a torn apart Marv, Dean waited.

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“Hey Uncle Robbie.” Johnny was pouring a drink at the social hall when Robbie, seeming so down walked in. “You O.K.?”

“Um . . . yeah..” Robbie blinked several times, as if his eyes were hurting. He looked at how fast Johnny downed his drink. “Easy.”

How odd Johnny thought that was for Robbie to tell him. “O.K. easy. Any news on Marv?”

“Nothing yet.” Robbie spoke the line he had told everyone. How horrible it was that Marv had died, how much worse it was with the way Marv had lost his life. Figuring he’d wait until Dean and Ellen told him more. Confirming or denying what killed him.

“I stopped by the morgue.” Johnny told him. “Before I came here.”

“Really? And?”

“They wouldn’t let me in there.”

“Not at all?” Robbie asked.

“Nope. I hung outside the door . . . Uncle Robbie, they seemed like they were having a good time in there.”

“They love their work.”

“Hanging tonight? Wanna shoot some pool?”

“Um” Robbie’s hand slid down his face. “No, just grabbing a drink and heading home.”

“O.K.”

Robbie motioned his head behind Johnny. “Looks like you have company anyhow.”

Johnny looked over his shoulder. “God, she won’t leave me alone.”

“You’re supposed to be getting close to her anyhow John, you told us

you would.”

“Yeah I know. It just makes me feel really creepy thinking about being with her.”

“Why?” Robbie questioned.

“Um . . . um. Don’t know.” Johnny finished his drink. “Just thinking about it being her I guess.” He poured another. “Maybe I’ll go torture her.”

“Yeah, you do that. I’m gonna just sit here.” Robbie watched his nephew draw up an egotistical look and waltz over to his table with a semi ignore Bev attitude. Pouring himself a drink, Robbie slid on the stool. He looked once over his shoulder to Johnny and Bev. How trivial Johnny must think him and Joe for having him find out what’s going on with Bev over the Dean and Ellen situation. How trial it sounded to Robbie. But he had to keep reminding himself, that the ‘Dean and Ellen’ reason was only the front story. The real reason being to hopefully eliminate or point a finger at her when it came to George.

“That’s it.” Johnny slammed down his drink. “Bev, if you are going to continue to stare at me, I’m leaving. You’re undressing me with your eyes. I feel so violated.”

“You owe me.”

“Owe you what?”

Bev raised her eyebrows a few times. “For the other day.”

“Oh really.” Johnny stood up and readied to leave. “Well see, that’s the problem with you.”

“Wait. What’s the problem with me . . .” Bev scooted from her chair hurrying her way to a leaving Johnny. “Johnny.” She caught up to him. “Johnny.”

“I’m leaving.” He walked by Robbie laying his hand on Robbie’s back. “See ya Uncle Robbie.”

“John.” Robbie swam in his drink.

Johnny smiling and not letting Bev see, left the social hall.

“Johnny.” she ran to catch him. “Wait.”

“What?” Johnny stopped walking.

“What did you mean, that’s the problem with me.”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You don’t. Did you just tell me in there, that I owe you?”

“Yes.” Bev stood before him.

“Well that’s not the way things are run with me. *I* say what goes on. Who owes who. Get it?”

“But I . . .”

“No buts.” Johnny stayed firm. “I call the shots. I say what gets done. I tell you what you do, not you tell me. If your up to anything, I’d better damn well know ahead of time what it is and why you’re doing it.”

“But Johnny.”

“And as far as sex goes. If I want to sleep with you, I will. No deals, and trust me babe, when I want it, I’ll find you and you’ll deliver no problem.”

Bev folded her arms. “Really? Well I don’t think I like your attitude.”

“Oh well.” Johnny tossed his hands up.

“And you are so wrong.” She spoke snide.

“I’m wrong? Who are you to tell me I’m wrong?”

“I will tell you you’re wrong. The only way this will work is if you own me? Let me tell you something Johnny, no one owns me.”

Johnny just watched her, nodding arrogantly.

“And I say who I sleep with and when. Not you or anyone!” She poked him in the chest. “I don’t even know why I chased after you in the first place. You’re cold. Mean. And a complete waste of my time. I wouldn’t sleep with you now if you got on your hands and knees and begged me.”

“Baby.” Johnny placed his face close to hers. “You want me so bad, it wouldn’t take anything to get you to sleep with me anytime and anywhere.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Right.” Bev huffed.

“Watch.” Johnny grabbed a hold of her face, pulling Bev with a slight force up and into him. Wide and sexual he placed his mouth over hers. Pressing it hard and deep to hers, moving his mouth and kiss in a sweeping motions over and over, holding on to her face as he stepped her backwards.

And against everything she told him. Bev responded.

Further and further into the dark alley between the social hall and the next building Johnny led her. Moving her and moving her until her backed her up against the social hall wall. His mouth released from her as he grabbed onto the collar of her shirt and he leaned his body in a bent manner directly against hers. “What were you saying?”

Bev’s mouth reached for Johnny’s lips, but he kept pulling back from her.

“How bad do you want it Bev.” Johnny’s waist moved into her and his hand glided with a firmness up her leg. “How bad?”

“Bad.” She breathed heavily trying to kiss him.

Almost biting, Johnny laid his lips to under her ear, running them down hard to the nape of her neck. “How bad do you want me?”

“I want you Johnny.”

“And what will you do for me?” He asked deeply, moistening her neck with his mouth, breathing hard into her ear.

“Anything.”

On her words, Johnny’s hands slid down both of her legs then back up lifting the skirt she wore high. He began to kiss her again, one hand secured under her skirt and the other undoing his own jeans. Bev’s hands went to his hair and to his neck. The moment she held his head and locked him in that kiss, was the moment Johnny braced his hands behind her thighs, lifted Bev up, drew her legs around his waists and slammed her with a sexual drive into the aluminum side of the social hall.

It was Tuesday so the social hall was nearly empty and quiet. Not even the juke box played for the men who just were there to relax. Perhaps that was why Robbie heard it, lifting his views from his drink, up to the noise. Actually Robbie heard it at the same time as the other seven men in the hall. All of them looked around at the steady dull metal banging that they heard.

Like a metronome, only picking up speed with each few seconds that

passed. Bang-bang-bang-bang.

“What the hell?” Robbie stood up from his stool. Everyone had stopped what they were doing. “What is that?”

Cole set down his pool stick. “Sounds like it’s coming from outside. Maybe it’s Denny and Josh playing around.”

Robbie looked at his watch. “Probably, this is their hanging out hour.” He returned to his stool, grabbed his drink and shook his head at the increasing rate of the banging. “They think their funny. Ignore them.”

With Robbie’s reassurance that nothing was wrong, everyone went back to what they were doing. And to even show the annoying teenage boys, someone placed on the jukebox.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

September 24

Beginnings, Montana

“Sacriligious.” Ellen stated as she set down both metal boxes on the cryo lab counter.

“No way.” Dean shook his head setting down two boxes as well.

“I’m telling you Dean. That is what Joe’s word would be. Sacriligious.”

“It’s science El.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think he’d take to kindly to us keeping parts of Marv.”

“Ongoing investigation. In the old world it sometimes took months to get autopsy results.” Dean justified. “However, Joe won’t say anything. He’s stepping back for a while remember? Henry’s leader.”

“I can handle Henry.” Ellen winked. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Hmm.”

“And as far as Joe is concerned. Bet me he still takes charge of us. Because we know the truth.”

“You may have a point. Let’s get this boxes unloaded into the spare freezer until the man of the hour shows up.”

“I know someone is talking about me.” Danny Hoi walked through the open cryo lab door.

Dean motioned his hand to Danny. “Man of the hour.”

Ellen smiled. “Hi Danny. So punctual and quick you are showing up so soon after our request.”

Danny stood taller. “Want to make the best impression my first day as Head of Mechanics.”

“And you are.” Ellen said.

“So, what did you guys need?” Danny asked.

“Help.” Dean stated. “Care to follow us. We have to put these boxes away.”

“Sure.” Danny shrugged and trailed them. “What’s in the boxes.”

Dean looked back at him. “Body parts.”

Danny laughed. “You guys are funny.” He saw how serious they were as they walked into the freezer room. “You guys are joking right? Right?”

Dean opened the freezer case. “Um yeah sure Danny.” He set his box inside and took the ones Ellen handed to him. “El, we’ll unpack these later.”

“O.K.”

Danny couldn’t get his eyes off the boxes Dean put away. “So uh . . . what kind of mechanical favor do you need.”

Dean closed the freezer lid. “Here I’ll show you.” He pointed to the door in the littler of the two back rooms. “This closet.”

So serious Danny looked as he raised one eyebrow and deepened his voice. “Is it giving you problems Dean? I know how closets can be.”

Dean snickered as he opened the closet door. “See, it’s big.”

Danny peeked. “Yes it is.”

Shaking his head with a smile, Dean raised his eyes to Danny. “No, I want to know how cold you can make this closet for me.”

“Excuse me.” Danny looked into the empty closet. “How cold? Did you say how cold?”

“Yep.”

“Whoa.” Danny checked it out. “You mean like air-conditioning cold or freezer cold?”

“Freezer cold, refrigeration.” Dean explained.

Danny started to laugh then stopped. “You’re serious. Why would you two need walk in refrigeration in this . . . never mind.” He whistled. “It could take some work. We’d have to seal it, add a new door, a lot of things. A separate compressor and coolant unit.”

“So you can’t do it?” Dean asked.

“No, no.” Danny held up his finger. “The word ‘never’ didn’t cross my lips. Tell me exactly what you see for this closet.”

Shop talk, and it was something Ellen didn’t want to be privileged to. She’d rather deal with the five remaining rabbits. “Dean, Danny, I’m just going to leave you two to this. I’ll be in the other room.” Getting a nod from Dean, Ellen walked from that room into the main cryo lab. She stopped when she entered and spoke in such awe. “Oh wow.”

Henry was there. And she couldn’t even recall the last time she saw him looking so handsome. He wasn’t in his usual blue work pants and white shirt uniform he typically wore during the work day. He wore a black tee shirt, tucked into his baggy, but tailored baggy, jeans. A wider black belt around his waist. And to top it off, Henry was having a good hair day.

“Henry.” Ellen stepped further into the lab. “Look how good you look.”

Henry grinned with a tilted head. “Thanks El. Joe said as Leader I should always look nice. I’m not one to wear those button down shirts you know.”

“I like this much better.” Closer she stepped to Henry. “Where did you get the pants?”

“Danny got them.” Henry stated. “Small favor slip. But I asked him if he saw anything in Jordan that could be leader clothes to grab them and he did.”

“You can just tell Danny had the fashion sense in the old world.”

“Oh you know it. He has that hair thing happening.”

Ellen reached up and touched Henry’s hair. “And so do you today.”

Henry enjoyed the compliments. “But . . . do I look official.”

“Very much so.”

“Good. Because I’m here on business.”

The smile left Ellen’s face. “There goes the wind from my sail. I thought you came to see me.”

“Did you want me to be?”

“Looking like this? Yes.”

“O.K.” Henry leaned forward and kissed her quickly. “How about I leave after this and come back in to see you.”

“O.K., let’s get the business out of the way.” Ellen spoke upbeat.

“Where’s Dean?”

“In the closet with Danny. Don’t ask.”

With a grin Henry looked to the back. “Oh yeah? All right, we’ll do this with out him. Autopsy. How’s it going?”

“Great. I mean . . . sad. I mean, going.”

“Anything conclusive?”

“Nope.” Ellen shook her head. “Not yet. Soon though.”

“I thought for sure you had results. You gave us the body back to bury.”

“We don’t need the body. We took what we need.”

“You what?” Henry asked shocked.

“I mean we took the test . . . ran the test we needed to run. Sometimes they take a long time Henry to be final.”

“O.K. You’ll let me know when everything is done?”

“As soon as I know, you’ll know.”

“Good.” Henry said.

“Are we done with business?”

“Yes.”

“Walk out Henry and come back in. I want to pretend you came to see me looking that good.”

“O.K.” Henry hurried out of the lab, knocked once and walked back in. “Hey El.”

“Henry!” She grinned. “What a surprise. Are you here to see me?”

“You know it.” He moved close to her.

As Ellen giggled she heard Danny and Dean’s voice come into the lab. She looked over her shoulder. “Hey Dean, look who came to see me. Henry. Doesn’t he look handsome today.”

Dean gave a look as if to tell Ellen, ‘you actually want me to answer that?’. “So Henry, what brings you down here?”

“Ellen.” Henry answered.

“Figures.” Dean said. “Thought maybe you were here on official business considering it’s your first day and all.”

Henry smiled a little. “No way. I came to see El. Hey El, I’ve been working since five. You wanna take a break with me?”

“Oh sure Henry. I’d love to take a break with you. Can we walk around the community?”

“Yeah.”

“Bye Dean.” Ellen moved to Henry. “Be back.

“El, our work?” Dean asked.

“Of course it is Dean.” Ellen giggled and left the cryo lab with Henry.

“And she exits.” Dean’s hand raised and dropped.

Danny, who was being quiet--a rarity--snuck up behind Dean and whispered. “When I was in highschool I used to date this girl. She dumped for this geek the moment he became class president.”

“Danny.”

“Nope.” Danny stepped back. “I’m seeing some similarities here Dean. If you need to talk.”

“Sorry, but I fail to see the similarities. This is hardly highschool and she’s hardly my girlfriend Danny, she’s my wife.”

“True.” Danny grinned. “But this is Beginnings. The place that makes Payton Place look like an episode of Leave it to Beaver.”

Dean just grumbled a response and walked back to the smaller back room.

Danny snickered and followed Dean fully intending on irritating him

more.

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“I woke up, I showered.” Joe explained as he walked with Hal towards distribution. “I had my coffee and cigarette and I even read that damn newspaper. Which I have to admit, I’m liking. I looked at my watch and remembered. Hey, you’re in distribution today. That opens two hours later.”

Hal smiled. “Forgot huh? So what did you do? Go back to bed?”

“Nope. I opened my front door when someone started to knock. And I let Henry in my house. Christ, he was there asking me if he was dressed all right. Was he having a good enough hair day. Would people like him. How should he act.”

“Don’t you worry about him?”

“Nah,” Joe shook his head. “Henry will be fine. Trust me.”

“I have to Dad, because until you emerge from retirement . . .” Hal let out a worried breath. “He’s our leader as well.”

Joe had a sneakiness to his chuckle as he laid a hand on Hal’s back and led him into distribution. There was an extra bright spot that made retirement worth while on this day. Joe didn’t have leader responsibilities to deal with and because of that, he got to spend that time with his son before Hal headed back down to Bowman.

^^^

Robbie held the unscheduled security meeting up at the training area. Solace, sadness, that was the air of demeanor with everyone as they sat around Robbie while he talked.

“Some sort of wild animal.” Robbie explained. “Is what Dean told me this morning. As of yet, they are trying to pin point it and . . . if there is more than one of them. If that’s the case, we are gonna have to begin a hunt. We can’t take a chance of whatever that got Marv, getting in here. Now . . .” Robbie flipped a page of his notes. “Marv died in the line of duty. Marv also died while gathering points for . . . for the Neville competition. The Neville Committee approached me this morning and wanted me to present you with these suggestions. Either we give Marv an honorary Neville win, or we make him Neville and the competition continues. Handling it like the former Miss America pageant where the winner takes it from Marv. Feedback?” Robbie saw Dan’s hand raised. “Yes Dan?”

“So, he would be the first official Neville?”

“Yes.” Robbie answered.

“Hmm.” Dan swayed his head. “O.K., not like I’m being a dick or anything but . . . But, Marv was a nice guy in all, but he was no Neville. And I don’t think it would be fair to you or me or anyone else who is up there in Neville points to make him a winner just because he died.”

“True.” Robbie stated. “However, wouldn’t it be the kind and brotherhood thing to do?”

Dan fluttered his lips. “Kind is one thing. Brotherhood is another. Robbie, this is competition. Come on. Do you want to go down in History as

someone that was the *second* Neville competition winner. Or, someone that lost to Marv?"

Robbie knew the answer. He knew what he wanted to say. "O.K., lets put it to a vote. Fair is fair, and it is Marv's memory we're talking about. O.K., all in favor of letting Marv be Neville or reigning Neville, give me a yeah." Robbie listened to the grumbles and clearing of throats. He watched his men lower their heads, shift their eyes and pretend they were ashamed. "All right. All against, give me a big 'ooh-rah'." Robbie cringed and his ear rang when the intrusion of voices shouted out at him what they wanted. And even though they were all fond of Marv, they were more fond of being Neville. "O.K." Robbie tossed up his hands. "Neville competition continues and, we'll . . . we'll uh mention Marv's name at the ceremony. Gentlemen, you can return to work, anyone wanting special detail to deal with this animal see me."

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Binghamton, Alabama

With visions flowing through his mind of his own decaying body lying in the woods somewhere, a portion of his head missing, Richie held tight to his tool box and walked through the laboratory door that he hesitated going. They wore white lab coats, worked on placing together lab equipment and the new scientist all spun on their swivel chairs to look at Richie when he entered.

Did he look like their next subject? Richie wondered staring back at the faces. "I uh . . . I got a work order for a cooler." He didn't receive any answer. "O.K., I'll just uh . . . figure it out. Thanks." No one pointed him in the right direction and no one said a word, they returned to their work as Richie waltz through. Richie had to give it to Frank. He argued with Frank telling him that the bogus work order would be a major slip up. These were highly intelligent men, they would realize they didn't request one. But Frank insisted that even though they would wonder about the order, they were all too pompous to question it. How embarrassing it would be for scientist 'A' to ask Richie in front of the others and have scientist 'B' stand up, humiliating him by saying there is a problem with a cooler.

As obscure thinking as Frank's thinking was, it got Richie through the main lab and to the back where all coolers were. The large room was filled with them and Richie cringed. How was he going to find this vial with all those long freezer. Stepping to the first one, he noticed the small glass window by the other door. Through it he saw another lab.

"Look for a mini fridge." Frank's instruction repeated in Richie's mind. *"chances are, that's where a vial is kept. The large batches may be in the long freezers."*

On the counter in the empty lab, Richie saw the short silver refrigerator, a biohazard sign on the front. No one was in that back room lit only by a dull table fluorescent lamp. So Richie peeked out the door he walked though, checked on the busy scientists in the main lab and he walked through the cooler room to the other lab. The lab smelled of newness and disinfect and looked as if never used. With that scenario in his mind Richie guessed the fridge

would be empty. But it was worth a chance. Even if he didn't discover the Salicain in there, he discovered something else. A lab he knew nothing about. And if that was there, how many other were too.

He set down his tool box next to the silver counter fridge. He reached for the handle hoping it wasn't locked. When he pulled he found out it wasn't.

Richie felt the cold air hit against his stomach and breeze through his tee shirt and he bent down peering his face through the crack. Vials upon vials were lined up in the fridge. And no sooner did Richie's eyes graze across the middle shelf and see to the left, the vial marked 'Salicain' that the fridge door closed. Richie's views looked up to the hand on the door. A scientist stood there.

"This isn't the one." Richie smiled. "She's uh . . . working fine." He crinkled his nose as he grabbed his tool box and walked backwards pointing to the cooler room with his thumb. "I'll start on the big ones in uh . . . in there." Richie spun around and allowed his back to face the large male scientist that busted him. He hid deeply the anxiety he let out in his breathing and tried to calm his racing heart as he moved to the cooler room. Nothing helped. His hands shook, his heart pounded. And even though he found the vial of Salicain, Richie couldn't clear his mind of the thoughts, that if he kept on listening to Frank, he really would end up a dead man.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

"Truck is in secondary position." Stewart laid a folder in front of George on his desk. "They'll move into position as soon as the final surveillance flight is made."

"Good." George flipped open the folder. "The train is ready for the trip as well?"

"Yes sir." Stewart answered. "We estimate five hours by truck to the train and another seven to Binghamton."

"And is everything in Binghamton prepared?"

"Yes." Stewart nodded. "Construction and remodeling was completed on the home."

"CME's?"

"Prepped and ready for your orders. Sgt. Landers says they are ready to move out."

"Excellent, excellent. Let's let the new arrival get settled in Binghamton first. Tell Sgt. Landers to look at a move date of September 27th or 28th." George began to close the folders. Stewart stopped him.

"President Hadly, genetics sent a note, it's in there."

"Where?" George adjusted his glass then saw the yellow Post-It. "God he, is still using these." George un-stuck it, lifted it and read. After, he looked back to Stewart. "Tell the labs to keep a close eye out. I may not know much about this, but it seems to be too early. Contact me in another week or so, otherwise don't bother me."

"I think he wants Dr. Hayes' opinion on . . ."

"Dr. Hayes has adjusting of his own to do first and then he will get to

work on the virology and genetic material. Until then, tell the labs they have to wait.”

“Yes sir.” Stewart took the Post-It note from George, it stuck to his thumb and then fingers as he switched it. Finally, he gave up and wrinkled it up. He stood there waiting to engage in more conversation with his leader, and when Stewart realized he was being ignored, he took that as his clue and left.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“Dean?” Ellen called out into the cryo-lab as she walked in. “Dean?” Ellen set down the folders she carried and walked to the coat tree grabbing her lab jacket. She placed in on.

“Back here El. I’ll be right out.”

“O.K.!” Ellen moved across the lab. She flicked on a microscope as she passed it in her walk to the smaller back room with the spare freezer. She hummed some song that she hadn’t a clue where it was from.

Dean pulled the door and secured the buzzing lock of the ‘secret’ lab. “El?” He stepped into the main lab.

“Here.” She came out holding a small specimen tray.

“Hey.” Dean moved to her. “I thought you were at containment.”

“I was. Jason is there being the being leader, so I checked on Jeremy and came back here before heading up to the clinic.”

“How is Jeremy?”

“Doing well. He’s eating more food with consistency and it sounds as if his voice is coming bk. Ellen set down the tray she handled while she talked. She uncovered it and grabbed a pair of tweeze.

“And his spirits?”

“Checking up on me doctor or are you curious.”

“El, I’m sorry I’m not wanting to . . .”

“Kidding.” She smiled at him. “His spirits are fine.”

“You had me.” Dean kissed her on the cheek.

“So were you checking the case?”

“Yes. All is fine.”

“Good.”

“So, what uh . . . brings you back down here?” Dean looked over her shoulder.

“This was bothering me.”

“That section of Marv’s brain.”

“No.” Ellen lifted up an even smaller piece. “This section of Marv’s brain.”

“What about it?”

“I didn’t get to look at it close. But I think it’s regurgitated.”

“You think or you know.” Dean asked.

“Pretty sure.” Ellen brought the red object held by tweezers closer to her nostril and sniffed. “I can smell the stomach acid on it. You?”

Dean brought his nose closer. “Yeah I can. I think you’re right. Check

it out under the scope and note it.”

“Planned on it.”

“I find that interesting. Why some parts were ingested and others weren’t.”

“And others tossed back out.” Ellen said. “On purpose or do you think whatever did this involuntarily rejected it.”

“Hard to say. We still don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

Ellen stopped in her look to the microscope. “Dean.”

“El.” He held up his hand. “We don’t know.”

“We think.”

“We aren’t sure.” Dean nodded then pointed. “Keep it that way until we are conclusive. Understand?”

“Is it right?”

“It’s wrong if we let it out before we know. Trust me. Remember, people can be cruel.”

Ellen agreed with a trace of sadness.

“And El, whenever I leave, if the results are not finished, you have to work hard to prove without a doubt, what it was that got Marv. O.K.?”

Ellen nodded slowly.

“Good. I know you have enough work as it is. I’m positive with Jeremy in containment and your UWA guy heading back home today, once I’m gone, Henry will move you full time to research. I know you don’t want that but it has to be that way.”

“I know.” Ellen’s hand touched the microscope, hesitating to do her work. “And I know it won’t be long before you come back.”

“Let’s hope.” Dean kissed her again. “But . . . deal with everything as if I am not. Got it. You follow the priority list. Which is?”

“Are you testing me?” Ellen asked.

“Yep. Go over it one more time.”

“O.K.,” Ellen took a breath and faced Dean. “As of this date, if you leave . . .” Another breath. “Freezer case in the special lab is always top priority. Bi hourly checks.” She watched Dean nod. “In between, two hours a day Marv stuff. Two hours clinic lab work. An hour patient work, unless there’s an emergency, the rest biological, genetic and viral work, including meds.”

“Good.” Dean kissed her. “I made a complete daily schedule for you, it can help you get into a routine.”

“You didn’t include bathroom breaks, id you?”

Dean paused,. “Um . . . no El.”

“You did.” She laughed. “So anal.” she turned to go back to the microscope.

Dean grabbed her arm. “I’m just preparing. That’s all. We work too hard. You know what you can give Johnny to help on and you know what you can’t.”

“I know.” Ellen leaned into him kissing him softly, “But can we just not talk about this anymore? Please. I just don’t want to talk about you leaving.”

“All right.” Dean spoke softly and stood side by side with her. “Hey, maybe Frank escaped and that’s why we haven’t heard from George.”

“Maybe.” Ellen smiled at that thought. “And then all this planning will be obsolete.” She held up crossed fingers. “Let’s hope.”

Dean gripped those fingers, squeezed gently then lowered them holding

on. He stared at her making deep eye contact. "Let's hope. As for now . . ." He released her fingers and placed them on the microscope. "Let's work on regurgitated brains. Shall we?"

Ellen giggled, shifted her eyes to Dean and then they both--not less the sarcastic intelligent jokes--began to work on Marv's brain.

^^^

It was just Henry and Joe, in Joe's Office. Or Henry's now. But Joe sat in his usual behind the desk position and Henry sat across, a chair pulled close to the desk as they reviewed things together.

Joe only raised his eyes from his reading. "Henry." He spoke his name in a scolding but soft manner.

"O.K., O.K." Henry held up his hand. "But Joe you have to admit."

"Admit what? Henry, it is not be a 'GQ' leader. It's be a good leader."

"My hair looks good then huh?"

"Henry."

"Joe shouldn't I be sitting in that seat?"

"Henry."

"O.K." Henry tapped his fingers and lifted a sheet of paper. "How often will I get a John Matoose report to review?"

"Once or twice a week." Joe answered.

"Who will give them to me?"

"I will."

"So you follow John?"

Joe made a snarling face. "When in Christ's name do I have time to followed John?"

"Now, you're retired."

"But the reports have been coming in for sometime. No. It's not me."

Joe said annoyed.

"Robbie?"

"No."

"Ellen."

"No."

"Dean."

"Henry!" Joe slammed his hand. "I will not divulge my secret spies. Got that?"

"But, Joe, I'm leader and I should . . ." Henry saw Joe was not amused. "I should not know who they are. Definitely."

"Henry." Joe flipped a page of the computer print out he reviewed. "I'm looking and I don't see it."

"See what?"

"Any history past the time when the Regressionator safeguard was placed in."

"Joe it was safeguarded."

"Still." Joe reviewed. "Just incase. It should be here."

"Nothings there." Henry shook his head. "Dean and I reviewed and figured why waste the paper. Anything, and if anything happened, it happened prior to the safeguard."

Joe nodded. "I see. And gut instincts on Jason?"

"He's weird Joe."

"No." Joe huffed. "That's not what I meant. You heard him speak, you were there. What are your gut instincts about im."

"I told you I think . . ."

"Henry." Joe held up his hand. "If you say he's weird, I'm gonna reach across the goddamn table and hit you. I'm talking about him being a suspect."

"Oh." Henry let out a breath. "Well you know what he said when he slipped up to me and Dean."

Joe shook his head. "You can't say it's a slip up. How do we know he doesn't know about John. And he may have been referring to Rev. Thomas too." Joe picked up a pen and closed the Regressionator history. "I'll review this later."

"Did you say anything to Andrea about those letters she mailed?"

"No, not yet. I will. Before I do, I want to set it up that I have the house alone and do a complete search of her things."

"Oh good idea. Robbie is searching Rev. Bob, you're searching Andrea. Hey . . ." Henry scratched his head. "What am I gonna do?"

Joe slid a paper to him. "You'll file this John Matoose report. And you'll need the silver key Henry, that drawer is locked."

"O.K." Henry grabbed the report and walked to the two filing cabinets by the door. He moved to the second and bent down to the last drawer. As he unlocked it, there was a knock at the office door.

Instinctively Joe called out as he was standing. "Come in."

The door opened slowly and Maura walked in. "Mr. Slagel are you alone."

Joe shifted his eyes to Henry. "Um yeah Maura, what can I do for you."

Henry, without shutting the cabinet, moved to the side of it and slouched down, staying concealed.

Maura seemed nervous, wringing her hands and peering outside to her mother who waited.

"Did you want to shut the door?" Joe asked.

"Oh, no, mother said she needs to see me."

Joe flashed a fake smile to Gemma while grumbling then smiled at Maura. "What's up?"

"I've been, I've been thinking about what you said. You know about Rev. Bob."

"And?"

"And he trusts me Mr. Slagel. But . . . but . . ." She sort of stomped her foot. "I could not find that passage anywhere in proverbs."

"Oh." Joe nodded. "That's because I'm Catholic and it's in our bible. I'll show you."

Maura innocently held up her hand. "No need. I thought about it and figured I'll tell you what I can. But you have to promise me you won't tell him I told you."

"O.K." Joe said.

"Promise me Mr. Slagel. My mother said you're a man of your word. Promise me."

"Yeah, yeah. You didn't tell your mom did you?"

"Oh no. That would be awful. I just told her it had to do with the

Neville competition.”

“Good.” Joe waved his hand to her to hurry Maura. “You were saying?”

“Rev. Bob had one last name for a really long time. His whole life. Then a family member, a cousin I think, dragged him into something years and years before the plague. He didn’t know he was being drug in. And he fought with his cousin.” Maura explained with passion. “And he said he felt shame being associated with the name and he changed it a few years before the plague. I saw the legal document.”

“Did he tell you who his cousin was?”

“No.” She shook her head. “But he showed me the document.”

“Did he tell you why he kept the document?”

“Yes. In case anyone needed to see it. I didn’t tell him you wanted to know. He’s playing fair and square Mr. Slagel.”

“Yes he is.” Joe said pacifying. “Thank you Maura. I appreciate this.”

“Whew.” She looked relieved. “You’re welcome. I just didn’t want to burn in hell like that Catholic passage said I would. O.K., that’s it. Bye .” She hurried out of Joe’s office pulling the door closed quickly.

Moaning in pain, Henry emerged from behind the file cabinet. “Ow, my knees.” He walked sort of hunched, his knees were still bent.

Joe flicked a wave to Henry with a grunt. He lifted the history stack. “Well I’m out of here. Things to do at distribution. Henry get back to me about those runs.” Joe walked to the office door.

“Joe.” Henry moved slowly like a crippled old man. “Wait.”

“Christ Henry.” Tucking the stack under his arm, Joe moved behind Henry and straightened him up fast. Henry screamed. Joe laughed and swatted him on the back. “See ya.”

“Joe. Did you really tell that little girl she would burn in hell if she didn’t tell you the truth?”

Joe chuckled as he opened the door. “Nah Henry.”

Henry let out a long relief sigh. “Thank God.”

“No.” Joe stepped out, pulled the door closed, opened it and popped his head back in with a grin. “I believe my exact words to her were, ‘burn in eternal damnation’.” Flashing another grin, Joe waved, and left.

Henry’s hand met his own forehead with a slap at the same time the door closed. Hard he ran his hand down across the bridge of his nose then his mouth, and eventually dragging his bottom lip a little. Oddly, Henry pulled his hand away and stared at his palm. “I just ran my hand down my face. Joe does that all the time. I don’t think I’ve ever done that.” Again, he looked at his hand only this time looking a bit horrified. “The first official day as leader. . . . Oh my God. I’m turning into Joe.”

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“Leonard has had a stroke.” Dr. Morris spoke to Frank and Richie as they stood bedside of Leonard.

“My God.” Frank gasped dramatically covering his mouth, staring to a still Leonard who laid on his back, arms to his side, eyes wide open and shifting.

“A man so young. So virile, so . . . emf.” Frank felt the nudge of Richie. “Poor thing.”

“Yes.” Dr. Morris swayed his head. “Only forty-two.”

“He is forty?” Frank whistled. “Wouldn’t know it.”

“No. I’m surprised he survive this stroke.”

“His stress level must have been high.” Richie suggested.

“Oh yes.” Dr. Morris said. “High. A man in his leadership position.”

Frank closed his mouth tightly and shook his head. “Well, I’ll have to do everything I can to help out now. I . . .” Frank’s voice cracked. “Excuse me. I’m . . .” Frank grabbed hold of his own throat. “I’m a bit choked up. We were getting rather close.”

“I see.” Dr. Morris said. “I’ll leave you to visit. Make sure you talk to him. Encourage him to fight his way out of this.”

“Oh I will. Thank you.” Frank watched Dr. Morris leave. He smiled at Richie then moved closer to the bed leaning down to Leonard and surprising even Richie by is singing--pretty good too--a Bruce Springsteen Song. “*Cause I’m Trapped. Ooh yeah, yeah, yeah. Trapped! Ooh yeah, yeah-ah!*” Frank grinned.

“Colonel Slagel.” Leonard spoke his name with a jolting edge bringing Frank out of the day dream he had slipped into during their meeting. “Colonel Slagel.”

Frank snapped forward in his chair. The huge grin was still plastered across his face. “Huh?”

“Why are you smiling at me?”

“I’m smiling?”

“Yes, and staring.”

“I’m staring too?”

“Yes!”

“I was uh . . .” Frank folded his hands and leaned into his desk, loudly he cleared his throat and drew up a serious expression. “Has anyone ever told you how attractive of a man you are.” Frank raised one eyebrow.

“Ex excuse me?” Shocked and taken aback was written all over Leonard’s face.

“That’s why I was smiling. Taken by you.” Frank stated. “Very taken by your . . .” He watched Leonard stand up. “Hey, where you going?”

“I think I should be leaving.” Leonard spoke nervously as he hurried to the door. “I uh . . . I have things and preparations to uh do. Good day Colonel.”

“Yeah but I’m not done complimenting” Frank’s door shut and Frank leaned back in his chair smiling. He cupped his hands behind his head and rocked back and forth in confidence. Because he knew now, if the Salicain plan didn’t pan out, he knew of another way to get Leonard to stay away from him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

“I bet you’re more than ready to go home.” Ellen stated to the UWA

soldier who was sitting on his hospital bed.

“Yes.” The soldier smiled and looked to Dean and Rev. Bob who was also in the room. “Not that you don’t treat me well.”

“You must finish the final wave of medication.” Ellen instructed. “I’m informing Blue that I gave it to Hal.”

“Yes doctor.”

Rev. Bob, who as visiting, spoke up. “And you’ll tell the preacher in your community that I look forward to our meeting up with him?”

“Fr. Brace. Yes.” The soldier nodded. “He’s a Catholic priest, I’m sure he’ll love to meet you as well.”

Dean snickered. “Wait until Joe hears.” He looked at his watch. “I let you guys finish up. El, I’m uh heading to see the kids for a lunch. O.K.?”

Ellen looked up from the chart. “Kiss them for me.”

“Bye.” Dean walked to the door.

“Oh Dean?” Ellen called him.

“Yes.” He slid to a stop in the doorway.

“Tell Andrea. I think she needed you to do something, I’m not sure. She had said something earlier.”

“Got it.” With another hurried wave, Dean walked away from the room and down the hall. He turned the bend to the main entrance hall and approached his lab. The door was open and Andrea, Jason, and Johnny were seated inside. “Andrea? Did you need me for anything.”

Andrea looked up from what appeared to be a fun conversation instead of business. She smiled. “Not anymore Dean. Thanks.”

“O.K., I’ll be back. I’m heading to the school to have lunch with the kids.” He waved to Andrea, Jason and Johnny and moved town the hall to the main door. Again, Dean waved, but this time to Henry as he pushed open the glass door. “Hey Henry. I thought you were the big leader now.” Dean looked down at the tool box. “Why are you fixing this hinge again.”

“I feel useless not fixing something. So I thought I’d tighten this up again. Robbie has seemed to take Frank’s place. Where you headed?”

“Having lunch my kids. I promised Alexandra I would. I’ve been so busy.”

“Have fun.”

Dean nearly trotted in an upbeat manner to the school. He didn’t know why his spirits were up. But if Dean realized his good day was close to going sour, he would have basked in the good mood he carried to the school with him.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“Waverley and Brimson?” Sgt. Ryder asked Blue.

“Yes.” Blue reviewed his notes and nodded.

“I understand what Waverley did, but Brimson?”

“The horse incident.” Blue explained. “Hawk was tossed, his foot got caught and Brimson ran in, stopping the horse, freeing Hawk. He also broke his pinky finger.”

“O.K.” Sgt. Ryder signed the paper. “The witnesses attested to that?”

Brimson tends to exaggerate.”

“They attested.”

“All right. Give this to Gr . . . Gr . . .”

“Grace.”

“Yes. And then we’ll ship them up to Beginnings next run up.”

“Got it.” As Blue gathered up his Neville documents and stood up, the door to Hal’s office opened and a private rushed in. Blue turned his head to Sgt. Ryder. “Elliot, you can certainly tell they know Captain Slagel is away.”

Sgt. Ryder stood up. “Private is this an emergency.”

“Yes sir.” The private was out of breath. “The . . . the Nebraska scouts have returned.”

“Already?” Sgt. Ryder questioned as he walked around the desk. “They aren’t due back till next week. What’s wrong?”

“No sir.” The private smiled. “You should ask what’s right. They brought with them three of our five missing soldiers from the Anderson farm.”

The private’s words were barely finished and Sgt. Ryder rushed by him and Blue, and was out the door.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Alexandra giggled as she played with her father’s bangs, sitting on his lap at the park. “Daddy, you need a hair cut.” She held them back off his forehead and kissed Dean.

“You sound like Mommy.”

“Can I put your hair in a ponytail.”

“No.” Dean shook his head as her little hands laid on his cheek. “My hair isn’t that long.”

“On top it is.”

“Alex.” Dean spoke then heard his phone ring. “Hold on sweetie.” He unhooked his phone from his belt. “Yeah?”

“The time has come.”

Dean’s heart dropped and his eyes closed. He lifted Alexandra from him.

“You’re not speaking.”

“What do you want me to say?” Dean asked.

“I guess nothing. I’ll speak and listen to me carefully. The perimeters go down for a daily check. You are to be at the back gate at 12:47 a.m. That is when that perimeter goes down. It’ll be down for three minutes.” George explained. “And you will walk out. Be there Dean, I have people waiting.”

The lump in Dean’s throat was so large he could barely speak. “Tonight?”

“Tonight. Bring with you what you need and leave a note for your wife to show around. You left for the society. Make it good. And make sure no one follows you. No one, or say goodbye to that cozy little house and all it’s occupants tonight. Fires can be deadly. And trust me I’ll know if someone is following you. I have that covered. Or . . . how else did I know you were having lunch with your children right now.”

“I’ll be there. Will I be going to see . . .”

“Frank? Yes. Goodbye Dean. I look forward to having you aboard. I won’t be there to greet you, my people will. But I’ll be along shortly.” George hung up.

So deep in thought Dean was. So slow Dean brought the phone away from his ear and stared at it hanging up. He was so engrossed that the hand that laid on his back caused him to jump a foot in the air and fumble his phone. Dean bent down, quickly catching it before it crashed to the ground.

“Dean?” Joe looked at him.

Dean was breathing heavy. His face was pale and he looked confused.

“Dean you all right?”

“No. No Joe.” Dean blinked several times. “Could . . . could you see the kids back to school.” Running his fingers through his hair he backed up.

“Dean?”

“I . . . I have to find El.” He spoke in a near daze. “I have to find El.”

“Dean.” Joe grabbed a hold of Dean’s shoulder and turned him around. “What’s wrong?”

Dean held up the phone slowly. “It . . . it was George.” Deans voice quivered with emotions. “I . . . I . . .” Dean swallowed and glanced his views to his happy and playing children. “I leave tonight. I leave tonight.” Without saying anything else, Dean turned back around and headed to the clinic.

“Dear God.” Joe whispered and ran his hand over his face slowly as he watched Dean. Pummeled by news he did not expect, Joe pulled himself together, placed on a ‘Pap-pap’ smile and turned around from watching Dean and walked over to join his grandchildren.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Bowman, North Dakota

“Elliott, you missed me.” Hal grinned and joked as he stepped from his truck spreading wide his arms to a very happy looking Sgt. Ryder. “Look, you’re glowing.”

Sgt. Ryder swatted Hal’s reach away. “I’m happy, but not about you.”

“I’m crushed.”

“I take it the trip to Beginnings was successful and fun.”

“Yes.”

“How is the new leader working out.”

Hal laughed. “We’ll have to talk about that. How were things here.”

“Great.”

“Great?” Hal questioned.

“Great. Follow me.” Sgt. Ryder led the way.

“Oh my God.” Hal spoke in awe and near whisper after peeking in the hospital room where Link, Kyle and Ted were. “Our scouts stumbled upon them?”

“Yes.”

“Amazing.” Hal peeked back in. “They look bad.”

“Well, the society beat them, starved them and they walked a lot. Otherwise, Blue said they’ll be just fine.”

“What did they tell you? Where were they?” Hal questioned.

“Maybe you should hear it from them.” Sgt. Ryder pointed into the room. “You need to hear what they have to say.”

“Thank you.” Hal knocked on the archway and stepped in the room. “Gentlemen, welcome home.” Nodding his head to all three of their thank you’s, Hal pulled up a chair. “I know you already told Sgt. Ryder, but . . . but can you tell me. What happened?”

Link spoke up first. “We were fighting the society when they over took us. We didn’t even know that our man got away with the woman from Beginnings until Sgt. Ryder informed us. They took us from one camp to the final one.”

Kyle continued the story. “They wanted to know about us, our camp, and they beat us in interrogations everyday. Finally we lied to them and sent them on a goose chase. Unfortunately . . .”

Hal nodded. “Not without the risk of one of your lives. William or Jeff?”

“Jeff.” Ted answered. “William dies at Anderson Farm.”

“I see. And how did you escape?” Hal questioned.

“The Beginnings man freed us.”

“Frank?” Hal smiled “You saw Frank? How is he?”

“He’s fine.” Kyle said.

“I must tell you Frank is my . . .”

“Man!” Link complained loudly not hearing Hal. “The man is an

asshole. Telling us we can walk home. Him and his bad ass attitude. Like he's all that. What the hell was up with that shit."

"Yeah." Ted agreed. "And did he give us food? No. He took our uniforms and gave us weird clothes to wear."

"Funky clothes." Kyle stated. "And bad shoes. We couldn't even keep our boots. What were you saying about him Captain?"

"Um . . ." Hal smiled just slightly. "Um . . . I heard about him up in Beginnings."

Link fluttered his lips loudly. "Bet they don't like him either. The man freed us but he could have helped us."

Hal nodded slowly as he stood up. "Well." He cleared his throat. "I'll let you men get some rest. We'll talk tomorrow." Falsely Hal stayed chipper and left the room. He pulled the door closed as he stepped into the hall and to an awaiting and smirking Sgt. Ryder. "You knew what they were going to say, didn't you?"

"No. No. So, why didn't you tell them Frank was your brother."

"Are you nuts?" Hal started walking with him. "They hate him. I need my respect. And right now for as badly as they feel about him, I don't want that rubbing off on me."

"Has Frank always been like that."

"Yes." Hal said strongly. "Always. His entire life. I should have expected no less. After all, he was the big trouble maker and instigator in the family."

"You don't say." Sgt. Ryder commented with a shadow of doubt to his tone. But since he didn't know any better, he took Hal's word for it and continued to listen to Hal gripe about Frank for the next thirty minutes.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Although Frank knew something *could* have gone wrong, he felt strongly that it didn't, so he waited outside the building where the labs were at. Hanging in the darkness like some sort of criminal. He watched the lights finally go out in the building--for the second time. When they went out the first time he was certain it was safe to send Richie inside. But no sooner had he done that, the scientist returned. How was Frank to know they only took a break for a late dinner.

Knowing it was getting late and the chances were good that it was an all clear, Frank walked into the lab building.

He made it to the main lab, unlocking the door with his own keys. "Richie." He called out in a whisper. "Richie." Frank saw nothing.

Remembering what Richie told him about the back lab being located off of the cooler room, he headed back there. "Richie." He continued to call in the darkness and then Frank heard it. A light banging. It seemed to come from that lab Richie had told him about.

"Look at this shit." Frank placed his hands on his hips and looked around. "Is this decked out or what. This has to be for the big wig. A desk . . ." He stopped when he heard the banging again. "What is that?" Scratching his head, Frank listened in to locate it, when he saw the silver fridge sitting on the

counter. "Oh, the Salicain." His hand reached for the handle when again, he heard the banging. It was close to him, under him and Frank squatted down. There was a cabinet under there with a large door. Frank placed his ear near there hearing the light bang. Seeing the latch on the cabinet, Frank undid that and pulled on the door. The second it opened was the second Richie rolled out of the cabinet and on to the floor.

"Frank." Richie stood up.

"What the hell are you doing in there?"

"I was stuck."

"How did that happen?" Frank asked.

"They came back Frank. Like two minutes after you sent me in here. I had to hide. They latched it when I was in there."

"Did they see you?"

"No." Richie shook his head.

"Good." Frank patted him on the back. "Did you get the Salicain?"

"No, they came in too fast."

"Not a problem." Frank pointed to the fridge and pulled on the handle. Locked. "Fuck."

"Sorry Frank."

"No. That's O.K." Frank ran his hand over the top of his own head and through his hair. "If we can't get it, I think I have a back up for getting nosey fuckin Leo off my back."

"Well I got news for you Frank. You better set whatever that plan is in motion and set it in motion fast."

"Oh . . .uh . . . why is that?"

"Because I overheard them talking." Richie said frantic. "Things are gonna get tight. That big shot all the hoopla is about. He arrives tomorrow."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Thank you." Joe hung up the call and turned to face those who gathered in Robbie's livingroom. Robbie sat slumped on one end of the couch. Jess in the chair and Dean and Ellen huddled so close, holding hands and leaning forward, they nearly shared a cushion. "O.K." Joe spoke to them. "So we may not have to depend on Danny's tracking anyhow. We'll use it for Dean. But we now know where Frank is."

The gloom disappeared and all of them looked up at Joe.

"Binghamton Alabama. A reserve base there." Joe walked over and sat on the chair.

"How do you know where Frank is?" Robbie asked.

"Three of the UWA soldiers that helped him and Ellen were taken with him." Joe explained. "He helped them escape."

Robbie was curious. "Helped them escape. What about himself?"

Joe held up his hands. "They don't know why he wouldn't go. They asked him and he said nothing. Hal said they complained about him. Nothing new." Joe reached into his pocket grabbing a cigarette. "Dean leaves in four hours. They are going to go home and so am I. Jess and Robbie you two head

down to the social hall, mingle, do whatever. At 12:20 I want you two to leave, go the long way around to the living section and watch the house for anyone. Got that.”

“Dad.” Robbie spoke up. “Why can’t I just follow Dean. Let me follow him to the gate. He can go but maybe I can see who will be tailing him. See George’s guy.”

“No” Dean spoke up clenching tightly to Ellen’s hand. Looking as if he were dying inside. “I won’t take even the slightest chance with my family. Not the slightest Robbie. It goes as planned. You and Jess watch my house while I leave.” He brought Ellen’s hand to his mouth, keeping it there, running his lips over it as he rocked back and forth.

“This is ridiculous.” Robbie stood up. “I can’t believe we’re just letting him walk out our gates. We’re handing Dean over.” Robbie’s voice was high and with emotions. “I know why we’re doing it. But Frank can take care of himself. We’ll watch the kids and Ellen. We’ll guard them with our lives. Let’s just send Jess to Binghamton, scout out the area and get Frank.”

“And what?” Joe questioned. “Chance Dean not going out to that gate. Chance them shooting Frank on the spot down there. He’s the bargaining tool or one of them. Dean doesn’t go, there are no guarantees on Frank. Or worse, Ellen and the kids. Guard them Robbie. From who?” Joe questioned. “Do you know? D I know? No. We don’t even know who or where it would come from. Guarding blind is not smart. I don’t want Dean to walk out into George’s hands anymore than you do. But we all know he has too.” Joe stood up and paced. “We have him covered. Tracking device is hooked up to the communications room map. The bug is attached to Dean’s jeans. We’re good. We wait until the signal stops and we drop Jess near there. He scouts, takes pictures, we go back and get him. Matter of a week we have Dean and Frank back.” Joe sounded so certain. “Dean, We’ll have you back. I promise you with my life. Trust me. Just . . . trust me.”

“I do Joe.” Dean closed his eyes briefly and holding Ellen’s hand he stood up. “But right now I’d like to spend these last couple hours alone with my wife and kids.”

“I understand.” Slowly Joe nodded his head once. He laid his hand on Dean’s shoulder “We are with you out there. We’re watching you. You are not alone.” He placed his face close to Dean’s. “*You* are not alone.” Joe dropped his voice. “Take care of yourself for us.” As Dean passed him, Joe laid his hand on Ellen’s cheek and kissed her.

Robbie walked before Dean and extended his hand. “Be careful. I mean it.” He said with more seriousness than Dean had ever seen.

Dean shook his hand firm. “I will. Watch my family.”

“With my life Dean.” Robbie stepped back and out of the way.

Dean gave one more closed mouth and silent nod to everyone, then sadly he led Ellen from Robbie’s home.

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

No sooner had George placed on his favorite pair of blue checkered

pajamas and turn off his bedroom light that his phone rang. George stared at the receiver as it set on the night stand, calming himself before he picked it back up. He wanted to lash out, scream at Leonard for calling him, but seeing how it could have been important, George waited until his anger subsided.

He lifted the receiver to his ear. "Just for the record Leonard. It's midnight on this side of the country."

"Yes, I know, but this is . . . is important." Leonard told him. "It's uh . . . about Colonel Slagel. This Frank guy."

"What about him."

"Sir." There was hesitation. "Sir he . . ."

"Spit it out."

"He frightens me sir."

"Yeah, so."

"So he uh . . . he uh . . . he . . ."

"Leonard!"

"He's gay sir."

George rubbed his eyes. "He's not gay."

"Sir, he um . . . complimented my appearance."

George hid his snicker. "It's not a gay thing Leonard, it's a sexual necessity. Obviously though with the amnesia it must be something he had in him way before him and Henry had their thing. Now tell me how this is a risk to the society."

"It isn't." Leonard said.

"So where's the problem?"

"I think he's attracted to me."

"Turn him down for crying out loud. He is not the first gay man you have run into. It's common."

"But uh . . . he uh is the first one that is as large as he is. What if he wants me?"

"Keep your distance. O.K., now I'd like to hit the hay Leonard. Don't bother me anymore for this stupid shit. The only reason I don't have your ass fired for this is because it amused me."

"Yes sir."

George prepared to hang up but stopped. "And if it's any consolation, I wouldn't want him behind me either." Leaving that as his last words, George hung up, enjoyed a moment of laughter, then finally crawled into bed.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen's eyes stayed focused on Dean's shaking hands as he placed a photo of her and the kids into his duffel bag. She held the sheet close to her nude body, sitting in bed, her heart pounding as she watched him. The expression on his face was so sad. His head stayed down, his growing hair falling forward. Packing slowly as if, if he just hesitated a moment longer his leaving may not have to occur.

"Dean." The 'zip' of the duffel bag went straight through Ellen from her stomach to her heart.

Quietly he lifted the bag and placed it on the floor by the foot of the bed. He reached for his shirt, grabbed it and walked up to Ellen. "I have to be going soon."

"Not yet. We still have time."

An emotional single laugh came from Dean. "Still have time." He spoke softly and sat on the bed.

"We still have time." Her hand ran up his bare chest moving to his neck and pulling Dean to her. "Spend just a few more moments with me please. I need to be close to you again."

Dean closed his eyes and softly grazed his lips against hers. "If I crawl back in this bed with you, I won't wanna leave."

"You don't wanna leave anyhow." Ellen pulled at him. "Just one more moment." Her lips parted as she laid back.

Following Ellen's lead, Dean brought his knee up to the bed and his body down to hers. Softly he kissed her. His bare chest met hers and he wrapped his arms tightly around her. It was the first time in Dean's entire life that he could actually recall his heart hurting as he made love to Ellen. An ache filled him with each kiss, each move of his body. Making love to Ellen slowly and as if it would be his last time. Holding her tight and trying to consume her in, as if he could take a piece of her with him. Needing so badly to steal something at that moment that would last him, carry with him and give him the strength to do what he had to do. So frightened Dean was, scared of what was going to happen to him. And he buried that, hiding it deep within him. Dean wanted nothing to ruin their final, tender goodbye.

^^^

"Anything?" Jess asked Robbie as they sat deep in the underdeveloped section watching Dean's house.

"Nope." Robbie handed the infrared binoculars to Jess. "See if you can see anything."

"I know what you're thinking." Jess lifted the binoculars to his eye level. "You're thinking. No one is watching Dean's house, so no one will see me follow Dean."

Robbie was silent.

"Robbie?"

"I have to do it."

"You have to stay put."

"What if . . . what if . . . I follow Dean. I can do this. What if I see who it is working for George, take him or her out. Then the threat against Dean's family is over and we go after Frank."

"And what about what your father said?" Jess asked. "Huh? What about Frank?"

"Frank can take care of himself."

"Not if they have a gun to his head right now waiting for the news that Dean is secure." Jess lowered the binoculars. "This is the only way Robbie."

"No it's not." Robbie stood up.

"Sit down Robbie." Jess ordered.

"I have to do this." Robbie started to walk.

“Robbie.” Jess stood up. “I am under orders from your father.”

“For what?” Robbie said with sarcasm as he moved. He stopped when he heard the clicking of a gun’s chamber. He slowly turned around to see Jess pointing a gun with a silencer on it at him. “What the hell Jess.”

“I am under orders from your father to watch you and incapacitate you if you interfere.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Jess held the gun steady in an aim at Robbie’s leg. “Robbie, you’re my friend. I care about you. But if you come close to jeopardizing the lives of those kids in that house, I will do what I have to do to protect them first.”

“You’re fucked. You know that.”

“Yeah well, the world’s fucked. The whole situation is fucked. But that doesn’t mean we can take matters into our own hands, especially when innocent lives are at stake. Sit down Robbie and watch the house with me.”

Robbie closed his eyes. “Jess.”

“Sit down Robbie.”

Letting out a long huff, Robbie tossed his hands up and moved back to where he was. “I won’t forget this. Pulling a fuckin gun on me.”

Jess put the gun away into his harness. He sat down at the same time as Robbie did. He handed Robbie the binoculars.

Robbie snatched them from his hand. He was angry, he was bitter, but he would do exactly what he was supposed to do. Especially after realizing Jess was dead serious. But then so was the situation that was about to go down.

^^^

Billy was the last kid Dean kissed. His lips stayed upon Billy’s cheek for the longest of time, smelling his son, whispering to the sleeping child how much he loved him and would miss him. Dean’s heart was breaking.

Painfully Ellen watched him. She held her arms tightly to her body trying so desperately to stop herself from shaking.. Her body quivered from top to bottom. She felt so cold, her heart beat strong. Her breath escaped her when Dean laid his hand on her cheek, picked up his duffel bag out side of Billy’s bedroom then walked without saying anything to the livingroom.

“Dean!” Ellen raced after him, he was reaching for the door. “Oh God.” She flew forward slamming it shut with her body. “What are you doing.”

“Ellen.” He closed his eyes. “Please. I can’t say goodbye. Please just let me walk out.”

“Don’t you leave without saying goodbye to me. Don’t you do it. Look at me.”

Dean lowered his head.

“Dean.” She reached her shaking hand for his chin. “I love you.” she spoke softly and with passion. “Don’t think a minute or second of the day isn’t going to go by without me thinking of you. My heart’s breaking. Don’t leave without looking at me and saying goodbye.” There was silence. “Please.” So quiet their breathing was actually heard. “Please.”

Dean swallowed. Feeling her breath, hearing her words. The duffel bag dropped with a thump from his hand to the floor, and Dean grabbed hold of Ellen. With such force he grabbed her into him, wrapping his arms around her

exhaling an aching moan as her body touched his and his face pressed to hers. “El. I love you. I love you so much.”

A single sob came from Ellen as her fists clenched his shirt wanting to hold him there for ever.

“I have to go.” He laid his lips to her cheek. “I have to go.” Dean stepped back, running his hand across her face, feeling her tear that fell across his hand.

Ellen shivered, sniffing hard as she watched Dean pick up his bag, toss it over his shoulder and reach for the door handle. “Dean. I love you.”

Dean opened the door, took one long look at Ellen. He paused before leaving, reached out his hand, clenched behind her neck and pulled her back to him, pressing his lips hard to hers. He kissed her long and with emotions, putting everything his heart felt into that one single goodbye kiss. Softly he released, sliding his fingers across her cheek. “I love you. Goodbye El.” While his strength to do it was up, Dean turned away from her and walked out the door pulling it closed behind him.

“Dean.” The second the door closed was the second Ellen dropped into it. Filled with so much hurt, she laid her forehead to it and pounded her fist once against the wood. “Goodbye.”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

George had set his alarm so as to be awake when the call came. Siting on the edge of his bed, the light on, he jumped form his skin with excitement when the phone rang. “Yes.” He spoke fast. “Yes, he’s on his way to the gate?” George closed his eyes in gratefulness. “You stay back, you hear. You don’t let a soul see you at all. No, it’s too risky, trust me . . . No.” George shook his head. “I don’t care if it’s clear. You take top priority with me. I told you this before. I love you. You know that. With you I take no chances.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Timed perfectly as instructed, Dean stood by the unlocked back gate. It set some up on a hill and he turned around taking one more long last look at the home he was about to leave. The buzzing of the perimeter shutting down for the nightly check, jolted Dean as if he touched the electricity of it. When the buzzing finished, he pushed on the gate stepping through and closing it. So strong his heart beat and Dean could not breath.

He stood alone. He heard nothing. He saw nothing.

Just as he began to think that something had gone wrong, plans had suddenly changed, he heard a quick shuffle of leaves behind him. Before Dean could turn around, he heard a popping sound and felt a strong painful pinch, hit to the back of his neck. A burning that made him cringe and an unbearable pain

filled his head as he felt the hot liquid move through the veins of his neck. The dark back gate area spun around him and grew even darker. Out of focus, blurry. Dean's eyes felt heavy, his legs felt weak. The duffle bag slipped from Dean's shoulder and fell to the ground. Within seconds of that . . . so did Dean.

HEROES ...

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

September 25

Beginnings, Montana

With a gasping breath, Ellen sat straight up on the couch, suddenly awoken from her sleep. She looked at her watch and sadly moaned, closing her eyes as if the time caused her pain.

“You’re up?” Robbie walked from the hall into the livingroom. His hair was wet, he was dressed neatly and ready for work. “Why don’t you lay back down?”

“I can’t.” Ellen stood up from the couch. “I didn’t even mean to fall asleep. I didn’t want to. Not last night.”

“I made coffee, you want some?” Robbie asked, watched Ellen nod and moved toward the kitchen. His stride slowed when he saw the note. Dean’s note on the breakfast counter. “When are you showing this to Henry?”

Ellen ran her fingers through her hair, walking to the breakfast counter and sitting on a stool. “Do I have to?”

“El.” Robbie poured her a cup of coffee, laying it in front of her.

“I know. I know. This morning. I’m calling him to come over.” She lifted her coffee. “What time did Jess leave last night? I fell asleep.”

Robbie snickered. “So did I. Remember I went to bed while you guys were watching that old tape.”

“How are you going to explain his leaving?” Ellen asked.

“Everyone in Beginnings knows about his family and how most of them survived. He already filed papers with my Dad asking for permission to visit a small town in Canada where other family members lived.”

“Robbie, that’s really dumb. Who’s gonna buy it?”

“Who cares?” Robbie brought the ‘traveling’ tin cup, as he called it, to his lips. “I’d better get to work. Have to start working on a security team to go with my Dad on the run.” Robbie walked from the kitchen and kissed Ellen on the forehead. “I’ll check in with you all day. O.K.?”

“O.K.” She grabbed his hand as he stepped back. “You’re bringing some things over tonight right?”

“Yep. And El.” Robbie lowered his voice. “Dean is fine.”

“I’ll feel better when I get his phone call. I know it.”

“Just don’t change the demeanor too much. And get mad.” Robbie made a growling face which caused Ellen to laugh. “Got to go. Call Henry.” He pointed as he walked to the door. “And take a shower or something. Today you seek out a new man.”

Ellen closed her eyes swaying her head as Robbie left. Though down, she enjoyed the little smile Robbie brought to her face. But that smile soon left her when she picked up her coffee mug and for what seemed the hundredth time, she reread Dean’s letter.

^^^

As if he were walking in a department store of soldiers, George paced himself slowly, hands behind his back as he moved through the lines and lines of motionless, standing and staring soldiers. They could have been statues. They did not blink, nor seem to breath. Nodding his head with almost an approval, George approached Sgt. Landers who stood at the front of the gymnasium style building. "Sergeant."

"Mr. President." Sgt. Landers saluted him.

"You can go ahead and move these men to programming. I want them shipped down to Binghamton day after tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

Nothing more was said by George, he walked slowly from the CME showcase and out of the building. Dean was on his way. Binghamton was well on it's way to being one of the top five sites. That's what they had planned. The military, the technology. There would be reluctance at first, George expected that. But George was also certain that would change. As soon as Dean saw what the society was trying to accomplish and he realized his family would be with him by Christmas, Dean's whole outlook would change. Because Dean was a man who stayed where his priorities laid, and it wouldn't be long by George's time frame, that Dean's priorities--his family--would be right along side with him.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank wanted to think that it amazed him when actually it amused him as he watched the men training in a field before him. He could see Leonard engaged in conversation with another ambassador and a society sergeant. Leonard, who the day before was breathing so hard down Frank's neck that moisture formed there, now was no closer than ten feet from Frank. He didn't think his face showed his amusement. Obviously it did.

"What's so funny." Richie placed a clipboard in front of Frank. "Look like your signing this."

"What is it?"

"Just sign it."

"No. I shouldn't sign anything."

"Frank it's orders for me to be on guard patrol at the new scientists home."

"Oh." Frank lifted the pen and signed the form. "Did I order these. Just so I know." Frank looked at Richie.

"Yes."

"Good thinking."

"Thanks." Richie tucked the clipboard under his arm. "Me being guard will enable me to stop by your house afterwards. That way no one is suspicious why I'm in the area. And I'd better give these to the security Sergeant standing with Leonard. See ya Frank."

"You do that. Tell Leo I said hi." Frank laughed.

Richie shook his head, carrying the clipboard and he made an

apprehensive approach to Leonard, the other ambassador and the Sergeant. "Excuse me, Sergeant. Colonel Slagel said to give you these orders. He wants me placed on the house detail list for the new arrival."

Leonard intercepted the orders and looked at them. "Mr. Martin. The Sergeant here was just informing me that you were Colonel Slagel's private assistant prior to my arrival. Is that true?"

"Um . . ." Richie shifted his eyes to the sergeant. "Yes."

"He said you two were close."

Richie swallowed. "Yes. See, we go back before the plague sir. President Hadly is aware of . . ."

"And why are you not his assistant anymore. Is it because of me?" Leonard asked.

"I think. I think with me being what I am . . . you know . . . he didn't want that to get in the middle of any relationship you two may have."

"I see." Leonard looked at the Sergeant and the ambassador. "Excuse us." he placed a firm hand on Richie's arm leading him back to Frank.

"Shit. What did I do?" Richie asked him.

Leonard walked up behind Frank and tapped him on the shoulder with the clipboard. "Colonel Slagel."

Frank turned around and smiled. "Leonard."

Leonard handed Frank the clipboard. "You're a busy man. I think perhaps it's best that you reinstate Private Martin here as your assistant. You two were close before, perhaps that is the best *working* relationship there can be. Think about it." Leonard didn't wait for a response, he walked away.

"Wow." Richie grinned. "Frank he like just handed me over to you. Wonder why he did that. He doesn't even care that were close. He want us to be together."

"I guess my plan to keep him away from me worked."

"Sure did." Richie smiled. "And what was the plan. What did you do?"

"Made him think I was gay."

Richie's eyes widened as he watched Frank turn back around to supervise the training men. He didn't know what to say, but he did know now why Leonard, the sergeant and the other ambassadors were giving hm them funny looks.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Dear Ellen,

You are probably wondering right now if I am at the clinic. If you go there you'll see I'm not. In fact by the time you get this note I will be long gone from Beginnings. I didn't want to leave you or the kids, but my work calls for me to be where it is needed more and I could do more with it. I was made an offer by the society and I found myself in a position that I didn't want to turn it down. That's where I will work now. That's where I will live. I hope that one day, both sides can see eye to eye and then maybe, you and I can live together as a family, once again. I love you always. Dean.

Henry looked as if his heart were broken as he raised his eyes from Dean's letter. The sensitivity he was feeling for Ellen reflected in his eyes as they glossed some in sadness. He looked so upset sitting at the breakfast counter that Ellen couldn't look at Henry. She just couldn't face him and she turned her back.

"El." Henry's voice cracked. "El, I am so, so sorry."

"Henry, I just don't want to talk . . ."

"I wondered when you called me, why you sounded so down. Why you needed me here. Does anyone else know?"

Ellen shook her head. "I came to you first. The community is going to wonder. You're the leader Henry."

"I'm your friend El. More than that, I'm your friend."

Ellen swallowed and turned to face him. Her insides shook staring at Henry.

"El, There has to be a mistake. O.K." Henry held the note up. "I don't believe Dean would do this."

Follow the plan? Lie to Henry? Ellen tried to do it but the words failed to come from her mouth. Quickly she searched her mind for truthful words that would not give it all away. "No, Henry he left for the society. I know it."

"How?"

"He was talking to George yesterday."

Horrified. Henry turned instantly pale. "El, you have to . . ."

"I can't talk anymore. Not now. O.K.? Not now." Biting her bottom lip, Ellen hurried from the kitchen, pausing to look at Henry as she raced out of the room.

Like Ellen did earlier, only from a leader's stand point, Henry read again, Dean's letter.

^^^

Poplar Bluff, Missouri

It had to be the jerk of the movement that caused Dean to finally open his eyes. He was lying on his side, yet his feet were on the floor. His hand rested against a softness, velvety, and moving his eyes some, Dean saw the grey color. His senses began to kick in as he awakened more. The moving had a bit of shift to it. The sound of an engine, but not motor vehicle. But nothing gave it away to Dean more than the long loud whistle that blew.

"A train?" Dean said out loud and sat straight up. When he did he got glimpse of the small private compartment he was in. Alone. He looked out the window to see the outdoors moving quickly by him. "I'm on a train?"

His stomach flipped and his head spun. So much nauseousness filled Dean at that moment that his mouth salivated and it took everything he had to keep from up heaving onto the floor. He felt as if he were feeling the effects of anesthesia. And when that thought hit him, he remembered the pinch and Dean reached his hand behind his neck. His fingers felt the dried bump of blood and how tender the area was. He had been drugged and that was the injection site. He didn't see it coming and by the time he heard it, it was over with. Dean physically felt bad at that moment, wanting only to lay back down and go to

sleep again. And if his stomach wasn't sick enough, it became ten times worse when Dean looked at his watch and saw he had been away from home for eight and a half hours. How far away from them had he gotten? He knew for sure it was further than he ever was or ever wanted. And he would only get further away, because that train kept moving and it was moving fast.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Damn it." John Matoose reached for his belt as he and Jenny sat in the 'Joe' park. "I forgot my radio."

"How can you forget your radio John. You wear it."

"Yeah. But I was under the counter in the communications room with Danny fixing the connections and I took it off."

"Just go get it after our little breakfast break." Jenny handed John a muffin

"I really should get it now. Do you mind?" John asked.

"Hurry up. Forrest only teaches art for a half hour." Jenny told him

"Be right back." John kissed Jenny on the cheek and darted away.

Joe, Robbie and Jess watched the tracking signal of Dean's move steadily in the communications room.

Joe staring at the wall map with one arm folded across his waist spoke up. "He definitely is going that way. Hal."

Hal's voice came over the speaker. "So he looks like he's heading to Frank."

"Looks that way." Joe stated.

"Then really, preparation time for Jess' trip should be minimal. I can get as much detail as possible off my men when it comes to location." Hal said.

"That might not be a bad idea. Get what you can, but we still won't know anything until that signal stops steady. Right now, the most we have seen it at a stand still is ten minutes." Joe stepped back some and stared at the wall speaker.

"Steady still signal then send Jess out to scout. Good idea. But here's the problem I see Dad." Hal spoke. "... Jess."

Immediately Robbie looked at Jess then to the speaker on the wall as if he were going to be speaking to his brother. "What the fuck Hal?"

"No Robbie, not what the fuck." Hal came back. "He's one man Robbie. You think it's wise to send one man, alone out there to scout this reserve base? I don't. I think it's foolish and I have never sent a man out alone. Ever."

Joe swayed his head to Robbie.

Robbie, whose arms were folded lifted a hand. "What do you want me to do. I'd go. I can't. I have security here to run."

"Is there someone else you can trust?" Hal asked. "If not, let me send one of my men with Jess. They are actually quite proficient in scouting society

camps. It's only a matter of making their minds snap back to the old world and adapt to your more technical surveillance ways."

Robbie rolled his eyes at his brother's words. "God are you dramatic?"

"Excuse me?" Hal came back.

"Why couldn't you just say, 'my guys know how to scout society camps, one should go with Jess.'"

"Because there is more to it." Hal defended.

"Like what?" Robbie asked. "They don't remember how to use a camera? A camera Hal. Not a technical surveillance way."

Hal remained big-brother calm. "Robbie, your irritated. You're probably tired. I'm going to forget this tone you're handing me. But make no bones about it, if I was there I'd nail you."

Robbie laughed. "With or without your sword Hal?"

"Robert!" Joe yelled. "What the hell is with you? Huh?"

"Oh no." Robbie held out his hand to Joe. "You can ask me that when you gave Jess orders to shoot me in the leg if I went against the plan and tried to follow Dean?"

"Obviously you tried to go against the plan or you wouldn't have known this."

"Uh Dad?" Hal interrupted. "You gave someone orders to shoot your own son?"

"Hell yeah." Joe stated. "When innocent lives are at stake, son or no son, he is not immune. And don't think for one second I wouldn't have you shot either for the same thing. But enough of this shit. Tension is high, I understand that. Robbie, are you going to close the attitude, so we can discuss this."

"Yeah." Robbie nodded and stepped back and leaned against the far wall by the open door. "I'm sorry. Hal, I'm sorry. I'm worried about Dean, I'm worried about Frank. And now you have me worried about Jess."

Jess gave a closed mouth look to Robbie. "Just show up to get me when you're supposed to and I'll be fine. I really can do this alone."

Joe looked at him. "But should you? Hal has a valid point." Joe's eyebrow raised when he heard this little voice, high tone, whiney, and murmuring *'Hal has a valid point'*. Joe turned his head over his shoulder to look back. "Robbie! Knock it off! Christ." Joe returned to the speaker. "O.K. Hal, pick out a man, I'll send the chopper down there for . . ."

"No need Joe." The new voice entered in the room.

Joe spun from his speaker view to see a very sweaty and nervous looking John Matoose. "Shit."

John took a step. "No need to bring someone in Joe."

"Dad?" Hal called out. "Is everything O.K.?"

"Let me get back to you Hal." Joe told Hal. Then not removing his eyes from John, Joe disconnected the call. "What did you hear John?"

"I . . . was I was coming back for . . . for . . ."

"What did you hear!" Joe blasted. His hand slammed hard on the counter.

John grew even more jittery. "I . . . I heard Dean left to . . . to help . . . Frank. You're send, sending Jess to scout. Alone and . . ." There was a vocal shudder of fear that came from John when he felt the cold metal of a revolver barrel pressing to his temple. "Oh God." John tried to shift his eyes.

Robbie held the gun firm against John's skin. He stepped closer to him.

Speaking so close his breath was hot against John. "You know too much." he clicked back the hammer on the revolver.

"No." John cried out.

Jess sprang forward. "Robbie no!"

"Robert." Joe spoke calm.

"What am I supposed to do?" Robbie asked emotionally. "Let him get away. We let him get away with too much. This piece of shit wanders freely around our community while my brother is taken by the society. Dean had to give up his family for the society." he pressed the gun harder.

"Joe." John's body shook, his lips trembled and beads of sweat formed like a mustache on him. "Joe Please. Please. I just want to help. I just want to help. I did this community wrong. Let me go with Jess. Let me go scout with him. I swear on my wife Joe I need to do this. I need to do this."

Joe walked toward John Matoose. "I can't trust you."

"I know." John breathed heavily. "Let me try to get that back. I have come to you with everything I know. Let me gain something back before I'm kicked out or killed. If I can help to get Frank back. Or Dean, let me. Joe . . . didn't I tell you Frank was alive. I know how George works. I told you he would contact you. I'm begging you Joe. Begging you. Lock me up until it's time to leave. But let me leave and do this."

Joe ran his hand slowly down his own face taking a step back. He stared at his son so coldly holding the gun to John. "Robert." Joe motioned his head downward. "Let him go."

"Dad."

"Let him go. John will hang with Jess until evening and then we'll tell Jenny he's on special detail to go with Jess. He'll get locked in holding without any communication until sun up."

Robbie did not want to put down the gun. "Dad, don't do this."

"Robert, put down the gun. If I was gonna let you shoot him, you think I would let you shoot him in here. Christ no. Put down the gun."

Jess watched Robbie apprehensively lower his weapon. "You shouldn't shoot him anyhow." He saw the surprised looks he got from Joe and Robbie. "I mean, why would you take even the slightest chance shooting him without proving to the community he was involved with George. Hell, I'd just tell everyone he's up doing rounds at sector thirty-two. Tie him to a tree and leave him there. Let whatever got Marv dine on him."

Robbie grinned at Jess' suggestion. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

"Thanks Robbie."

Joe turned slightly and grumbled. "Oh boy." He faced Jess. "Take John and brief him.. *Brief* Jess, O.K.?"

"Yes." Jess took hold of John's arm. "Let's go John."

John resisted so as to speak to Joe. "Joe, thank you for this. I won't let you down. I promise."

"Yeah-yeah." Joe nodded as Jess led John out.

"Dad." Robbie rushed to him. "How could you do this. How can you just let John be a part of the most vital plan we have going now."

"Don't question it Robbie."

"But Dad."

"Robbie, don't question it." Joe stayed firm. "If John is serious about

trying to make amends, let's get everything we can out of him. If he's not, it'll be easy to tell out there. John is not a smart man. If that's the case, Jess will see it and . . . John won't be coming back to Beginnings."

^ ^ ^ ^

The physical therapy room was hardly ever used. In fact, twice in Ellen's recollection was it ever utilized. Once for Joe when he first came out of the Salicain and the second time was what Ellen witnessed as she peered into the room. The Society soldier, Tom Collins, who was shot in the back defecting, walked using the help of bars and Melissa as a guide. Ellen applauded him when he made it to the end. "Excellent."

Tom smiled and so did Melissa. Not a week earlier Tom was ninety-percent wheel chair dependant. Ellen supposed it was that crush he had on Melissa that gave him motivation. Because by what Ellen learned by his charts, Tom made the best progress when Melissa worked with him. Ellen thought Tom was kinda of cute in a barely pubescent militia sort-of-way. And Ellen actually encouraged Melissa to show some interest back to Tom as well. One, it would help him, hating when she told her 'get Tom back on his feet'. And two, telling Melissa, Mark was a bore and Gene was old, at the very least, with Tom not even twenty, it could prove sexually interesting for her. One task Ellen visually learned through a medical procedure, that Tom was physically capable of performing. But Melissa laughed at her thinking Ellen was funny when she was dead serious. But to Ellen, that secret sisterhood telekinetic-message-thing told her Melissa had the suggestion in the back of her mind. Why else would she be doing that, wide grin, flip of the hair, flirting thing all women do.

Ellen was snapped out of her watching Tom and Melissa when she felt the gentle hand lay on her shoulder. She looked back. "Andrea."

"How are you?" Andrea asked with compassion.

"Fine." Ellen stated. "Just watching. He's doing well."

"Yes he is. Melissa does wonders for him."

Ellen snickered. "I'm heading to the lab, wanna walk with me?"

"Yes." Andrea began to walk with Ellen. "I didn't get a chance to speak to you this morning. Seems you've been avoiding me."

"I've pretty much been avoiding everyone."

"Why is that?" Andrea asked.

Ellen just gazed at her.

"Talk about town toward you is not negative." Andrea walked into the lab with Ellen.

"I didn't want to take a chance of finding that out."

"Robbie told me there was some fear of that. Trust me, no one is looking at you as a traitor. Just a victim.

Ellen closed her eyes, the word 'victim' raced through her mind. "Andrea, I'm really not wanting to talk about this. I'm very . . ." Ellen paused.

"Angry? Bitter?"

"Yes." Ellen was relieved Andrea answered her. How easy lying was to Ellen all her life until she really had to lie about something she didn't want to. Lying about her husband, making him out to be a bad guy, when he actually was being a hero, killed Ellen.

“You should be angry and bitter. And . . .” Andrea looked serious to Ellen. “Right now we have to talk. You and I.”

“About?”

“Dean and his leaving for the society.” Andrea walked over to the lab door and closed it. “Now . . .”

“Ellen.” The lab door burst open and Jenny ran in. “Oh Ellen.” She sounded so distraught. “You surfaced.”

Ellen shifted her eyes from Andrea to Jenny. “I surfaced?”

“You’ve been hiding all day.”

“Jenny, Andrea and I . . .”

“Ellen.” Andrea interrupted her. “You and I will speak later dear. O.K.? Talk to Jenny.” Andrea stepped to Ellen kissing her on the cheek. “All will be fine. I promise you.” She gave a slight smile to Ellen and to Jenny and left.

Jenny watched Andrea. “Weird.” She told Ellen after Andrea departed. “Anyway . . .”

“Jenny, I’m not wanting to talk.”

“O.K.” Jenny pulled up a stool. “But you have to listen.” she sat down. “I have been giving lots of thought to this. Lots.”

“Jenny . . .”

“No, Ellen listen. Dean didn’t leave. I mean he left, but h didn’t just leave. I read the note. Sorry. Robbie showed it to me. Henry wouldn’t, he was being a dick and said it was none of my business.”

Ellen blinked, Jenny was rambling so fast. “What are you talking about.”

“Dean’s letter. The society made him an offer and he was in a position where he didn’t want to turn it down. Blackmail. Ellen! They blackmailed him into leaving. Threatened him with you and the kids somehow. He left to protect you. If, *If*, they didn’t take him. No one is gonna tell me someone isn’t in Beginnings working for George, how else does he get one step ahead of us so much. No, and I’m starting a campaign to search for him. Ellen.” Jenny reached over and grabbed Ellen’s hand. “Dean is too good. There is no way he would do this. No way.”

“Jenny.” Ellen was hesitant. “Where did you get this all from?”

“The note.”

“I read the note too.”

“Yeah, but I bet you didn’t read between the lines, did you? Read between the lines Ellen and read it again. Not once did he mention in there he wanted to be a part of the society. Not once.”

“Shit.” Ellen raced to the door. “Thank you Jenny.”

“Oh sure. No problem. We’ll start right away.”

Jenny was pleased. She had gotten through to Ellen and she knew it wouldn’t be long before she got through to everyone else as well. Ellen knew that and that was why she raced out of the clinic. What had Dean done? It wasn’t intentional but somehow Dean failed to make that note believable. And knowing where Jenny’s thinking was and the power of persuasion Jenny had with everyone, it was very conceivable that the whole plan could go awry and deadly if the people of Beginnings failed to think that Dean abandoned them. Ellen had to find Robbie and they had to do something fast before everyone started thinking that way and pushed for Jenny’s ‘let’s save Dean’ campaign.

Andrea was at the clinic and the kids were in school. The house was perfectly empty when Joe walked in and went straight to his bedroom. In the back of the closet was Andrea's 'treasure box'. Her private personal things that detailed her life. She let no one see it and Joe never had the urge to until now. Pulling the locked box from the closet he set it on the bed and began to pick the lock. It wasn't right what he was doing, this was his wife and Joe knew it. But it also was an investigation and under circumstances like that, it was no holds bar.

Joe undid the small lock and lifted lid. An over abundance of perfume fragrance whipped at him and Joe sneezed. Despite what seemed like an allergic booby trap for Joe, he began to rummage. Looking through with one hand and covering his nose with the other, Joe halted. Nasal and stuffy and through his sneezes, he smiled and spoke out loud to himself. "Well, well, well. What do we have here."

"A smear campaign?" Robbie seemed shocked that Ellen would suggest the idea to him. "El."

"No Robbie, Jenny is right. I memorized that note. He subconsciously refused to admit he turned against us. We have to start a smear campaign."

"Well Henry is not helping." Robbie stated, his hand tapping on the counter of the clinic lab.

"What do you mean?" Ellen asked.

"He refuses to talk about it to anyone. The men are saying when they question him, he's telling them, there is a misunderstanding. El . . . people just don't want to turn their back on Dean. I'm trying."

"I know you are." Ellen tapped him on the cheek. "I appreciate it. All right." she took a deep breath. "Think. We can't take a chance of Dean or Frank being endangered because of this community's loyalty to my husband."

Robbie laughed.

"What?" Ellen asked.

"It has to make you feel good though. The fact that no one wants to believe it."

Ellen smiled. "Yeah it does. Anyway . . ." She looked at her watch. "I'd better be going. I have to meet Danny in the cryo lab in half hour and I want to stop by the school first."

"Yeah I have to go too. I have to met my dad, he just radioed me."

"See you later?"

"You bet." Robbie kissed her on her cheek and as Ellen walked out, Johnny walked in. "Hey John." Robbie started to leave.

"Uncle Robbie." Johnny called out. "Can I speak to you?"

"Um . . . sure."

Johnny peered out the door to make sure Ellen was gone. "O.K., can I stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop seeing Bev. Dean's gone, no threat to El. Can I stop. I had to have sex with her three times last night."

Robbie's mouth dropped open. "And you want to stop?"

Johnny shuddered. "She gives me the creeps. I keep thinking in a month she's gonna tell me she's having my kid." Johnny shuddered dramatically again. "Please?"

"I guess now it's O.K. I'll talk to Pap about it for you. I'll let you know."

"Thanks." Johnny grinned as Robbie walked out. "Wait a sec." he scratched his head in confusion, speaking to himself. "That's not fair. If I don't want to be with her anymore, I shouldn't have to ask my Pap."

High and pleasant his name was sung out. "Johnny."

Johnny spun around and looked. "Shit."

Bev walked in and closed the door. She snickered and wiggled her fingers.

Johnny whined.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

So shiny that button on his Levi's was that Dean wondered if anyone even noticed. The bright autumn sun seemed to reflect off of it as he sat in the back of the huge truck. He had just finished checking his duffle bag during the half hour trip and everything was in there. Now all that was on Dean's mind was that button and tracking device that Danny incorporated into it. The truck slowed down to a stop. And Dean prayed at that moment that the tracking device worked, because even though the 'Binghamton Reserve Base' sign was faded, it was clear to Dean he had reached his destination.

He had finished his personal training and Frank took his break in the office he had cooled down to nearly sixty degrees. Away from the society workers, soldier and away from Leonard. Frank wanted to be alone and he wanted to hide out because he had just received word that the scientist had just arrived. And Frank wanted to stay as far away from him as possible.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"One out of three." Joe told Robbie as he handed him a Beginnings envelope. "If Andrea had sent all three of those letter to Jake, then why did she only keep one of them?"

Robbie checked out the post mark. "This date coincides with the history log. And you only found one."

"Only one."

"Which could very easily mean your wife mailed one to back up her

story, and the other two letters . . .”

“Her warning to her lover George perhaps?” Joe raised his eyebrow.

“Perhaps.”

Joe took the letter back. “However, still not conclusive enough. I got my secret spies now trailing Rev. Bob. You keep up on him. Be his buddy.”

“I’m on it.” Robbie started to walk with his father. “But I wish this investigation would wind down soon Dad. It’s getting on my nerves. I feel like I’m sitting in the movie ‘Titanic’ all over again.”

“Stuck in a situation that doesn’t want to end?” Joe snickered. “I’m with ya. But . . .” He laid his hand on Robbie’s back. “My gut tells me this is gonna be over soon. Real soon. And before long, we’ll know exactly what person or persons are Georgie Porgy’s helpful hands.”

^^^

The temperature gauge to the case was bent outward on an angle for easier access. The freezer, Dean’s freezer in the special lab was pulled out a few inches from the wall. The only light in the dark lab was the thin beam of the penlight that shined upon the numeric dial of the thermostat. Hands worked fast and precise on the temperature gauge, replacing the back piece of it. When finished and put back together, the needle bobbed back and forth and then it went steady at a perfect temperature. After the gauge was straightened back up, the freezer was rolled to its normal position. The penlight went out and Henry smiled, stuck that miniature flashlight in his pocket and walked from the special lab, securing the door behind him.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Beginnings, Montana

Though his morning reports dictated that the guard who walked perimeter thirty-two saw nothing, Robbie insisted he do the afternoon rounds. Foregoing all possible Neville points, he stopped by tracking getting a confirmation from Mark that activity was sporadic, still fast and the signal growing. Yet Robbie spotted nothing as he gazed into the large field. There was a certain smell up there that seemed to linger. An odd smell that Robbie couldn't put his finger on, but knew. And though he didn't see anything Robbie felt something. He felt as if he were being watched. That feeling of being stared through, sensed and observed. He stood there for a while, waiting, and hoping something would jump out at him. His rifle was aimed high and his concentration solid. But part of Robbie knew nothing would happen or go after him. Not out of the animal's fear of him, but the animal's knowledge of him. A good hunter never judges rash. Never jumps the gun and that was why whatever it was would not attack Robbie. Because whatever it was, was actually the hunter and Robbie was the prey.

^^^

What was that purple spot? Tiny and perfectly round. A scar like right behind Bev's ear. Johnny stared wildly at it in wonder, knowing he had seen that same mark somewhere else but he just could not put his finger on it. He never noticed it before on her, but then again he never looked that closely at Bev. He was towering over her as she leaned on the counter in distribution, her head tilted allowing the visibility of that mark. Was it part of what Ellen did to her? Johnny kept on staring. He just knew it would bother him. He knew it.

"Johnny?" Bev snapped her finger.

"Huh?"

"You're staring."

"Yeah I am. What is this gross mark right here." Johnny pointed to her neck.

Bev tsked and stood up right letting her shorter hair cover it. "It's not a gross mark it's a birth mark."

"It's gross looking."

Bev rolled her eyes slightly with a gasp. "So is this how you're doing it? Insulting me to give into this break up?"

"It's not a break up Bev. It's a cessation of sexual activity with you."

"Why? I like you Johnny."

"You bore me Bev and you give me the creeps. Especially now since I seen this . . ." He reached his finger for the fascinating scar but she swiped his hand away.

"Johnny, look, I'll learn new things. We have to be together."

"We have to not. Now I have to get out of here." He let out a long sigh.

"Wow, I feel good. Take it easy Bev."

"What am I supposed to do now?"

“Um . . .” Johnny snapped his finger. “Go after Henry. He’s leader now. Lots of prestige.” He turned around to leave distribution, and turned around to see Henry. “Oh hey Henry.”

“Thanks Johnny.” Henry grumbled.

“No problem,. Thought I’d help you out.” Johnny grinned and walked out.

Henry thought he saw Bev stepping to him but he didn’t know if it was his imagination or not, so he hurried to the back of distribution. “Joe?”

“Come on back Henry. Just getting the afternoon distribution ready.”

Henry stepped into the back room. “You wanted to see me Joe?”

“Yeah Henry.” Joe was hunched over a box, he stood up, reached in his back pocket and pulled out the envelope he stole from his wife. “Wanted to let you know, Jason was telling the truth. Here.”

“You found them.” Henry stared at the letter. “It’s to Jake.”

“One letter I found. The others aren’t there.”

“Maybe we should check George’s things in storage. You know all the stuff we took from his house.”

“We did.” Joe said.

“No.” Henry handed the letter back. “We checked for information about the society. Not once did we look for a letter from the future to him.”

“Henry that is an excellent suggestion. No we didn’t did we?” Joe smiled brightly. “I’ll get on that tonight.”

“O.K., let me know what you find.” Henry laid his hand on Joe’s shoulder. “And I’d better get going, I’m behind.” Henry backed up. “And Joe, I hope you find something that can clear Andrea.”

Joe watched Henry leave. He looked at the letter he held. “I do too Henry.”

^^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Escorted and carrying his own duffle bag, Dean was brought into Leonard’s office. It was located in the same building as the labs. Dean stepped in the room and looked at the two gentlemen standing there. Dr. Morris was one of them.

“Dr. Hayes.” Leonard extended his hand.

Dean did not take it. “When do I see Frank?”

Awkwardly, Leonard withdrew his handshake. “I’m sure we’ll get to be on friendly terms.”

“I doubt it. When do I see Frank?”

Leonard cleared his throat. “This is Dr. Morris he . . .”

“When do I see Frank?” Dean asked again. “Are you listening?”

“We have labs for . . .”

“Hello!” Dean raised his voice. “I’ll speak slowly. O.K.? When . . . do . . . I . . . see . . . Frank? A deal is a deal. Are you aware of the deal?”

“Yes, I am.” Leonard said.

“Then you are aware that I get to see Frank. Then I call my wife for your safeguard as well as mine. Now when . . .”

“Do you see Frank, yes.” Leonard looked at Dr. Morris. “Would you like to?”

“Yes.” Dr. Morris answered. “Dr. Hayes before you ask the annoying question again. Let me explain something to you as a doctor. Mr. Slagel was injured when he came in here. He lost a lot of blood. Shot, pneumonia and so forth.”

“O.K.” Dean said, wanting the doctor just to hurry along.

“O.K.” Dr. Morris continued. “Now, you can check him for surgery marks, I’ll even authorize a scan of his brain to show you he has not be made into a CME.”

“O.K.” Again, Dean had attitude.

“O.K. I’m telling you this just so you are prepared.” Dr. Morris explained. “He’s a different man. He may not recognize you at all or speak to you with any knowledge of you.”

“Why is that?” Dean asked.

“Unless he knew you prior to the plague, you’ll fall into his amnesiac category.”

“O.K.”

“Mr. Slagel has amnesia.”

Dean nodded his head once. “Frank has amnesia.” Dean placed his bag over his shoulder. “O.K., now . . . when do I see Frank?”

Leonard tossed his hands up. “Right now.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

With a sneaky grin, Danny held up a gold key. “El? You’re not listening to me are you?”

“Um . . .” Ellen turned from her microscope. “Sorry. Engrossed. Is this mine.” She reached for it and Danny pulled it away. “Hey.”

“No. Not Hey. Listen to me.”

“O.K.” Ellen’s head turned slowly back to the microscope.

Danny grabbed her chin and made her look his way. “El, this will take a second. O.K.?”

“All right. Shoot.”

Danny opened her hand and laid the key in there. “This is the key to the freezer. I have the other one incase you lose this one.”

“Danny. I have a key to the freezer.”

“That’s not good anymore. I picked the lock and changed it for you.” He saw the look on Ellen’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you look in the case?”

“No.”

Ellen grabbed her chest. “Whew. Why were you picking the lock.”

“I had to install two wire contacts on the ends of the seal. I merely lifted the case an inch, that’s it. I taped the wires, once the case was closed. It was open a matter of seconds.”

Ellen smiled. “Thanks. Contacts, why?”

“Dean knew, but Dean’s gone. It’s your alarm system on that case.”

“Oh!” Ellen was excited.

“Ellen. You, me and Joe are the only ones who know about this. Swear to God you won’t tell a soul. You can’t.”

Ellen held up her hand. “I promise. So if someone picks the lock and opens the case, the alarm will go off?”

“Yes, loud too. You’re key disarms the system. So don’t lose it. There’s a surcharge for a replacement.”

Ellen giggled and grabbed her key chain. “Look Danny, I’m putting it on now. Maybe we can find out who is trying to get in the case.”

“That’s the point.” Danny smiled. “Any questions?”

“Nope.”

“Good. I’ll let you get back to your . . .” Before Danny could finish his sentence, Ellen had turned back to her microscope. “Never mind. I’ll see you later.” He moved a few steps. “El, what exactly is in that case that you don’t want anyone to see?”

Ellen raised her eye from the microscope, she peered over her shoulder to Danny. “You can say it’s mine and Dean’s life’s work.”

Danny shuddered. “Knowing you two, don’t get into details.” Enjoying the snicker he got from Ellen, Danny left the cryo-lab.

“Oh.” Ellen raised her head. “Oh.” She bit her bottom lip, checked to see if she was alone and grabbed the clipboard. “Where does Dean have that tooth mentioned.” She flipped through a page. “Shit.” She read what he wrote and looked into the microscope. “This can’t be . . .” Ellen smiled. “One way to find out.” Looking at the time and figuring it was safe to leave everything the way it was, she grabbed the phlebotomy tray that was always out and ready, and she left the cryo-lab.

^^^

“Preparing early?” Joe asked Jess as he and Robbie approached him and John in the empty social hall.

Jess looked up from his map. “Just incase I want to learn the region.”

Joe nodded and looked to Robbie. “Tell him.”

“The signal stopped.” Robbie said. “Get things together Jess, we want to fly you out as planned first light.”

“To?” Jess asked.

Robbie’s hand came down and landed on the map. “Binghamton Alabama.”

^^^

Like a little girl with her pet, Ellen sat with Marcus on the floor of Melissa’s home. He sat beside her, nuzzling his head in a playful manner to Ellen’s hair. He made a happy grunt, smiling and showing his filed down teeth.

“You’re a good little boy Marcus.” Ellen told him, rubbing his head and laughing as Marcus’ foot thumped like a dog’s on the carpet. “Aren’t you.”

Marcus squealed in delight.

Ellen looked up to Melissa who sat on the couch. “I appreciate you

letting me do this.”

“Whatever I need to do. I’ll do.”

Ellen smiled. “Thanks. And right now I’m taking you up on that. Right now, I need you to hold down you son.” Ellen reached over into the phlebotomy tray pulling out a syringe with a long thick needle attached. As soon as Marcus saw it he squealed louder and began to race around the living, jumping, leaping and darting so fast, Ellen and Melissa had a hard time catching him.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank’s office wasn’t that far down the main corridor of the building that he couldn’t hear the double glass doors open and close. He snarled and cringed when he heard the footsteps near. He knew what it meant. He heard the truck. He avoided going and looking out. It was a matter of seconds until he was going to meet that dreaded big wig. Already without a face attached, Frank was determining ways to get rid of him. “Shit.” Frank looked up when there was a knock on his door. “Yeah!”

Leonard opened the office door. “I’d like you to meet the new top scientist.”

“I’m busy.” Frank griped.

Leonard just walked in.

“Hey.” Frank snapped. He saw Dr. Morris enter second. “I said . . .” And then Frank felt like his heart literally dropped from his chest when into his office walked Dean. “I’m busy.” Frank lowered his head to his papers again, trying to hide the smile.

There was silence as Leonard and Dr. Morris both watched Frank, watched him for signs of his memory coming back.

Leonard looked for an answer from Dr. Morris. and got one when Dr. Morris winked. Figuring there was no memory jarred, Leonard stepped to Frank’s desk. “Colonel Slagel. I would like you to meet Dr. Dean Hayes.”

Frank laid down his pencil and stood up, he walked around his desk and extended his hand to Dean. “Nice to meet you.”

Dean just stared at Frank. “Yes. Same here.”

Leonard walked closer to Dean speaking in a low voice. “I’ll let you see for yourself Dr. Hayes.” He brought his voice to a normal level. “Dr. Morris and I will be back shortly. Colonel, will you give Dr. Hayes the general synopsis of our base.”

“Yes sir. My pleasure.” Frank walked back to his desk and sat down. He watched the door and watched Leonard and Dr. Morris as they walked out. He shifted his eyes to Dean who had set down his duffle bag. Seeing Dean’s mouth open to speak, Frank held up a finger to silence him. He listened to the foots steps and then stood up again walking to his small window. Trying to look cool and calm, yet appearing sneaky, Frank took one quick stride passed the window glancing out as he did. Catching the needed glimpse of Leonard and Dr. Morris as they conversed outside the building. Then, shocking even Dean, Frank let out a deep, chesty, enthusiastic bellow as he charged to Dean. Wide grinned and with excitement, Frank threw his arms around Dean, lifting him up off his

feet, and screaming again. “Oh my God!”

Dean laughed, he couldn't help it as Frank set him to his feet. He too was just as excited to see Frank, so much so they both had matching wide grins painted on their faces.

“Dean. Dean!” Frank ran his fingers through his own hair. “Oh my God! I never thought I'd be so happy to see you.”

Dean laid his hands on Frank's arms. “And I never thought I'd be so happy to see you either. It's good to see you Frank. It is so good to see you alive.”

“Man I'm happy.” Frank bit his bottom lip. “I could kiss you.”

“Frank, let's not . . .”

“Fuck it.” Frank's huge hands grabbed hold of Dean's cheeks. He yanked him forward and kissed him quick and with a loud ‘smack’ as he released Dean and stepped back “Man am I glad to see you.”

“Yeah.” Dean touched his just kissed lips, snickered and shook his head. “We miss you so much at home Frank. God do we miss you.”

“Really?” Frank moved back and sat on the edge of his desk.

“Really. It's not the same there. And what is with this amnesia.”

“Selective amnesia.” Frank pointed to his temple.

“Selective amnesia?”

“Yeah, can't remember anything past the plague.”

Dean laughed. “And they bought it?”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Hook, line and sinker. George too. I should win an academy award for this shit. I still can't believe this. Man, my heart.” Frank grabbed his chest. “I thought for sure they'd see the shock on my face . . . and hating to admit it, happiness when you walked in this office.”

“You were good. You had me worried for a second. Just a second.” Dean, with a smile still on his face, stared at Frank.

“So Dean.” Frank held out his hand. “What the fuck are you doing . . .” Frank's office door opened. “Pivotal and strategically placed. Easy access for our troops that are working the country side. We're right now . . . Oh, Leonard. I was just giving Dr. Hayes the basic concept of our community.”

“You'll have to fill him in later.” Leonard said. “Dr. Hayes and I have business to conclude first. And then I take him to his lab.”

Dean was surprised by this. “But he was just . . .”

“Later this evening.” Leonard stopped Dean. “Come Dr. Hayes.”

Dean picked up his duffle bag, took a step to the door, stopped and faced Frank. “Thank you for the talk. We'll speak later. It was . . .” Dean held out his hand. “Nice meeting you.”

Frank grabbed his hand, shaking it. “Same.”

There was something strong and reassuring about the grip Dean felt Frank deliver in that handshake. It made him feel good, and safe. And as Dean left with Leonard, he knew all those bad feelings, all the hurt he went through the night before when he left his home and family, they were all worth it. He had done the right thing. His heart told him, everything was going to go as planned and work out, just as Joe promised. And love or hate, worst enemy or best friend, whatever Frank meant or was to him, nothing was ever going to touch that moment, that ‘feel good’ emotion that rushed through Dean the moment that he saw Frank.

Beginnings, Montana

She was scratched from the corner of her left eye to the corner of her mouth. On long thin scratch that barely bled. But Ellen was happy because she had obtained the blood cultures she needed from Marcus. She smeared them and had them running through the analysis program in the cryo lab. And impatiently she waited. Very impatiently. Actually, Ellen grew annoyed when the phone rang and it drew her attention away from watching the indicator that told her the percentage on analysis ran. Leaning on the counter, injured face point blank at the computer screen, Ellen turned on the phone. "Lab, Dr. Hayes speaking."

"I love you." Dean spoke softly.

Ellen shrieked, nearly dropped the phone and spun around so much in surprise her back was now against the counter. "Oh my God." Ellen embraced the phone as if she were embracing Dean. "You're all right."

"I'm fine. I arrived safely."

"Are you sure Dean. Tell me they aren't holding a gun to your head or something."

"No El. They aren't."

There was something about Dean's voice. No fear, calm, soothing and with a tint of happiness, that told Ellen he was honest. "Oh Dean, I'm so glad you called."

"I thought for sure you'd ask right away. You didn't ask."

"Because I know you'll tell me."

"Frank's fine El. He's alive and strong."

Ellen closed her eyes tightly, her face tensed up as a tear ran down her face. She tried to hold back the tears of hearing the news.

"He needs a hair cut. God I don't recall seeing Frank with this much hair on his head in years."

Ellen laughed. "It gets curly." She sniffed. "Will you tell him I said hi?"

"You know I will."

"Will you tell him something else."

"Anything."

"Are you sure?" Ellen asked.

"El, anything. Anything."

It was soft, but heard, a small sob and then Ellen sniffled again. "Will you tell him that I miss him and that I love him?"

"You know it."

"Dean. I am so proud of you for doing this. I love you so much. You don't know how proudly I claim the name Hayes right now."

Dean was quiet at first, and emotional. "El, thank you for saying . . ." He stopped talking when he heard the warning siren. "What are you analyzing?"

"Oh." Ellen wiped her eyes. "Um, you know how we were connecting the structure of that tooth you found in Marv."

"Yes."

"Well . . ." Ellen turned and looked at the screen and the results. Her mouth dropped open and the phone slid away from her lips.

“El? Talk to me. Is something wrong? Can I help?”

“Oh Dean.” Ellen spoke softly. “We have a problem.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Bowman, North Dakota

Hal felt like singing the song, *'oh what a beautiful morning'* as he walked out of the mess hall after dinner. He had plenty to eat, no indigestion . . . no Craig. A wise decision on his part to make Craig one of the building crew. Give him responsibility and get him out of his hair. But the happy thought of being 'pain in the ass' free had to be replaced with more serious ones. It was time for major decisions on Hal's part. He had talked to his father just prior to dinner and found out he was to be back in Beginnings in two days and would be gone for what could end up being a week. Now Hal had to pass out the authority in Bowman, not to just Sgt. Ryder, but to someone else as well. Because during that conversation with his father, Hal found out, Sgt. Ryder was going to be a part of the plan as well. Hal prepared every one of his top men to be able to take the authoritarian position in Bowman. His decision would be difficult, not because he had no one qualified enough, but because he didn't want to slight any of the men he had hand picked and trained himself. Unlike Beginnings, the deciding factor on who would lead Bowman was not placed on a popularity vote. Hal saw enough of that in the old world. And Hal was seeing it in Beginnings. Not that he didn't like Henry, he did, everyone did. But Henry was too nice and not quite the leader material Joe was or even Robbie for that matter. And Hal didn't want all his hard work and building of a strong community to go to waste in the event something happened to him. And though Hal was confident the rescue mission to get Dean and Frank would go off without a problem, there was still that chance. And because of that chance, Hal had to give even more thought into who he placed in the leadership line. And with that heavy on his mind, along with the latest Neville Stats, Hal walked home to do some serious thinking.

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Beginnings, Montana

Robbie grabbed a few more items, tossing them into a duffel bag. They were things he needed if he was going to be staying over Ellen's. Just as he reached for his front door in his leaving, it opened. Jess walked in.

"Robbie."

"Hey, Jess. You get John all situated at holding?"

"Yeah." Jess stepped into the house, slowly running his hands through his hair. "Are you leaving for el's?"

"Yep. See ya in the morning . . ." Robbie took a step to the door and stopped. He looked back at Jess who had wandered, almost saddened to the table. "You O.K."

"Yeah." Jess waved his hand at Robbie. "Go on."

"You sure?"

Jess looked up from his stare at the table. "Actually, hating to admit this, I'm a little . . ."

“Nervous about tomorrow.”

Jess only gave a closed mouth smile.

“Need to talk?” Robbie asked.

“No, that’s O.K., Go on over to El’s.”

“Jess, come on. We’re friends. If you need to talk about this. I’ll hang and talk.”

“Really?” Jess asked. “I just need to get over this anxiousness. The pressure. Not that I can’t handle it. But . . . you know what I mean?”

“Yeah I do. I can remember in the old world when I was in the Army, anytime I was getting shipped out, no matter how confident, I got that knot in my stomach.”

“Same here.”

“Hey. Why don’t I take my bag over El’s, tell her I’ll be by later and you and I can have a drink and hang.”

“Take my mind off of it?”

“Hell we’ll have fun.” Robbie moved through the door. “I’ll be back.”

“Thanks Robbie.”

“No problem. You’re helping my brother Jess.” Robbie turned serious. “For that I am very grateful. Be right back.” Robbie nodded with a smile to Jess, stepped backwards out the door and closed it.

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Binghamton, Alabama

Debating on whether it was actually food they stuffed his cupboards with, or old unpackaged M.R.E.’s Dean walked out of his kitchen leaving food to be an option for when he was so hungry, he didn’t have a choice. He checked out his watch again. Where was Frank? They had let him call home, talk to El about her test results and then when he was finished with his very monitored call he was rushed away to a lab. They placed folder upon folder in front of him. Did they actually expect he would willingly begin solving their problems? Dean knew they were smarter than that. But smart enough to figure if he wasn’t going to help them, he would still be locked in that lab until they came for him. And when they did, they brought him to his house. Dean’s mind swarmed with thoughts that they shipped Frank out. It was a one time visit thing and no more. Seeing that it was early evening, Dean would wait a little more before making any final deductions.

He grabbed his duffle bag and decided to take his things upstairs. Find the bedroom that he would sleep in. No sooner did his foot hit the second from top step that Dean heard a banging and shuffling. It jarred him some and made him wonder if he should race back down the steps or investigate. Figuring what did he have to lose, he followed the noise to his bedroom.

It came from his closet. Hangers moving, grunting. And as Dean set down the duffle bag, the closet door opened. Dean laughed. Frank walked into his bedroom. “You couldn’t use the front door?”

“Fuck no. Can’t let them see us talk.” Frank looked back at the closet. “Fuckin secret passage is built for someone your size.”

“Thanks. Good to see you again.”

“Yeah, I heard they had you in the lab.”

“Locked in the lab. I didn’t hear from you. I didn’t know if we’d see each other again. Frank? Why is there a secret passage in my closet?”

“Oh.” Frank smiled. “I thought you were going to be some big wig society scientist. Thought I’d snoop you know. But you’re you. And . . .Dean, what are you doing here?”

“I’m here for you Frank.”

Frank laughed. “You’re my rescue.”

“Asshole no. It was part of a deal. George called me up. Me for you. I join the society, you go home.”

“Dumb.” Frank scoffed at him. “You think I’m stuck here?”

“Well, uh, yeah Frank. Since you failed to come home.”

“How can I come home Dean?” Frank asked. “I have to find El first, as soon as I do, I’m out of here.”

Dean laughed.

“What?”

“Frank, Ellen’s home. She’s fine. The UWA rescued her and brought her home.”

Frank’s eyes widened. “You’re shitting me? Fuck this. Let’s go.” He reached for Dean’s bag.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re getting out of here.”

“We can’t go anywhere Frank.” Dean grabbed for his bag struggling with Frank over it.

“Yeah we can Dean.” Frank tugged. “I’m not staying. I didn’t leave before because I was afraid for El. She’s home. Let’s go.”

“No. We can’t.” Dean pulled in a losing bag battle. “You should still be afraid for El and our kids Frank.”

“What?” Frank stopped fighting and let go of the bag. “What do you mean?”

“George has someone else besides John Matoose working for him in Beginnings. This person lets him know everything. You’re not the only reason I came Frank. El and the kids are. If I backed out, He said he’d kill them.”

“I’m killing him when he gets back here.”

“Well you’re gonna have to wait until the rescue takes place. That way El and the kids are placed under protective custody. Until we synchronized it, we don’t know who it is, where it will come from or when. So we hang tight.”

“Fuck. He blackmailed you into coming?”

“Yep. With their lives and yours.”

Frank walked closer to Dean nodding his head. “He must want you bad.”

“Yeah he does. I think his technology has stalled. I don’t know. But he thinks the combination of my leaving, you being dead and Joe’s retiring, Beginnings will weaken.”

“My Dad retired?”

“As a cover up.”

“Don’t even tell me fuckin Henry is leader.”

“Yep.”

“Uh!” Frank hit himself in the face. “No wonder George is confident. Fuck. When they coming?”

“A few days.”

“And they think I’m dead back home.” Frank asked.

“Convinced of it. We had to convince them. We had a really nice funeral for you. Trish taped it.”

“Oh yeah?” Frank nodded. “Is that how you convinced them?”

“That and Ellen.”

“She grieved huh. Big time.” Frank grinned. “Was she emotionally distraught? I know she had to act, because she wouldn’t think I was dead.”

“You’re right. She didn’t think for a second you were dead. But, she grieved and . . . and for the final convincing straw, she . . . brace yourself Frank.”

“What.”

“She.”

“What!”

“She got married to someone.”

Frank lost his balance, but only for a second. “O.K.,” He held up his hand. “I can handle it. It was a plan to make the community think I was dead. She moved on. I’m the love of her life.”

Dean rolled his eyes.

“I know it’s not Henry. Robbie. She married my brother. I always said . . .” Frank saw Dean shaking his head. “No? Who?”

Dean held up his left hand.

Frank waved back. “Who?”

“Frank.” Dean stepped closer nearly shoving his hand in Frank’s face.

“Who?” As Frank lowered Dean’s hand, he saw the band. “No.”

“Yep.” Dean smiled. “Mr. And Mrs. Dean Hayes.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep.”

“O.K.” Frank held up his hands. “It was a cover up. Right.”

“Um. . . . sure Frank.”

“Plan was she gets married, I get back, she gets annulled from who ever she married.”

“That was the plan.”

Frank cringed. “You have no intentions what-so-ever of getting annulled. Do you?”

“Nope.”

“Fuck.”

“Married Frank.”

“Dean.” Frank pointed at him. “Don’t.”

“Mr. and Mrs. . . .”

“Dean!” Frank blasted.

Dean laughed. “Had to rub it in. But uh . . . don’t worry Frank.” Dean swatted him on his arm. “I know you guys. And El says hi and she loves you and misses you. And being the swell guy I am, and knowing this. When you get back I’m gonna give you your happy little reunion.”

“Thank you.”

“For an hour and then . . .”

“Dean.” Frank stated his name like he always has. “Shit. I want out of here. We should just say screw the plan, you and me grab a jeep, take off late tonight. We’ll be home by dawn, protect El and the kids before they even know

we're missing."

With his arms folded Dean raised an eyebrow to Frank. "How in the world do you think we're making it home by dawn?"

"Driving." Frank placed his hands on his hips.

"Yes, you said that. To Beginnings?"

"Yep."

"In a few hours."

"Yep." Frank looked certain.

"Frank last I heard the speed of light has yet to be achieved by motor vehicle. How do you suppose we make it to Montana from Alabama in a few hours."

"We're in Alabama? No we aren't." Frank tossed his hand at Dean.

"Yes Frank. We are."

"I thought we were in Colorado."

"Binghamton Frank." Dean said.

"Yeah. Binghamton Colorado."

"No! Binghamton Alabama."

"Oh my God! I'm in Alabama?"

"I can not believe you didn't know this."

"Shit." Frank walked in small circles. "Oh man and I sent them UWA soldiers walking seventeen hundred miles." Frank snickered. "And here I thought Richie was just really bad at math" Frank continued to laugh.

"Who's uh . . . Richie?"

"Me." Out from the closet stepped Richie.

Dean's eyes shifted and he gave a weird look to Frank then to the stranger who mysteriously appeared in his room. Dean walked behind Richie peering into the closet then back to Frank. "Anyone else you're expecting Frank or am I safe in closing this?"

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Beginnings, Montana

"Oh my God." Ellen exclaimed with such disgust to her voice when she saw Josh's room as she passed it on the way to the livingroom. "Did Dean or did Dean not, tell you to pick up this room?"

Josh peeked from behind the door. "Huh?"

"Clean your room."

"O.K." Josh closed the door.

Ellen grunted and walked to the livingroom. "Sorry. Henry."

"No problem." Henry sat on the couch. "You want to have desert now or later when Robbie gets here?"

"Let's wait a little bit, see if he shows soon. I don't want him to miss your Beginnings first recreation of Jell-O."

"He's seems like the Jell-o type of guy."

"Actually Dean is the Jell-o guy. He told me when he was in college, he lived off cherry Jell-o."

"Oh el, you can't live off of Jell-o. It hasn't an real nutritional value. I

think he was lying to you.”

“Henry.” Ellen sat on the couch. “It was figuratively speaking.”

“Oh.”

“So, how was your day as leader.”

“Tough. I must have been asked a thousand times about Dean.” Henry shook his head. “El, I can’t figure out who is telling people. I wanted to keep it a secret until we figured it out . . .”

“Henry.”

“No El. Something is not right. It just isn’t a Dean thing to do.”

“Henry.” Ellen laid her hand on his knee.

“And as leader of the community I’m pushing to look into this. Jenny brought the content of that letter to my attention and she made valid points. And that was coming from Jenny.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “Listen . . .”

“El. I’m getting together search parties. I’m calling Hal tomorrow. Him and I are sitting down. His men scout society camps. We are going to find Dean. He’s in trouble El. He’s there against his will, I feel it, and we’re going to go get him. He wouldn’t leave us. His home, his kids and he wouldn’t leave you.”

“Henry.” Ellen stood up. “You can’t do that. O.K.?”

“Look, I know you’re hurt.” Henry stood up. “I also know you’re probably in denial over this but . . .” He reached out and turned Ellen to face him. “As the leader of this community and as your friend. I can not let this go until I feel satisfied that Dean joined the society on his own accord.”

Ellen’s head lowered. “Please don’t do this Henry.”

“Why El?”

Ellen looked up at Henry. She saw the concern in his eyes as he stared at her. “Henry.” She said his name painfully.

“Why, El? Why don’t you want this done.”

“Because Dean *didn’t* join the society on his own accord. He went there in a blackmail trade to save my life and to bring Frank home.”

Henry’s hands slid in surprise off of Ellen and he stepped back.

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Binghamton, Alabama

Dean’s finger swayed and pointed as he looked at Richie. “I know you. Don’t I?”

Frank answered. “Nope.”

Dean shook his head. “Yeah I do. What is your name?”

Richie saw no problem telling Dean. “Richie Mar . . .”

“Mar!” Frank interrupted abruptly. “Mar-ja-ho-its.”

Dean looked up to the ceiling with a thinking look. “Richie Marjahowitz doesn’t ring a bell. But you look so familiar to me. Really. I mean, you look really, really familiar.”

Richie smiled. “That’s because I look exactly like . . .”

“Everybody else.” Frank finished Richie’s sentence. “Doesn’t he Dean.” Frank grabbed Richie’s chin. “Doesn’t he have one of those faces everyone has. A nose, eyes, lips . . .”

“Frank.” Dean said his name. “What is wrong with you? God?”

The smile fell from Richie’s face. “Dean? Is this the Dean from Beginnings. You said someone was here from Beginnings, you failed to mention it was . . . Dean.”

Dean snapped back a little in shock at how bitter Richer said his name. “Frank, what did you tell . . .”

“Check this out Richie.” Frank said. “Dean married Ellen.”

“Oh my God.” Richie said with disgust. “You married Ellen?” he gasped his displeasure. “How could you. Now that means you’re my . . .”

“Hero.” Frank interjected. “You’re his hero Dean. Richie was saying any man that gets married is his hero.”

Richie never boasted himself to be the brightest of men, but he was certain after the third interruption there was a reason that Frank didn’t want that Dean guy to know he was Ellen’s brother. Richie smiled, Maybe Frank was going to use him to help break Dean and Ellen up. “So you’re Dean.” Richie said.

“Yes.”

“Dean the dick?”

Dean was shocked. “What?” He couldn’t believe this coming from someone he just met. “Who told you I was a . . . Frank.”

“What?” Frank acted clueless.

“Did you tell him I was a dick?”

“I think asshole was more the word I used.”

“What!” Dean snapped. “You told him I was an asshole. Who’s the asshole in Beginnings Frank?”

“You.”

“Right. No, Frank. You.” Dean pointed.

Richie was offended. “Dean, how can you call Frank an asshole. When you’re the one who stole his woman.”

“Yeah.” Frank commented.

“I what?” Dean stepped back. “I stole Ellen from you. Is this what you told this man?” Dean snickered in disbelief. “Richie, he stole Ellen from me. We were married. We had children. He pushed and he pushed and he used their past to get her to do what he wanted until I left her. Isn’t that right Frank.”

“No.”

“Uh.” Dean’s gasped out. “You’re lying! No wait, you aren’t lying because I really think in that ‘pea size, neanderthal, one way, my way, Frank-BIG-man-attitude’ brain you believe I stole her from you.”

“Yeah.”

Dean grunted loudly. “I can not believe you brainwashed this man into probably hating me before he met me when who’s fault is it that you’re here? Huh Frank? Whose. I’ll tell you.” Dean steadily became more emotional. “Yours. Because you decided to kidnap Ellen from Beginnings.”

“Oh I did not.”

“You duct taped her and tied her up, drugged her and took her out without permission. That is kidnaping.”

“It was a grieving vacation.”

Richie moved away from the two men, watching them like a ping pong game.

Dean started to speak but the shock of the words that came from

Frank's mouth made him speechless. He had to twitch his head and jolt back into his brain to remember who he was talking to. "Frank! Things were worked out. We had an arrangement between us. There was no reason for you to take her out of her home and away from her children to grieve."

"In my mind there was." Frank placed his face close to Dean's.

"You broke our arrangement." Dean kept his stare on Frank.

"Like I care."

"You know, I'm glad this came up. Because Frank, I am still really pissed at you."

Frank snickered and looked away.

"Go ahead laugh." Dean warned. "But let me tell you something. The whole reason I did this. The whole reason I came here was to bring you home and kill you."

"Kill me."

"Kill you."

"Like dead?"

"What other way is there Frank?"

"Ha!" Frank laughed hard. "You don't have big enough balls."

"According to Ellen, I believe you're the one without the big enough balls."

"Oh no little man." Frank shook his head. "Don't even go there. Back to killing me. You think you can do it. How?"

"Naturally."

"Like you're a born killer?"

"No Frank you moron. Like making it look like it's not an accident or deliberate."

Frank bobbed his head almost like he approved. "So you're gonna chase me around Beginnings. Trying to kill me." He stepped back from Dean. "You know, this could be interesting."

"I'm serious Frank. I have a list."

"Good." Frank snapped his finger. "Don't warn me though Dean, anymore. O.K., I think this will be really cool." Frank nodded. "Yeah. But wait till we're home so I have a lot less things on my mind. O.K.?"

Dean tossed his hands up. "You wanna make it into a game, don't you?"

"Yeah, can we?"

Dean's hands fell to his legs with a slap. "Sure. Why not."

"Excellent."

"But don't think you get Neville points for cheating death with me. O.K.? I'll talk to the Neville committee first. You'll already be the favorite once you get home."

Frank was lost. "Neville Committee? Neville points?"

The whole entire expression changed on Dean's face. "That's right. You don't know."

"Know what?"

"Frank, this is a really neat game going on. You'll love it. In fact . . ." Dean stepped closer to Frank speaking up beat. "It's custom made for you."

Richie's head spun. It literally spun. What happened to the fight? What happened to the hatred? One second they were arguing, the next rambling on about some post apocalyptic game of heroism like they were best buddies.

Richie gave up waiting for the argument to continue. He just moved closer and listened more to the conversation, trying to figure out how he could get involved in it also when he arrived in Beginnings.

^ ^ ^ ^

Beginnings, Montana

Henry's bangs stood nearly on edge from his hand holding them back. He whined in a Henry manner, both vocally and physically. "Aw El. I can't believe you kept this from me. Frank's alive."

"Yes Henry. Dean said he's fine."

"I'm community leader El. I should have known this."

"Oh but Henry we couldn't tell you. We all wanted to. We were going to. Please don't be mad. And please don't let on that you know. I'll be in so much trouble."

"They don't trust me do they El? That's why no one told me, huh?" Henry questioned.

"I trust you Henry." Ellen laid her hand on his shoulder. "That's why I told you now. So you see why you can't start a campaign looking for Dean?"

"Yeah. And you know what El. I'll help. O.K.? I'll bash him." Henry nodded. "I'll talk real bad about him. O.K.?"

"Oh Henry, that's a good idea. Oh! Make me cry tomorrow in front of people."

"I can do that."

"Yeah." Ellen smiled. "Make it bad about Dean. Really go off."

"Really make people hate him. Yeah. It'll be fun." Henry grinned. "Wow, and Frank's alive. Wow."

"He'll be home soon Henry."

"I can't wait El. We'll have a big party."

"With lots of food."

"We'll show the funeral tape."

"We can do it like we do the walk ins." Ellen spoke excited. "And speaking of food. Where is Robbie?"

"You think he forgot?" Henry asked.

"No, him being here is part of the plan." Ellen looked at her watch. "He's supposed to show up when people are still walking around."

"Wanna go get him. I'll stay with the kids."

"O.K. Let's practice your Dean bashing on him tonight."

"I'll think of some juicy things right now El."

"O.K." Ellen was perky and headed to the door. "I'll be right back."

After she had left, Henry placed on a serious thinking face and sat on the couch. "Dean Bashing. Dean bashing. . . . Oh!" Henry snapped his finger. "I'd better write this down." He stood up, went into the kitchen and grabbed some paper and a pen. He went back to the livingroom, sat on the couch and leaned into the coffee table writing his thoughts down. Henry snickered like a school girl as he did so, seemingly so pleased with himself.

^ ^ ^ ^

“Dinner was really good Jess. Man.” Robbie rubbed his stomach as they walked from the diningroom to the livingroom. “I didn’t expect you to cook.”

“Cooking takes my mind off of things.” Jess carried two drinks with him. “This mission is on my mind.”

“How can it not be. But . . . everything will go fine. I’ll drop you off. You guys march in there. Get what you need and meet back at the pick up point. Do you worry about running into trouble you can’t handle?”

“Nah. Not me.” Jess set down the drinks. “Robbie.”

Robbie hesitated in his sitting down. “Yeah?”

“I really appreciate this.” Jess took a step to him, so serious. “You spending this evening with me, means so much.”

“I know you have a lot on your mind. I just want to be there for you. Look at what your doing for us.”

“I don’t want that to be the reason you’re here.”

Robbie shook his head with a slight grin. “No way. We’re friends. That’s the main reason.”

Jess took a deep breath. “Remember how we had that talk at the social hall.”

“Um . . .” Robbie moved his eyes up to think. “Um . . . yeah.”

Jess smiled. “Remember how we talked about being close friends and I suggested we take it slow and you said, what the hell, we live together.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I think right now. I need to say, what the hell. Right?”

“Right.”

“What the hell. I need you.” Jess took a step to Robbie grabbing hold of him, one hand on Robbie’s cheek, the other on his shoulder. And Jess with slight force, Pulled Robbie to him and passionately planted his lips on Robbie’s.

It barreled Robbie over, taking him so much by surprise, he nearly lost his balance. Robbie was sent into total confusion at that moment, everything spun around him. His body jolted in shock. Not only from the sudden feel of Jess’ parted lips touching his, but also from the unexpected sound of Ellen’s voice that rang in the room at the exact moment Jess kissed him.

“Whoops. Sorry.”

Hearing Ellen and then the door close, Robbie pulled from Jess, stumbled over the table and grabbed hold of the arm of the couch to stop from hitting the floor. “Oh my God.” Robbie trembled, looked at Jess, then to the door. “Oh my God. El.” Robbie leaped on then over the back of the sofa and charged to the door. He stopped as he opened it, looking at Jess. “I’ll . . . I’ll beShit.” He took off calling Ellen’s name as he did.

Ellen walked fast. She heard Robbie calling her. How she would react when she looked at him was the reason she kept moving.

“El. Please.” Robbie sounded desperate running to catch up to her. He reached her at the last row of houses. “El.” He grabbed a hold of her.

“Robbie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Ellen moved away form him and walked to her house.

“Ellen. Please.” Robbie jumped ahead of her. “I need to explain.”

“It’s none of my business Robbie. Really it’s none of my . . .” Ellen

stopped moving. “You know what? Yeah it is, come to think of it. It is my business. Don’t you think I have the right to know you’re involved with a man. I think I should have been made aware of the relationship.” Ellen raised her eyebrow in question.

“Oh God.” Robbie looked absolutely distraught. Terror lined his red, sweaty face. His hands shook as they covered his eyes. “Oh god. Help me. You’re my friend. What am I supposed to do about this.”

“I’d keep it quiet if you want to stay head of security.”

“No!” Robbie squinted his eyes painfully and grabbed hold of her shoulders. “He’s my friend El. I had no idea he was gonna kiss me.”

“What?” Ellen looked confused.

Robbie breathed heavily. “That has never happened to me ever. I don’t know how to handle this now. I don’t know how to handle him. Help me. Tell me what to do. How do I face him again?”

“Oh man Robbie.” Ellen spoke with compassion laying her hand on his cheek. “This has you really upset. Wow. I never seen you thrown through a loop before.”

Robbie closed his eyes. “I didn’t even see it coming.”

Joe’s voice, distant but outside with them carried shockingly over. “How in Christ’s name didn’t you see it coming.”

“Dad?” Robbie turned to see Joe walking off his front porch.

“Joe!” Ellen scolded. “You are so nosey.”

“Christ, you two are talking about this outside. How can I not hear you. I was sitting on my porch.” He moved closer to Ellen and Robbie. “Robert, what did you expect. You led him on.”

“What?”

“You led him on.” Joe told him. “What was that today. You told him, no wonder you liked him?”

“Dad. That wasn’t what I meant. I had no idea he was gay.”

“That’s because you were clueless.”

“And you knew?” Robbie asked.

“Yeah, I knew.” Joe said.

“Why didn’t you tell me.”

“Honestly?” Joe shrugged. “I really enjoyed watching you play innocently into it. I figured if you were so brainless about it, I wasn’t gonna tell you.” Joe looked at Ellen when she gasped. “Take a hike Missy Jane. I wanna speak to my son.”

“Joe, I want to . . .”

“Go.” Joe pointed to her house. “Now!”

Ellen widened her eyes, folded her arms. “I’m going but . . . Robbie, we’ll talk tonight.”

Robbie nodded fast and nervous.

“Night.” Ellen stepped on her porch. “Oh wait until I tell Henry you had a homosexual moment.”

“El.” Robbie reached for her hand. “I’m begging you. Please don’t.”

“I’m kidding. See you tonight.” She smiled at Robbie opened the door and gave a mean face to Joe. “Night . . . Joe.”

Joe waved her off then faced his son. “You have a problem.”

“This doesn’t make me gay. Does it?”

Joe lifted his shoulder. “Don’t know. You know your uncle Jerry came

out of the closet at your age. Remember, he left his wife for that fella.”

“Uncle Jerry was gay?” Robbie asked with so much surprise. “I didn’t know. I thought he was just really good friends with his . . . roommate.”

Joe raised his eyebrows.

“Oh God.”

“Robert. Calm down.”

“I can’t. I can’t.” I can’t.” He paced around. “What am I gonna do about this Dad?”

“What do you wanna do about it?”

“Huh? Robbie stopped walking.

“The way I see it you have two choices. You can go back to the house, beat the hell out of him for hitting on you, kick him out of your house and end the friendship entirely. Or . . . you go back to the house, you sit down with him and you talk to him. You set him straight . . . well, you know what I mean . . . tell him the way you are. Clear the air and forget the situation. Handle it like that time when we first got to Beginnings and you were so plastered you kissed Jenny Matoose.”

Robbie cringed in the painful memory.

“Yeah. All was forgotten. It’s up to you what choice you make. It all hinges on whether you still want him as your friend or not. He’ll find someone else Robbie to do that sort of thing with. There are plenty of men in Beginnings who are willing. But if you want to stay friends with him, you’d better damn well make it clear, you’re not one of those men. Unless there’s something about you I don’t know.”

“Dad.” Robbie shook his head. “I like Jess . . . not that way, but I like him. I want to be friends with him.”

“Then you know what to do.”

“Yeah. Thanks dad.” Robbie gave a smile to his father and started to walk away. He stopped and faced Joe. “Wait a second. Why am I thanking you. You could have stopped this whole thing from ever getting to this point.”

“And ruin seeing you in this state.” Joe snickered. “Never.”

Grunting like his father, Robbie waved his hand once and walked away toward his house.

^^^

Jess stood up from the sofa the moment Robbie walked back into the house. “Everything O.K. with El?”

“Um . . . yeah.” Robbie closed the door.

“How was she with it?”

“Jess . . .”

“We should have told her. It was only right knowing the history between you two. Maybe I should be the one to talk to her tomorrow. What do you think.” Jess held Robbie’s drink to him.

“I think I need that moonshine.” Robbie took the drink and brought it to his lips taking a long drink. “Jess. Sit down.” Robbie motioned to the couch.

“She was mad, wasn’t she.” Jess sat down at the same time as Robbie. “I’m so sorry. I’ll explain it to her.”

“There’s no need. I did already.” Robbie set down his drink. “We have

to talk.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think . . . I think there’s been a bit of mis-communication between us.” Robbie grabbed his drink and finished it. “I like you Jess.”

“I like you too.”

“No.” Robbie held up his hand. “I like you as a friend. Not in any other way.”

Shock took over Jess’ face. “But I thought . . .”

“I know what you thought. And I’m sorry, you thought that way.”

“See.” Jess shook his head. “You came to me. After Trish told you everything.”

“Trish left out some very important details. Some *very* important details.”

“Oh God.” Jess stood up. “I’ll pack up and leave. I’m sorry. I am really sorry.”

“Jess.” Robbie stood from the couch.

“I thought we were close. I thought you needed that extra closeness as much as me.”

Robbie hid his cringing. “I . . . really.” Robbie closed one eye looking at him. “I really get that extra closeness when I need it. Trust me. But I can always use a good friend.”

“I have to leave this house Robbie. There is no way we can stay friends now.”

“You don’t want to be friends with me?”

“Oh I want to. But do you know how hard it is to be friends with some you’re . . . you’re in love with.” Jess walked to the steps

Bam. Robbie didn’t expect to hear that. “Yeah I do Jess. Yeah I do. I know exactly what it’s like to see the person you love every single day. To want them. To want to be with them. But to have to stay behind a friendship wall, because that is the way it has to be. I’m there. O.K.”

Jess nodded. “Same boats, different situations?”

“Yes.” Robbie said. “But you stay friends. And the one with more feelings, deals with it. You deal with it if the friendship is that important.”

“But I kissed you. Do you know how embarrassed I feel at this moment for putting you in that position.”

“Get over it.” Robbie told him. “I will. And it will be forgotten about.”

“Can you forget.”

Robbie fluttered his lips. “Yeah . . .” He snickered. “If Ellen lets me. Look if you want to move out and stop being friends. There’s nothing I can do to stop you. But if you wanna stay, stay. We can be friends still.. I like being your friend.”

Jess walked away from the steps. “Only if we kill Trish tomorrow.”

Robbie laughed. “Oh most definitely. We will kill Trish tomorrow.”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

The night air was filled with only one sound. George didn’t need to see

it to know what it was. The unison, firm sound of marching boots. The voice of Sgt. Landers carrying in synchronization with them. George smiled as he stepped away from his window and released the curtain he held back. Things were going well. Dean was in Binghamton. Frank didn't get his memory back. And his new brigade of CME troops were now on there way there as well.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Robbie." Ellen spoke serious, laying on her side, in bed, her back facing Robbie who read. "I let you sleep in here because Henry is camping in the livingroom. Shut out the light please."

"Thanks for the book El."

"Shut out the light."

"El." Robbie set the book down. "Can we talk?"

"We talked."

"Please."

Ellen rolled on to her back. "Is this another Robbie paranoia calming session?"

"Yes." Robbie moved to his side to face her. "What if . . . what if I'm gay and I don't know it."

"God, Robbie."

"Serious El. My Uncle Jerry turned gay at my age."

"I remember when Uncle Jerry moved out on his wife. I knew he was gay before that. Everybody did. You are not gay."

"O.K. But right now, I'm scared."

"Are you having feelings for Jess?"

"No."

"A twinge of excitement when you think of the kiss?"

"El, no. Stop."

Ellen snickered. "Sorry. I can't help it. You're just being paranoid again. Let it go. You're fine. You're just a very attractive man that's all."

"Still the best looking man in Beginnings in your eyes?"

"Still the best." Ellen leaned into him and kissed him softly. "Goodnight."

"El. Do that again."

"What?"

"Kiss me."

"Robbie."

"Please?" Robbie moved to her. "Just kiss me and make me get to . . . well, the point that I know women still turn me on. Please."

"You want me to kiss you until you're aroused?" Ellen asked.

"Yes."

"Well, seeing how you're a Slagel this should take three whole seconds." Ellen moved to him pressing her lips softly to his.

Robbie laid his hand on her cheek, keeping the kisses soft, yet intense. He kissed her and kept kissing her. Then he grunted, pulled away and in frustration laid on his back. "Nothing."

"Robbie." Ellen held back her laugh.

“No, this is terrible. Nothing.”

“Maybe it’s me.”

“No, you’ve always done it before. It’s me. I’m gay.”

“Robbie.” Ellen moved to him. “Come here.” She grabbed hold of his shoulder rolling him her way. She moved her body nearly touching to his. She kissed his neck and grazed her fingers tips oh-so-lightly up his thigh, tickling across his boxer shorts and to his chest. Her hand laid flush against his chest hair as her lips moved to his and began to part his with intensity. A few seconds into the kiss, she felt his lips tense up, and widen into a grin. Ellen pulled away slightly. “Feel better?”

Robbie bit his bottom lip with an ornery smile. “Yeah. Thanks El.”

“No problem. Goodnight.” She inched away from him. Rolled on her side and pulled the blanket up. “Shut out the light now.”

Robbie reached for the lamp and turned it off, he adjusted the covers and grew comfortable in bed. “Hey El . . .”

“Night Robbie.”

“But you know what. Now could be the perfect opportunity . . .”

“Goodnight Robbie.”

Robbie smiled, slid down further and closed his eyes. “Night El. Thanks.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

September 26

Beginnings, Montana

There was a certain amount of awkwardness between Jess and Robbie as they lifted off just before dawn for their scouting mission. Robbie talked, Jess was quiet. Which totally surprised John Matoose, because he had it pegged as Robbie not saying anything. Especially after what Jenny told him when she came to say goodbye. How she heard Robbie chasing Ellen up the street. And how, bored, she followed and eavesdropped. John Matoose found himself listening to the conversation. Trying to find the hidden messages they sent to each other regarding the lovers quarrel. The sordid affair that Ellen busted. Actually John Matoose wanted to hear anything at that moment that didn't have to do with the scouting mission. Because hearing anything at that moment would make him less nervous. And John Matoose was nervous.

^^^

It was early and Joe wasn't due in Distribution just yet. Not wanting to alert anyone to his checking out George's things in warehouse 'A', Joe decided to wait until daybreak to do so, instead of at night when the lights would be seen. The streets of Beginnings only had those who worked early and headed to their shift. Mainly, security and field workers. Joe reviewed his checklist in his mind as he made his way to the warehouse. First thing was look through George's things. Second was to locate Henry and find out what the hell he had been doing as leader. Because Joe had to assign security positions while Robbie was making the flight. A task Henry told Dan he'd prefer not to handle and to speak to Joe.

Just about at the entrance to warehouse 'A', Joe heard his name being called. Not seemingly for anything, more so a good morning hello. Joe, holding out his keys turned to see Jason.

"Early start?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. You too I see."

"Josephine had heart palpitations all night. I stayed there till I sent her home."

"Is she all right?" Joe asked.

"Nothing serious. She's fine. I think, my professional opinion, she has a bit of withdrawal. She tried quitting drinking." Jason explained. "And, well you and I know she can be quite the lush."

"What made Josephine decided to give up the bottle. Her health."

"A man."

Joe nearly choked on the laughter that blurted out. "A man made her quit?"

"Actually she's trying to impress him. Forrest."

"And what was your doctor advice to her?"

"I told her to drink again. Forrest drinks as much as she does and at eighty-some years old, I told her why quit now."

Joe was a little surprised by Jason's unconventional advice. Had it been Dean, Dean would have had her in his new detox program. "Awfully unorthodox advice for a doctor."

"Yeah well, her heart won't take the withdrawal symptoms Joe. So let her go. Hell, her liver is still in great shape, she may still be skipping around here twenty years from now. Anyway I'm off. Wanted to say hi."

"Where you heading Jason?" Joe asked taking in that Jason had approached him behind all the town's buildings. "Odd that you're back here."

"Nah, I cut through this way to get to Mechanics. Easier. I have a req to turn in.." He started walking away then he stopped. "Oh Joe." Jason turned back. "I wanted to ask you. You can tell me it's none of my business, but how's the search for the society insider going. I figured that's what you were doing by asking for the history of the time machine."

"It's going." Joe held up a finger slowly. "Let me ask you a question, Jason."

"Shoot."

"You said something to Dean and Henry. You said 'another person' working for George. As if you knew of one."

"I do. Well, I think. I'm not sure. But I'm pretty certain of it."

"Who?" Joe asked.

"John Matoose."

Joe tried not to let his shock be seen. "What makes you say John Matoose?"

"History. I gave it thought when things were going against us. Especially when we went back March 6th and it seemed so much like a set up. I figured, John had to know about this place when he met up with you guys. He was with the president. I think John knew more than he should and George used that against him. John's whole demeanor changed when George left. Consistent with someone who has a lot of pressure. That's why I think George used John's knowledge to get John to do things. Held it over his head. He snapped easily and so forth. But the clincher came after the new plague. John all of the sudden was removed from any security work except for flights. Straight Mechanics. And you have someone tailing him."

"Why would you say that."

"Because I work odd hours, hardly ever sleep. John doesn't see it. I do."

"If it is true and he is followed. You won't . . ."

"Say a word?" Jason held up his hand. "No. I figured the only reason John isn't headless or out of here is because you're probably using him for all you can get. I'd do the same thing. When the well is dry, fill it in."

"You've given this a lot of thought. Haven't you?" Joe asked.

"Yes I have."

"As much thought to whoever else you think it is in Beginnings."

"Person or persons. I have several theories. I've been wanting to share them with you. But a few are half baked."

"Well," Joe bounced from heel to toe. "Let me tell you, they can't be as half baked as some of the ones we're dealing with."

"Then we'll sit over a drink and talk about them." Jason said. "Today, I'm gonna try to work in my lab. With Dean's so-called disappearance, I'm pretty busy at the clinic. Maybe tonight or tomorrow."

“I’d like that.” Joe nodded once.

“Good.” Jason stepped and stopped. “Joe, one thing. I know you’re looking at me as a insider for the society. I don’t mind. I would too. But, with all honesty, I would like to tell you something.”

“Sure.”

“I may be guilty of some things in Beginnings. But working for George is not one of them.” Jason smiled partially and walked away.

Joe watched Jason, wondering what he had mean by the last statement, and he figured he’d find out later. But at that moment, getting into the warehouse and looking through George’s things was top priority.

Maybe an hour Joe sat on the floor of the warehouse going through George’s things. He knew for certain his legs were going to kill him when he finally got out of the crouched down position. He looked differently than he had done before, because he looked with different knowledge. And when he went through George’s books, he realized that was where he went wrong before. Like Henry had said, they were only looking for things to do with the society. And when they fine tooth combed his things before, they were actually using a thick tooth comb, because they merely skimmed over anything that was related to Beginnings. And that was their major mistake.

The book marks called to him. Scrap paper, Beginnings made, placed neatly in the parts of the books George left off. An avid reader and a man who read more than one book at a time, it wasn’t surprising to Joe that George used a marker. Joe even remembered him and Henry reading where George had left off in the books. Glancing at the book marks but not thinking anything off them. They were Beginnings paper, how much were they gonna tell them. How wrong Joe and Henry were.

It was there, folded long ways on page One hundred twenty-two of the book, ‘Poseidon Adventure.’ Triple folded, with George’s handwriting on the smooth side saying ‘bookmark’ and a George drawing of a daisy. But when Joe unfolded it, he realized what it was. It was evidence they needed, but not evidence they wanted to admit to. Someone from Beginnings really did try to warn George. And Joe read the proof he held in his hand. A note dated from the future to George in the past. *‘This is a warning. Do not continue on with the society’s plan. I urge you. The virus is infallible. I know this because I write you from a future that has gone bad. Signed, a friend.’*

Perhaps George kept the note as a reminder to his mistake for possibly scoffing at it all those years ago. There was only one problem, the note was not handwritten, it was typed. With no signature there wasn’t anyway to know who wrote it. Or was there? Joe glanced down at the note again looking at it instead of reading it and that’s when he noticed. All the capital letters were faded and cut off some at the top. A hint of blue ink, only a hint could be seen. A typewriter fault? A Henry-made typewriter ribbon error. Whatever caused it, Joe quickly ran through his mind, how many typewriters there were in Beginnings and who all had them. That was were Joe was going to start. Placing the note in his chest pocket, Joe closed the ‘Poseidon Adventure’ and began to pack up George’s things. He had a new direction, one he would get started on as soon as he could. It was a little clue, but a clue none-the-less.

Binghamton, Alabama

Frank kept watching through his training and whenever he was in his office for those six scientist to leave so he could go find Dean. A morning break is what they finally appeared to be taking and Frank took advantage of it. Sneaking out of his building, staying close to the walls, edging his way to the next. Darting in and out of bushes. Trying not to be seen. As if someone his size could easily be concealed.

It dawned on Frank as he was making his mad dash to the doors of the lab building that, why was he hiding. He was C.O. of the base. So realizing this. He slowed down, stood straight and walked in. He made his way to the main lab. The door was locked and he opened it with a key that Lt. Merrick had marked for him.

Frank readied himself to scold Dean for not stopping by during the course of the morning to say 'hi'. But he figured, like he was addicted to smoking, so was Dean addicted to lab equipment or something.

Frank didn't see him when he walked into the lab. But that didn't mean Frank didn't know where Dean was. He remembered the special lab off of the freezer room. And Frank just deducted that was where they kept Dean. Hidden away like a deformed child or something. And Frank was right. Walking into the freezer room, he could see Dean in the lab . . . on the phone?

Frank opened the door, hearing Dean laugh.

Dean's back was to Frank, reclining in the chair. "O.K., just keep that in mind . . . I'll try to call you later if I can get near a phone . . . I miss you too. I love you. Bye."

"No!" Frank cried out running into the lab as Dean set down the receiver.

Dean jumped at Frank's scream. "God Frank."

"That . . . that was El." Frank pointed to the phone. "Wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Dean, you asshole! You can call Ellen?"

"Yes." Dean stood up. "It was part of the arrangement."

"Fuck." Frank rushed to the phone and reached for it. "Where's she at. I wanna talk to her."

"No Frank." Dean laid his hand on the receiver.

"Dean."

"Frank."

"Get your hand off the phone. I'm calling El."

"And tell her what?" Dean asked.

"Tell her I love her and miss her."

"And divulge that you have your memory."

"No!" Frank snapped. "I won't say anything about that."

"Frank, you idiot. What the hell do you think telling her you love her would be doing. The lines are tapped."

"Oh." Frank thought about it. "Why is George letting you call home?"

"Because he thinks El is the only who know about it. And it was part of my bargain. I have to have constant check ins with her. If she doesn't hear from me I told George she would go to Joe and they would drop a weapon her and I

worked on that would wipe out everyone on the east coast. Except me, I'm immune."

"Is that true. Do you and her have a weapon like that?"

"Um . . . uh . . . no. What are you doing here Frank?"

"Bored I guess." He sat on the edge of Dean's desk. "You know Dean I heard the end of your conversation. In all seriousness. Don't get your hopes up on keeping this marriage thing once I get home."

Dean laughed, stopped laughing, looked at Frank and laughed again.

"What?"

"You think you're gonna steal her off of me?"

"Yes."

"You think?"

"I know."

Dean laughed.

"Don't . . ." Frank imitated Dean's laughing. "Wanna bet on it."

"I'll bet you. What do you wanna bet."

"That I can't steal her off of you and break up the marriage?"

"Yes."

"Let me think about it. I need a time frame though. She'll have a certain loyalty to you for a short time for coming after me. But after that . . ." Frank fluttered his lips. "You're little man history."

"You think?"

"I know."

"We'll see."

"We will." Frank nodded.

"Why are you here Frank?"

"What? Are you working on something?" Frank asked sarcastically.

"No." Dean shook his head. "I wouldn't work on anything for them, except to screw things up."

"So you have something better to do than to argue with me?"

Dean let out a long sigh. "I guess not." Dean pointed to his desk and extra chair. "Wanna catch up some more."

"Yeah." Frank sat down at the same time as Dean. "Hey Dean."

"What?"

Frank leaned into the desk. "Guess what?"

"What?"

"I know something you don't know."

Dean made a scoffing face, gasping in disgust. "What is this? Let's play first grade?" Dean leaned back in his chair. "What do you know?"

"I can't tell you."

"Does it have something to do with the society?"

"Nope." Frank played with the pencil holder. "More personal."

"Then in that case . . ." Dean took the pencil holder from him. "I know something *you* don't know."

"No you don't. You're just saying that."

"Nope." Dean shook his head.

"What is it?" Frank asked.

"I can't tell you. Joe orders." Dean smirked thinking of Hal. "Ah. Bet it's better than yours."

"Doubt it. Give me a hint."

“You give me a hint.”

“I can’t.”

Dean shrugged. “Neither can I.”

“O.K.” Frank tapped his fingers on Dean’s desk as he rested his chin on his hand. “Catch up time. How did this Neville Competition start?”

Dean smiled, leaned closer to his desk. He enjoyed the arguing with Frank. In fact he missed it so much, fighting with Frank actually put him in a good mood. And they sat in his little office and talked about Beginnings until the scientist returned.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The buzzing of the cryo lab door opening wouldn’t have gotten Ellen’s attention because she didn’t lock it. The sweet smell of cologne made her lift her head from the far counter and sniff. It drew closer. There were only two men in Beginnings who regularly wore Cologne. Joe, but that wasn’t a scent for him. He was more the ‘Old Spice’ or “Brute’ guy. And Danny Hoi. But Danny consistently wore the same thing and that definitely wasn’t what Ellen smelled.

She turned around and smiled. “Robbie.”

“Hey El.”

Ellen’s head twitch subtly looking at a clean shaven, hair combed Robbie. “What’s up with this?” She held her hand out to him and motioned it in a point.

“Oh.” He ran his hand over the top of his hair. “I didn’t get cleaned up this morning before I flew John and Jess off so I thought I’d take a shower now.”

“I see.”

“Busy?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“I’ll come back.” Robbie pointed to the door.

“No we can talk while I work, just looking for abnormalities. If you can take it. Stay.”

“O.K.” Robbie smiled and moved closer.

“Excuse my back.” She turned to the counter. “What’s up with the cologne?”

“You like it?”

“Yes.” Ellen pulled the large magnifying glass over the specimen tray she viewed. “There’s a clipboard over on the other counter, can you had it to me?”

“Sure.” Robbie looked and saw it. He picked it up, walking right to behind Ellen and handing it over her shoulder.

Ellen felt how close he was. “Robbie.”

“So uh . . .” He stepped even closer peering over her shoulder. “What are we looking at?”

“Marv.” She giggled when she felt Robbie lightly touch against her.

“Marv? And why are you laughing?”

“Why do I get this sneaky suspicion you’re being a little frisky right now.”

“Sorry.”

“Still feeling a little awkward about you manhood.”

“El.” Robbie whined her name.

“Are you?”

“What if I’m only attractive to men now?”

Ellen turned around and faced him. “Robbie. I will tell you this one time today. After that you have to wait until tomorrow. O.K.?”

“O.K.”

“You are incredibly sexy.” Her hand ran up his chest. “The best looking guy in Beginnings. Awesome green eyes. Cute little butt. Great body. O.K.?”

“All right.”

“Good. Now I have to get back to this before I go to the clinic.” She turned back to the counter.

“So you’re working on Marv. I thought we buried him.”

“Not all.”

“El?” Robbie looked in the specimen tray. “Those are little pieces.”

“Yes.”

“Of Marv?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded. Using tweezers, she lifted the pieces.

“What exactly are you doing with those little pieces?”

“Identifying them and documenting.”

“What part of him was it?”

“Oh. Look.” Ellen allowed Robbie to share the magnifying glass as she pointed. “This here is the . . . I wouldn’t expect you to know this off hand. But this is the duct of the epididymis. This here is a very small portion of the prepuce. And if you really look close you can see that this is indeed the external urethral orifice.”

“Yeah. Sure. What?”

“Let’s just say they are remains of Marv’s internal and external genitalia.”

“Uh.” Robbie shuddered vocally. “Oh my God. That mess.”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t look anything like parts of the male anatomy.”

“Sure it does chewed up and spit out.”

“Ouch.”

Ellen giggled. “Not digested either. Never hit the stomach. Other parts . . .”

“El.” Robbie shook his head. “That’s enough.” Just as he started to step back he heard the clearing of a throat. He looked over his shoulder to see a snickering Henry. “What?”

“Sorry.” Henry held up his hand as he took a step in the lab. “I was just wondering to myself if you are standing behind El to get a good look at what she’s looking at or maybe you just miss Jess.”

“Huh?” The it hit Robbie. His eyes widened and horror splattered across his face as if someone threw it at him. “El.”

Ellen laughed.

Henry stepped in. Only when he walked in he walked over to El with his hands behind his back and his backside always facing away from Robbie.

“Henry.” Robbie scolded. “Why are you walking like that.”

“Don’t want to excite you. I got those jeans on that El says make my butt look good.”

Robbie bit his lip and whispered to Ellen. “I’m killing you.”

Ellen kept giggling and working.

Henry made his way to Robbie who still stood close to Ellen. “So Robbie, I heard you tried homosexuality last night.”

“Henry!”

“Kidding.” Henry laughed. “I’m sorry. So, what are you guys doing.”

Ellen looked at Henry from the magnifying glass. “I was just showing Robbie the remains of Marv’s genitalia.”

Henry snickered. “Man Robbie, you have to see it anyway you can, don’t you?”

Robbie held up one finger and readied himself to snap at Henry. But as his mouth opened, Robbie’s name was called out over his radio. Robbie opened and closed his mouth as if the voice mysteriously came from him. He chuckled and grabbed the radio from his waist. “What’s up Dan.”

“None of us will do it Robbie. You’re head of security. You have to go to sector thirty-two. Hank failed to come back from Neville rounds.”

“Shit.” Hooking the radio from his belt and without even saying goodbye, Robbie ran from the cryo-lab.

Henry took a look at Ellen then followed behind Robbie never seeing Ellen plop her elbows on the counter and cover her face.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

“So then I said to my brother . . .” Jess told a story as he and John tromped through the thick woods more near to the base than they thought. “. . . he was on. I bet I was the one who could get out of the service before my tour was up.”

“And he won didn’t he?”

Jess laughed. “Yeah. I never left the service. I loved it. He hated it.”

“Hey what’s that?” John trotted ahead of Jess.

“Be careful.” Jess hurried to catch him.

John bent down to the large mound of dirt, branches and brush. “Someone’s been hiding and digging.”

Jess had his hand over his nose. “And by the smell of it . . .”

John lifted a large branch. “Oh man.” He stood up. “Bodies.” he sniffed outward and cleared his throat.

“How many.” Jess looked into the hole when John removed a few more branches. “I’m counting ten.”

“Eleven. Look.” John pointed.

“Oh, he’s just missing a leg. Missed that. Not hidden very well.”

“Not at all. I’d say this hole was dug with no intentions of hiding them.”

“And whoever it was covered them quickly.”

“Frank.” John said.

“How do you know?” Jess asked.

“All head shots. Forehead. That’s a Frank trademark.” John replaced the branches and kicked his foot to cover the bodies again.

“He’s taking them out.”

“But hasn’t for a while. No fresh bodies there.”

“Do you ever wonder if Frank worries about burning in hell?” Jess asked John.

“Frank. Nah.” John shook his head. “I think Frank has this idea that he’s already in hell and he might as well make the best of it.”

Jess snickered. “We’d better get moving. By the map that base isn’t too far ahead. And we’re gonna have to get out of sight.”

John agreed and moved onward with Jess only, after taking one more look at the mass grave, shaking his head with a snicker.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe finally had his first opportunity. Distribution was closed for an hour and he was going to use the break to start his investigation. He deduced there were six typewriters in Beginnings. And he decided to start with the typewriter closest to distribution. History’s.

He stepped inside the empty office of history and was immediately pelted with this sweet smell. He sniffed and sniffed again. It was warm and fruity. “What in Christ name . . .” He sniffed again.

“Hi Joe!” Trish spoke upbeat, walking from the back room, pulling the door closed as she held a stack of papers.

“Trish, what is that smell?”

“Oh, blueberry scented candles. You like?” She sat down at her desk, laying the stack in front of her.

“No. And where in the hell are you getting blueberry scented candles?”

“Danny Hoi. It cost a small favor slip but it was worth it.” Trish whiffed inward loudly with a satisfying moan. “Doesn’t it smell bakery fresh in here?”

“Whatever. Trish I need . . .” He saw her open her appointment book. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t ask me if I have an appointment.”

Trish quickly shut the book. “Oh never Joe. Just checking. What can I do for you?”

“Does your typewriter work?”

“Yes. Oh! Do you need me to type something for you?”

“As a matter of fact . . .” Joe smiled. “Can you.”

“Sure Joe. Are you going to dictate it to me?”

“Um, yeah. Just a line. I’m checking on something. Can you do it now.”

“Most definitely. Let me get some paper.”

Joe reached into his pocket for the note and watched Trish slowly open her bottom drawer. She fumbled down there then licked her finger and pulled

out a sheet of paper. She swirled her chair to her typewriter, placing the paper inside. "Trish."

She ignored Joe, humming a tune, turning the knob and pulling the paper up. "Whoops." She took out the paper and re inserted it. "Not line up."

"Trish!"

"What?"

"Never mind. Are you done?"

"Let me see." Trish looked at the paper. "I'm ready. It's lined up. Dictate."

"O.K. ready . . ."

"I type very fast Joe so don't worry about leaving me behind."

"Good. Now type . . . This is a warning." Joe saw Trish didn't type. "What's wrong?"

"Why am I threatening someone?"

"You're not."

"But you just said type a warning to someone."

"Just type those words."

"Who am I threatening?" Trish asked.

"No one."

"Who are you threatening?"

"No one."

"Then why am I typing, 'this is a warning'?"

"Trish!" Joe yelled.

"Yes."

"Just type the goddamn words."

"O.K." Trish's fingers clicked on the typewriter in seconds she was done. "Anything else?"

"No. Just let me see that."

"Here." Trish started to hand Joe the paper. As soon as he grabbed it she yanked it back.

"Ow." Joe brought his freshly paper cut finger to his mouth. "Give it back."

"Wait. No one sees this but you."

"Give it." Joe snatched the paper from Trish's hand.

"Ow!" Trish shrieked and brought her finger to her mouth also.

"Doesn't feel good does it?" Joe grabbed his glasses and put them on. He compared the notes and handed Trish hers back. "Here I don't need this. Thank you anyhow."

"No problem." Trish began to rip the paper up in tiny little pieces.

"What are you doing that for?"

Trish spoke as she kept herself engrossed in the ripping. "Because I don't want anyone to see the note. They'll know I typed it and they'll think I'm typing threatening letters."

"How the hell is anyone gonna know you typed that?" Joe asked her with sarcasm and annoyance, cringing at every little rip she made.

"Because I have the only typewriter in Beginnings that Henry's ribbons actually work good on. Everyone else's clashes in some way or another. So they see perfect type, they know it's my typewriter."

"How do you know this?" Joe asked.

Trish tsked. "Joe." she rolled her eyes. "Duh. I get all the history

reports Mr. Ex-leader. I know everybody's typewriter faults and glitches."

Joe's eyes lit up. "You do, don't you. Trish." Joe smiled. "How would you like to help me out?"

"With what?"

"Tell me about distinguishing characteristics faults of each typewriter."

Trish gasped. "My God Joe that could take a while. I'm a busy women."

Joe looked around. "Doing what?"

"History is mentally consuming but . . . I'll do it. However, it will cost you."

"Cost me what."

Trish tapped her hands in thought. She held up her finger, grabbed a pad and scribbled something down. "Paying my small favor slip to Danny Hoi." She handed Joe a piece of paper. "Sign this and I talk."

Joe knew Trish's filling him in could save him a lot of time and lead him in the right typewriter direction. So figuring he'd deal with owing Danny at a later time, Joe signed the paper that stated he owed Danny instead of Trish. He grabbed his small note book from his back pocket and proceeded to take notes as Trish slowly filled him in on the every single boring and detailed glitch of every typewriter in Beginnings.

^^^

Bowman, North Dakota

"Jenkins." Hal stated to Sgt. Ryder as they moved down the street of Bowman. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a good choice. And less hassle since he would whine the most for not getting picked."

"My thoughts exactly." Hal said. "So, we pack up and we leave for Beginnings tomorrow."

Sgt. Ryder let out a slow breath. "I didn't think I would be included in this plan."

"Actually, it was Ellen's suggestion."

"The woman's?"

Hal cringed. "You have to stop doing that. All of us have to stop doing that. Yes, Ellen the woman When we stated I would bring someone up to help Robbie protect her and the kids while the plan goes down, she asked specifically for you."

Sgt. Ryder grinned. "I'm honored."

"And you know what Elliott? I'm glad she did. I feel better with you there."

"And I get to go to Beginnings."

"It's not all that."

"Excuse me."

"Sure the technology is there, but small town charm?" Hal shook his head. "No. Our new town will definitely, kick ass in the charm department over Beginnings."

Sgt. Ryder chuckled and strolled with Hal. They discussed Beginnings

further and the plan that was going down much sooner than anyone anticipated.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Joe covered Hanks body probably faster than he uncovered it in the morgue. “Christ.” He looked up at Robbie. “Bad, but not as bad as Marv.”

“Still as easy to carry. Did you call Ellen?” Robbie asked.

“Yeah. She’s on her way.”

“Then maybe we should go meet her.” Robbie indicated to the morgue door.

“Yeah lets. Even though Henry’s out in the hall, I think this may be one of those times where I’m gonna have to intercept her and be the one to talk to her. We need answers.” Joe moved to the door and looked at Hank’s covered body again. “And we need answers now.”

As soon as Ellen walked into the clinic she saw Henry standing in the hall facing the other way. “Henry.”

Henry turned around. “Hey El.”

“I’ve been summoned. How bad?”

“There was only the one bag this time.”

Ellen let out a slow breath. “That is a relief. There is nothing worse then rummaging through a bin of very small body parts trying to distinguish . . .”

“El.” Henry shook his head and held up his hand. “Please. Just the thought makes me sick.”

“Sorry.” Ellen stepped closer to him. “So why am I not recognizing the name Hank? Who is Hank?”

“Oh, a defector.”

“Huh.”

“One of the society’s defectors that came right at the new plague. One of Jess’s men.” Henry spoke serious then saw the snicker on Ellen face.

“One of Jess’ men?” She raised an eyebrow.

Henry started to snicker as well then saw Joe and Robbie walking down the hall. “Here comes another one of Jess’ men.”

“Shh.” Ellen whispered. “Serious moment. Let’s be solemn.” She placed her hands behind her back and stood straight and with less the smile. “Hi Joe.”

“Hank is in the back. I want from you answers.” Joe told her.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Ellen began to walk away.

“No.” Joe called out. “If you can’t tell me what killed him then you’d better damn well have some answers about hat is happening to my men and what we can do to prevent it. Got that.”

“Joe, I said I’ll see what I can do.” Ellen swayed her head.

“Do it.” Joe ordered. “You’ve been working on Marv for days. Do it.” He faced Henry after Ellen walked down the hall. “What I need from you Henry is for you and Danny to sit down, figure out how much fence you need and how

many men you'll need to erect a perimeter as fast as possible. Cliff or no cliff what ever got two of our men I do not want to take a chance, no matter how small of it coming into this community."

"But Joe . . ." Henry said. "That's a lot of area and the kids play out there."

"Then you minimize the area going around the base of the cliff as close as possible then, you double the fence. The one on the inside of the community is the protection from the one that's hot. We are just gonna have to teach these kids to stay the hell away from the fence. Don't mean to step on your toes Henry . . ."

"No, Joe. That's O.K." Henry nodded. "I'll get a hold of Danny right now." Henry noticed the look on Joe's face. "That bad Joe?"

Joe looked at Robbie then Henry. "Put it this way Henry. I feel like I am in a Stephen King novel."

Ellen looked at the semi-mound that was supposed to be a body on the table in the morgue. She let out a deep tension breath as she placed on her gloves and moved to the table. "Oh boy." She cleared her throat and brought the accessories with her. Tape recorder, chart, trays. Hesitantly she grabbed hold of the top of the sheet and pulled it back exposing Hank's half torn apart head that was barely connected to his body. Ellen dropped the sheet and slowly closed her eyes. "Oh God. Not again."

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

On a small grade dug pretty much into the hillside, Jess and John laid on their stomachs. It was an odd thing for Jess to hear. Perhaps that was why he turned to John when he heard the snickering.

"John. What? What do you see?"

"I'll be damned. Take a look." John handed Jess the binoculars.

"What and where am I looking?"

"Walking into what we call building 'A'. Look."

"Oh shit." Jess lowered the binoculars and smiled at John. "Frank."

"Yep."

Jess looked again. "Holy hell." Jess then handed the binoculars back. "I almost didn't recognize him. He has hair."

^^^

Frank didn't think it was a poisonous apple. It didn't look poisonous. But then again it didn't look like an apple either. It was round and green and Frank thought maybe it was the start of some really huge plum. He held it, looked at it and debated in his mind on whether to eat it. It had been so long since he had fresh fruit. A custom he had become used to in Beginnings.

Figuring he'd take it with him, relax after working out, and stare at it

for a while, Frank walked down the corridor of the main building and to his office. He was surprised when the door was unlocked. He was more surprised when he saw Dean sitting there. "Dean." Frank hurried and shut the door. "How did you get in here?"

Dean sat in the chair by Frank's desk. "That guy Richie unlocked the door."

"Richie? He uh didn't say who he was, did he?"

"Richie, Frank. You know the guy who came from my closet."

"Oh yeah. That Richie." Frank palmed his mysterious fruit looking at it.

"Frank? What do you have?"

"An apple, I think. Kind of small." Frank held it up. "Maybe the start of a plum or peach. I was gonna eat it."

"Frank, you can't . . . go on." Dean raised his head. "Enjoy."

Frank opened his mouth, paused and smiled. "No-no." He set the thing on his desk. "You're supposed to wait until we get home. It's poisonous isn't it?"

"No. Eat it."

"No Dean. It's poisonous, isn't it?" Frank smiled. "Huh? Isn't it? Huh? Isn't it? Huh?"

"Frank!" Dean snapped. "God. Yes. It is a poisonous berry." Dean picked it up and whistled. "And a really big one too."

"So what are you doing here." Frank sat down behind his desk. "Miss me?"

"No, contrary to what you'd like to believe after the initial slight happiness of seeing you, I've had my Frank fill."

"Whatever. What do you want?"

"I have news." Dean moved closer to the desk. "Guess who's coming to Binghamton in two days?"

"Who?"

"Guess."

"Um . . ." Frank closed his eyes. "My dad."

"Aside from him."

"My brother."

Dean snickered. "Aside from him too. Guess."

"Who?"

"George."

"Who?"

"George!" Dean yelled. "George Hadly."

"Oh my God. No shit?" Frank snapped forward. "How do you know?"

"Leonard just told me."

"Oh this is so great. How long is he coming for?" Frank asked.

"I don't know."

"Let's just hope he stays long enough for us to safely kill him."

"All you'll have to do is your Frank thing to him and how long will that take. One second." Dean told him.

"You don't want to help?"

"What? Kill George?"

"Yeah."

"No." Dean shook his head. "You can have the honors. Killing is really

not my cup of tea. Except for you.”

“Ha!” Frank rocked in his chair. “Really ‘Mr. wipe out half the east coast’? Come on Dean, you don’t want to take the pleasure in killing George.” Frank raised an eye brow.

“Frank, I’m saving my energy for you.”

“He killed the world Dean. He . . . gave my dad Salicain.” Frank tossed out the list with an enticing manner. “Started the new plague. Had something to do with you going blind. Gave our kids the new plague. Brian Dean. And . . .” Frank stopped rocking and leaned his elbows on the desk. “According to Henry and Ellen, he even killed you.”

“O.K.. Maybe you have a point. But how much help do you need Frank to shoot him in the head.”

“Dean.” Frank smiled. “I was thinking on the lines of something more sick. Something that would make him suffer. You know, hit him with a delayed reaction. He thinks he got away and BAM, he dies a slow, painful, really disgusting, Dean-style chemical death.”

“Frank . . .”

Frank tilted his head. “You make it. I hit him with it. What do you say?”

Dean moved his lips around as he thought. “O.K., you got a deal. I’ll see what I can make here. Depends what they have.”

Frank slammed his hand on the desk. “Excellent. You’ll get on it right away.”

“Sure why not.” Dean shrugged. “Shit.”

“What?”

“I have no test subjects. I’m gonna need test subjects. Rabbits or such.”

“When do you need them by?”

“As soon as possible.”

Frank smiled arrogantly. “Don’t worry. I know just where to pick them up.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Andrea’s office.

Joe looked at the nearly shut door, facing it for what seemed to be an eternity. He checked out the note from the future and then replaced it in his chest pocket. With a hand that held a requisition, he knocked once on the door and pushed it open.

Andrea looked up from her desk, smiled and then began to stand. “I was just leaving.”

“Oh yeah?” Joe placed his hands in his pockets. “I need to uh . . .” Joe held up the requisition. “Need to borrow your typewriter. Can I?”

“Oh sure.” Andrea piled up some folders, moving them neatly to the corner of her desk. “Sad about Hank?”

“Who?” Joe asked.

“The new guy that died.”

“Oh.” Joe nodded once. “Yes. Very. It’s a shame.”

“Ellen didn’t say if she needed help with the autopsy. You know with

Dean gone and all.”

“I’m sure Ellen’s fine.” Joe waited impatiently for Andrea to move from behind the desk so he could use the typewriter on the little table next to it. “She’s fine.”

“Good.” Andrea smiled. “Are we having a special council meeting regarding it.”

Joe lifted his shoulder. “Don’t know. Andrea can I . . .”

“I guess I should be asking Henry that huh?”

“Yes. Andrea could I use that typewriter. I’m really not fitting back there with you standing there.”

“Oh.” Andrea snickered. “Sorry.” She stepped from behind her desk. “Be my guest.”

“Thank you.” Joe walked over, sat in her chair and turned it to face the typewriter. He looked at it.

“On the side.”

“What?”

“On the side. The power.”

“Andrea, I know how to turn . . . thank you.” He reached for the power button as if she guided him. Even though Joe was quite aware of where the power switch was located. He pulled out his glasses and placed them on. He could see from the corner of his eye, Andrea standing there. “Are you gonna watch me?”

Andrea closed her eyes and shook her head with a smile. “Sorry. I’m a little out of it. I’m going to go. See you at home.” She pointed to the door.

Joe watched her. Then Joe watched her stop.

“Joe.”

“Yes.”

“Can we have everyone over for dinner? I don’t mean the community.” She snickered at Joe’s grunt. “I mean, Ellen, the kids, Robbie, Henry, Johnny. Can we? We haven’t had the family together in a while. I’m making pasta and there’s . . .”

“Yes.”

“Oh goodie. Because I just think with Dean leaving and . . .”

“Yes Andrea. You can do this. You don’t need to explain.”

“Thanks.” She reached for the door. “I think it would be nice don’t . . .”

“Andrea! Christ, I’m trying to get this done.”

Andrea gasped. “Was that tone necessary Joe Slagel. Oh I don’t think. Do you?” She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Well Mr. Attitude. We’ll just deal with this later. And you’re lucky I don’t kick your ass out of my office now.” Her hand moved about. “Talking to me like that. Snapping at me. Sitting in my desk. Using *my* typewriter. Which by the way, I let no one use. Feel privileged Joe.”

“Are you done?” Joe peered up at her.

“Yes.”

“Good. See you at home.” He waited, and it didn’t take long. Andrea huffed, and stormed from the office, slamming the door. Joe turned back to the typewriter.

He set down the requisition, not wanting to type on it and not wanting to waste it and he grabbed a slip of scrap paper from Andrea’s little holder. He rolled it in the typewriter bringing the paper up a little. He peered over his

glasses, placed his hands on the keys and then Joe typed the words, 'this is a warning'. After he hit the return key, and the words barely inched their way up, Joe knew. He didn't even need to take the paper out of the typewriter. He pulled the future note from his pocket, just to double check. He compared both notes. And there was no mistake about it. The faulty type. The cut off capital letters. The blue and black ink running together. The future note's irregular and defective print was a dead match for the irregular and defective print of Andrea's typewriter.

Joe's heart sunk.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Beginnings, Montana

"It doesn't mean anything Joe." Henry handed back to Joe the future note and the one Joe typed. "Anyone could have snuck in there and used the typewriter. To me it's not conclusive."

Joe sat behind his desk, actually Henry's desk, leaning back in the chair, looking at the two notes that laid before him. "Robbie what do you think."

"Hating to do it. I have to agree with Henry. Just because it was her typewriter, doesn't mean it was Andrea." Robbie said. "What does your gut tell you Dad?"

"My gut." Joe lifted the notes and dropped them. "My gut tells me . . . she typed the note. And . . ." Joe stopped when there was a knock at the door. "And we'll discuss this later . . . Come in!" Joe sat back with an 'I've been expecting you' look on his face, when Ellen, so frightened, walked in.

"Hey Joe." Ellen wearing Dean's jean jacket, shut the door and shook her arms. So nervous she was. "Cold out there. Hi Henry." She looked to Robbie who stood up. "Hi."

Robbie inched his way to her as if Joe or Henry didn't see him do it. He whispered. "I need to talk to you later."

"O.K." Ellen looked around Robbie to see an impatient Joe. She waited until Robbie sat back down and then she took center room. "I'm still inconclusive on what is doing the killing. Our analysis program . . . um, it doesn't . . ." She cleared her throat. "Excuse me. It doesn't recognize the uh, animal."

Joe slowly rocked in his chair. He brought his hands, folded, to his chin. "Is that so."

"Yes." Ellen said. "What ever it is uh . . . goes for the jugular vein first. Most of the body wounds thereafter are not bleeders. Meaning, it goes for the throat, ripping and tearing until all movement stops and then it eats."

"The victim?" Joe questioned.

"Yes." Ellen answered.

"And this is all you have for me."

"Well it only eats the fleshy parts. And . . ." Ellen reached into the inside jacket pocket and pulled out a pump spray bottle. "Here." She set it on Joe's desk.

"What is this?" Joe picked it up.

"Um, it's this super uh anti animal formula me and Dean conjured up."

"Super anti-animal formula. For what?" Joe asked.

"It's a mixture that will burn an animals mouth on contact. If the men spray it on their neck. The second the animal bites him, the animal will go no further. You may have an injury but probably not a devastating mangled mess of a death."

"Thank you for the colorful commentating." Joe looked at the bottle. "This will burn the animal's mouth."

"Yes. Really bad too. O.K.? That's the best I can do now. Bye."

"Ellen." Joe called out to her as he held the bottle close to his nose. "This smells like straight garlic."

"Um . . . yeah. It is. Bye." She hurried for the door again.

“Hold it.” Joe set the bottle down. “Since when did garlic burn an animals mouth.”

“It works on werewolves.” Ellen shrugged and lifted her arms.

“Vampires.” Joe corrected.

Robbie looked at Ellen. “This isn’t a joke because you said the animal rips apart the throat first, is it?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “It’ll work. Trust me. I think. Not ‘think’ that you should trust me. You should trust me. But think that it will . . .”

“Ellen.” Joe stated her name harsh. “You’re saying this is an animal. Garlic won’t burn an animals mouth.”

“That will.” Ellen pointed.

“It’s garlic.” Joe said.

“Yes.”

“Garlic won’t do it. Animal Ellen. Not vampires. We don’t have vampires in Beginnings.”

Henry held up his finger. “If I can Joe. You *did* say you felt like you were in a Stephen King Novel”

“Henry.” Joe looked at him.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t.” Joe grabbed the bottle. “Now Ellen . . .”

“Bye Joe.” Ellen waved and ran out the door.

Joe, angry stood up. “She knows something. I know she knows something.”

Robbie turned from the closed door to his father. “What can we do though.”

“You and you.” Joe pointed to Henry and Robbie. “Can do nothing. But I have two doctors and a doctor wanna be who can pretty much make heads or tails out of her autopsy reports.” Joe sat back down. “And that’s where I’m gonna start.” He grabbed his phone and dialed. “Andrea. It’s me. I have something you need to do for me.”

^^^

Binghamton. Alabama

“What are they doing?” John asked Jess who watched Frank and Dean.

“Staying out of sight while they talk.”

“They should be back inside. Someone is going to see them together out there.”

“Nah. Their hidden. Look.” Jess handed John the binoculars.

“Does it . . .” John lowered them from his face. “Does it look to you like they’re arguing?”

“Yeah. But they wouldn’t be arguing. Catching up maybe. I mean they haven’t seen each other in a while. They’re on the same side. They’re probably just discussing George really in-depth and it’s making them look like that.”

“Yeah.” John returned to watching them. “You’re probably right. What the hell could they possibly have to argue about anyhow.”

“Henry.” Frank said the name so insistent.

“No, Frank. Robbie.”

“Henry.”

“Robbie.” Dean spoke argumentative.

“This whole conversation is pretty fuckin stupid.”

“Go figure. You started it.”

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself Frank.” Dean looked around to make sure they still remained behind the large storage building. He placed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “Robbie.”

“Henry.”

“Frank, you haven’t been there in a month. I know.”

“Don’t matter Dean. I know.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that she was living with fuckin Henry to stay neutral between us and . . . and.” Frank pointed. “You and I are gone. He’s gonna jump on it, especially since he thinks you really left Beginnings for the society. In Henry’s eyes right now. You’re a gone man. I’m a dead man. He’s a lucky man and trust me. He’s gonna waste no time.” Frank nodded with assurance.

“O.K., O.K. you have a point. But . . .”

“No buts.”

“Yes Frank but. I’m saying with all certainty, Robbie.”

“Robbie!” Frank scoffed. “Why in the world would Robbie go after Ellen in our absence if he knows your coming back and he knows me. His brother is alive.”

“Because I told him to make it look like Ellen turned to him when I left. I . . . I told him to watch over her and take care of her.”

“Dean!” Frank blasted. “What the fuck. Oh man.” Frank shook his head. “You gave the two most immoral people in Beginnings permission to play house. Oh you have no one to blame if something happens. You gave the green light. You know Ellen.”

“I know you’re brother too. That’s why I say Robbie’s taking advantage of us being gone. Ask him about the incident a week after you supposedly died.”

“What?”

“Ask him.” Dean raised an eyebrow.

“No.”

“Well.” Dean bounced from heel to toe. “They said nothing happened but . . . they were alone at that farm house for quite some time.”

“What do you think?” Frank asked. “Because I’ll kill him if I find out he touched her.”

“I don’t think they did.”

“Good.”

“Of course I didn’t think they did after I heard they did it the one time in Ashtonville.”

“They didn’t.” Frank said.

“They did.” Dean told him. “El, said so. When her and I broke up and

she lived with him.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “And bet me it’s happened before. But we can’t really get mad because we weren’t there in that history.”

“Technically we were.” Frank said. “We just don’t know it.” He looked at his watch. “Shit, we’d better be splitting up. We’ve been out here long enough.”

Dean checked out the time also. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“I’ll head out first.” Frank began to walk. “Hey Dean. Thanks for the talk. And work on that chemical.”

“I will. You work on my animal.”

Frank just grinned and kept on walking.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Was Andrea home already? Joe asked himself when he walked in the house, smelled the scent of food and heard the . . . slamming of pots? “Andrea.” Joe walked in the kitchen.

“Joe.” Andrea kept her back to him. “I’ll pretty much have everything ready. I have to do something around dinner time at the clinic. A uh . . . patient. It won’t take long. Hand the salad duty over to someone please.”

“What’s wrong?”

It was high pitched and so female. “Nothing.” She laid a lid on the pot. “Just a patient.”

“I’m not talking about the clinic. I’m talking about with you.”

“What do you mean Joe. What’s wrong with me because I won’t make the salad?” She stirred the cooking pasta. “I hate warm lettuce and you know perfectly well if you break it too soon it turns brown. I don’t know about . . .”

“Andrea! For crying out loud.” Joe stepped to her. “You found something out. Didn’t you. When you, Jason and Johnny looked into the autopsy you found something . . .”

SLAM! The metal pasta fork banged off the counter. Andrea spun coldly to Joe. “I found nothing.”

Joe’s eyes widened at the sudden switch in demeanor. “Excuse me?”

“And don’t you ever ask me to go behind a coworkers back again. You hear me? Leader, former leader, council member. I don’t care.” Her arms waved about. “There was nothing what so ever in those reports. None of us found anything Joe. You!” Andrea pointed as she backed up. “Just want answers so badly that you will stoop so low as to go behind Ellen’s back to find out. There are no answers Joe and I feel really bad for doing your dirty work. From now on. You want to play private investigator and find out what you think you know. Then you do it. Stop asking everyone else to do it. Stop asking me!”

“Why are you so upset about this? I asked you to read her reports.”

“Without her knowledge.”

“Yeah. So.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Yeah so.”

Andrea grunted loudly. "I'll tell you what your problem is Joseph Slagel."

"O.K. I'm game. Tell me." Joe said.

"Ellen said it was inconclusive. But your problem is, this isn't the CIA. When the truth is staring you in the face, you don't want to believe it because it's not hidden behind anything. Well Joseph not all things are hidden deeply somewhere, and you just have to take it for face value. Sometimes the most obvious truth really is the answer. And this is just one of those cases." Andrea stormed out.

Joe stared at the empty doorway. "In more situations than you realize Andrea, you made a valid point."

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters.

George smiled as he hung up the phone and looked at Steward who stood before his desk.

"Good news sir from Beginnings?" Steward asked.

"I don't know. Could be." George tilted his head with a smile. "Seems Beginnings has two men dead. Very violent killings."

"And . . . does this have to do with us?"

"Aside that it's just pleasant news to hear. It may." George leaned back in his chair with a pleasing smile. "It just may."

^^^

Jess and John had to stay hidden deep in the brush so that the headlights from the four huge military trucks didn't shine upon them. They were closer to base taking pictures than they needed to be when the trucks arrived. So engrossed with Frank standing on the roof of the one building, posing as if some hyped up wrestler in an arena full of people. So evident that Frank knew from Dean that John and Jess were probably out there, scouting, taking surveillance photos. John and Jess got some good shots of Frank and laughs before the trucks pulled through the gate and stopped just inside. The arrival of the trucks shocked them, but not as much as the regimented lines and lines of head shaven soldiers who stared to blankly and cold as they marched right in.

"Shit." Jess exclaimed.

"What?" John asked.

"CME's."

"What?"

"I estimate over two hundred of what you call SUTs, just made our chances of getting in that base, a little more tough."

^^^

Dean kept looking to the men who started to line up at the gate, waiting

for someone, obviously not Frank. They were in the distance, but still Dean could tell by their expressions what they were. They weren't all human. That was a quality they lost at the hands of some cyborg surgeon.

Dean would walk, stop, look and walk again to the Lab building. So into the arrivals that he didn't see Leonard walking out of the lab building. Dean nearly bumped into him.

"Dr. Hayes."

"Leonard." Dean tried to get passed him.

"Working late this evening I see."

"I found some interesting compounds we don't have in Beginnings. I wanted to look and work with them some more. Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. President Hadly would be pleased to know of your curiosity."

Dean grunted and moved to the double doors.

"Dr. Hayes." Leonard's call caused him to stop. "In your journeys across base. Did you by chance run into Lt. Murphy? He's the black man that stays with us ambassadors."

"Nope." Dean shook his head. "Losing men Leonard. George won't be pleased."

"No he won't. I'll have to find our other lieutenant for the arrivals."

"You do that." Dean really wanted to tell Leonard he could care less. But he didn't want to draw any attention to himself. He just kept walking. Into the building, through the main lab, passed the freezer room into the hideous hideaway--as Frank referred to it. And Dean stopped. "Frank." Dean immediately closed the door and shut the blinds. "What the hell is this?"

"Your test subject."

Dean looked at the black man in uniform, tied and gagged to the chair. The man sweat and his head was bleeding. "This . . . this is LT. Murphy."

"Yeah. Your point?"

"They're looking for him Frank."

"Yeah." Frank placed his hands on his own hips. "And your point."

"They're gonna know he's gone." Dean grew excited. "You can't just kidnap and tie up everyone. Especially him. They're gonna start to wonder what happened to him Frank."

"No they won't." Frank waved his hand. "Survival training."

"Survival training?" Dean asked. "Where the hell is that."

"That's the special secret place that all good society officers go." Frank placed his finger to his own temple, imitated an explosion sound and let his head drop to the right only before snickering.

"You're sick." Dean pointed.

"Yeah. And you have a test subject."

"What are we gonna do with him while I figure out the chemical compounds."

"A ha." Frank walked over to a counter, bent down and opened the large door underneath. "Quite cozy. And tied up and gagged. No one will hear him."

"That's cruel."

"It's war. And he's our prisoner."

Dean's hand covered his eyes as he shook his head in whining debate. "Frank. Frank. Frank."

“Dean. Dean. Dean. You gonna make him shrivel like in Colorado? Hey Dean. Make it take a while O.K.”

“Frank.” Dean cringed. “Enough of the sick comments. Let’s get him situated . . .”

“You gonna use him then?”

“I have no choice. We can’t set him free. Oh, if we get busted.”

“We won’t. If you don’t want him Dean, I’ll just take him out to survival training.” Frank began to place his finger in a gun fashion to his own temple again but Dean lowered his arm.

“Stop that. All right.” Dean looked at Frank. “Let’s take care of him. Then you, as fake C.O. here have another issue to deal with.”

“Like?”

“Like the two hundred SUTS that just marched in the front gate.”

“Fuck.” Frank took off.

“Frank!” Dean spun, hand out and Frank was gone. “Damn it.” He turned around and looked to Lt. Murphy, who frightened and shaken, stared at Dean as if for help. Dean shrugged, raised his eyebrows, and lifted his hands to the Lieutenant. “Sorry.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen knew something was up with Robbie when he came into Joe’s kitchen while she made the salad, and he slid the white wooden doors closed. And Ellen was right. “Robbie. No.”

“Calm on El. Please. Please.” He asked with such a beg. “Please.” He stood behind her.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that.”

“Just one time. Only one time. Well, maybe twice, but in the same night.”

“Robbie. No.” Ellen tore apart the lettuce.

“Dean said it was all right.”

“Dean said to watch me. Make sure I’m O.K.”

“Be there if you need me.” Robbie added. “El, you can really need me.” He whispered in her ear. “I will make it worth your while. I promise. Anything. Anyway. You name it. All yours baby. Just please, please, please . . .”

“Have sex with you.”

“El.” Robbie reached around her placing his finger over her mouth. “Make love.”

Ellen giggled. “All so you can prove to yourself, you still have it with a woman.”

“Yes. I need to.”

“Robbie.” Ellen shook her head with a grin and grabbed a tomato. “Why do I feel you’re gonna get as much milage out of this Jess hitting on you thing, as you can.”

“Who me. Never. I’d never take advantage. So uh . . .” He peeked around her putting his face close to hers. “Can we?”

Ellen swayed her head, cut the vegetables and laughed.

Joe recalled in his mind how angry Andrea was at the snooping issue. Going behind Ellen's back. Looking into her things. Joe even recalled how Andrea--while getting dressed for the house full of company she left--went on and on to Joe about the respecting of other people's privacy and business. Honesty and trust. Joe whole heartedly agreed with Andrea. One hundred percent. But there were times where you have to just swallow your morals and what's right and dig at whatever cost for the truth. And that was the reasoning Joe used in his mind when he followed his wife from the house in the middle of a Slagel family gathering. Telling them he wanted to walk her home because it was dark. Joe left minutes after she did.

And everything Andrea preached about honesty, trust and respect went right out the window when Joe saw she never went to the clinic. Quietly and in the dark she sat on a bench behind the chapel with Rev. Bob--which was convenient for Joe because he could hide and not be seen. He couldn't hear what they whispered, only that they did. But what they said didn't matter. He didn't need to hear the words. What he saw was enough. More so than Andrea's lack of honesty was the fact that there in the dark, hidden and alone, were the two people in Beginnings who were somehow connected very personally to George. The two people in Beginnings who were Joe's top suspects. And there they were . . . together.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

September 28

32 Miles West of Binghamton, Alabama

It wasn't even light yet, but Robbie spotted Jess and John right on time. There was a certain fright of the chopper being heard in such a dead world, hence was the reason Robbie just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. And Jess and John wasted no time getting in and closing the door. Jess for the simple fact that he just wanted to sit. And John Matoose because he awaited the reunion glances between Robbie and Jess.

"Man, do you two reek." Robbie commented as he lifted the chopper.

"Ha, ha." Jess shook his head with a smile. "You try spending twenty four hours straight outside in forest filled with decaying bodies, compliments of Frank."

"Frank?" Robbie laughed. "Taking them out is he?"

"Oh yeah. We got some good shots of him though. Don't we John?" Jess looked around to the back of the chopper where John sat.

"It was amazing seeing him Robbie." John said. "You know I told your Dad from the start that George wanted him and would set it up like Frank was dead. I didn't think he was dead. But it still doesn't hit you that Frank's all right until you see him."

Jess raised an eyebrow. "Robbie. Your brother has hair."

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "All over his body."

"No on his head. Instead of that clipped short hair. It's hair." Jess stated. "He looks . . ."

"Weird?" Robbie asked.

"Yeah." Jess nodded. "But enough of the good news."

"Shit." Robbie shifted his eyes. "What?"

"Let's just say when we get home and we show you the pictures. All that bragging you do about being the infiltrating champ better be true." Jess said serious. "You have your work cut out for you."

^^^

He was a flowery sort of gentleman. Eccentric and different. And George wondered as he stared at the conductor what he was doing working for the society. It was bad enough that they had to stop the train ten miles from Binghamton, but did they have to stop it because Chuckie the conductor wanted to release all the bad feelings the train was picking up on the journey. George looked at his watch as he walked outside the train, getting some air on their unscheduled break. His views snapped to the sky.

"What's wrong?" Chuckie asked.

"Did you hear that. It sounded like a chopper."

"Oh that."

"So you heard it."

"The chopper?"

“Yes.” George said.

“No.”

“Then why did you say ‘oh that’?”

“Because I know exactly what you mean.” Chuckie tossed his hand George’s way. “Sometimes I hear the television playing. Or a radio station. Sometimes I think I hear a car or a plane or even Mr. Rogers singing that Tomorrow song. Or is that Annie. Oh. Annie sang about the sun coming out tomorrow, Mr. Rogers sings about starting the day tomorrow. Did you ever catch that program.”

George really could have snapped and bit Chuckie’s head off. But instead he decided in his bewilderment, to just do his best to patronize the conductor so he would just drive the train. “Mr. Rogers?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. I even met him.”

“Really?” Chuckie asked with excitement. “My daughters loved him.”

“Mine too. But what the hell does Mr. Rogers have to do with me hearing a chopper.”

“Everything.”

“How.”

“Because you didn’t hear it. Just like I didn’t hear Mr. Rogers.”

“What the hell did I hear?” George asked.

“In the back of your brain there is this little memory reserve. It has life like memories that over flow once in a while from your subconscious to your conscious,. Sort of on the lines of de-ja-vue.”

“You’re crocked.”

“No actually I’m sober. And . . .” Chuckie looked at his watch. “I’m getting off schedule. No chopper. Just memories. But enjoy them.” He moved to the train. “Take in the good air while you can.”

“What?” George curled his lip in curiosity of the man as Chuckie got on the train. He winced when the whistle blew loudly. And then George had to start running when the train started moving without him.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The tea cups were little, almost child size, but they were authentic. Danny had found them and gave them to Henry. And he and Henry sipped their morning tea in Joe’s ex-office.

The expression on Danny’s face said he was pleased with the tea as he set the cup down. “Good.”

“I appreciate you coming up here to talk about this with me.” Henry said.

“No problem. And I get tea. You’ve done good Henry. You realize with my ideas and your hands and mind, we can recreate a better world.”

“But you’re inventive too Danny.” Henry pointed. “Look at all the things you made.”

“True. But that’s in mechanical. Yeah, I can figure out things. I am the

resourceful guy.”

“That you are.”

“So are you.”

“Thank you.” Henry smiled.

“I mean, You made tea again. Pork rinds and . . . Jell-o. Who would have thought. That was really good.”

“Thanks.”

“We should sit down and come up with a list of things we need again.”

“Let’s do that.”

“It’s a deal. Now . . . your problem.”

“My problem.” Henry stated with a heaviness. “Well?”

“My opinion?” Danny leaned into the desk. “You’re letting it get control of you.”

“You think.”

“Yeah, most definitely.” Danny told him. “The first day as leader. You took your time. *You* Henry took control. Now you’re kind of passive and it gets a head of you and says ‘here’s the situation. I’m boss.’”

“Wow.” Henry looked at Danny. “That’s a really cool perception. So what do I do?”

“You Henry. Have to say that you’re the boss now. Take control and give the situation no choice but to bow down to you.”

“How?”

“Cut it.”

“Cut it?” Henry ran his hand over his head. “I just did. A month ago.”

“Cut it again.”

“Like a trim?” Henry asked.

“No, like a cut. Come to the house tonight have Bentley bring it just so it rests on your shoulder, no further.”

“Will that work.”

“Henry, come on. The less you have the more you can control.” Danny was so serious. “And in my opinion. You can’t go short. You’ll look like a geek. Long hair suits you fine. But keep it long without being really long. You do this and watch how good your hair looks everyday, without spending hours.”

“Like you.”

“Yeah. Se?” Danny ran his fingers through his layered perfect hair. It fell back in place. “Bentley does the best cuts. A little dab a Hair Hold and five minutes of your time.”

“Maybe I’ll . . .” Henry looked up when the office door opened and Robbie walked in. “Hey Robbie. You’re back. How was Jess’ trip to Canada?”

“Good.” Robbie shut the door. “This is a bonus. The two of you together.”

Henry snickered. “You weren’t thinking of trying anything sexually kinky with us were you.”

Robbie nodded as he bit his lip. “I won’t hit you Henry, because I need something from you two.”

“Uh-oh.” Henry shifted his eyes to Danny. “Watch your back. Kidding. Robbie? Should I cut my hair.”

“Yes. Can I have your attention?” Robbie asked.

Both Henry and Danny nodded.

“I need you two to make . . .” Robbie stared at them then stepped back.

“Never mind. It’s too much to ask.”

“Whoa!” Danny called out. “What’s too much?”

“What I was going to ask you guys to do. It uh . . . it’s impossible probably to make especially in the time frame I need it. Forget it.” He walked to the door. “Have a good day.”

“Robbie!” Henry shouted. “Tell us what you need. Let us decide.”

“O.K.” Robbie stopped in his reach to the door. He spoke as if he were delivering impossible news. “I have a problem with a large number of SUTs in this area I have to make a run too. I can only afford to send a few guys and they can’t take them out. Basically, and I know this can’t be done, but I was sort of wondering if you do could device a de-scrambling unit like the Auralnator. Something that’s not bulky and can be taken with them. It has to effect at a distance, close, but not directly in the ear.”

“Played through a portable speaker system?” Danny asked and turned to Henry. “Can we pump the decimals out of something portable?”

Henry thought about it. “Frequency is what we need to shoot for. Perhaps a different de-scrambling pattern.”

“But would it have the same effect?” Danny asked.

“Probably not because it’s not directly in the inner ear.” Henry answered. “But we could stun them.” He looked at Robbie. “Would that work?”

“Can it give enough time to pass through the region?” Robbie asked.

Danny shrugged. “Depends. We can test a time frame, adjust the frequency and program. You’re talking a portable system so you’re not talking too big. So you won’t be talking too long of a time.”

“Half hour?” Robbie asked innocently. “Nah, that’s too much huh?”

“No.” Danny scoffed. “We can do better than that. Can’t we Henry.”

“Yeah.”

“No way.” Robbie said. “You guys can’t”

Henry was offended. “Robbie we can. Bet we can get it to at least . . . forty minutes. Right Danny.”

“Right. Ha!” Danny shook his head. “Why in the world would you even think, us two, great minds, great hands, mechanically inclined, resourceful handsome guys couldn’t do what you want.”

Robbie grinned with arrogance. “Because I need it done by tomorrow.”

^^^

The phone was tight to Ellen’s ear as she stood at the back counter of the clinic lab, trying to place tubes into the centrifuge. It wasn’t an easy task considering she had to keep closing her eyes. “Josh, I don’t care. Josh . . . Josh, I know you’re babysitting. But I won’t be long. Josh!” she screamed. “Clean your room!” she grunted and laid down the phone.

“My room was never messy as a teenager.”

Ellen heard Hal’s voice behind her. She smiled. “Somehow I know better.” She turned around to see Hal. “Even a couple days and I missed you. I can’t wait till we’re living closer.” She stepped to him as he walked into the lab. She stood on tip toes placing her arms around him. She kissed him on the cheek. “Where’s the uniform?” Ellen asked as she ran her hand across his white tee shirt.

“Saving the crisp one for the, well you know.”

“Impress Frank.”

“Annoy him will be more like it.”

“Thanks for coming to see me.” Ellen stepped a foot back, leaned against the counter and folded her arms. “Are you staying with me while you’re in Beginnings?”

“Can I?” Hal asked.

“Oh you know it. I have the big house.” Ellen looked around Hal. “So did Sgt. Ryder come with you?”

“He went to see the two babies that were born. He said he hasn’t seen children in forever.”

Ellen laughed. “Then wait until he stays at my house.”

“Is he welcome to?”

“More the merrier. Hey, how are you gonna explain us to him. Doesn’t he think that we are a couple?”

“He knows of the way it is in Beginnings. And I kind of . . .” He saw Ellen stare passed him. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t recognize him.” Ellen smiled gently. “Sgt. Ryder.”

Sgt. Ryder stood in the lab door. He too wore jeans and a tee shirt. “Mam, may I come in?”

“Sure.” Ellen, still smiling walked over to him. She surprised him by hugging him and kissing him on the cheek when he walked in. “Welcome to Beginnings.”

Sgt. Ryder blushed. He touched where she kissed. “Thank you for the welcome. And I have to say, Beginnings is great. What I’ve seen of it. Captain Slagel has told me he’s taking me to a place called the social’ hall tonight.”

“It won’t be crowded.” Ellen said. “It’s Sunday. But it’s a nice place. Hal and you are staying at my house. Did he tell you that?”

“It’s no trouble?” Sgt. Ryder asked.

“Not for you Sgt. Ryder.” Ellen told him.

Sgt. Ryder cleared his throat in nervousness. “Thank you so much for asking for me to help out in protecting you and your children. That means a lot to me. And will you please call me Elliott.”

“Elliott.” Ellen tilted her head. “Hey, we have the same nickname. El and el.” She snickered. “Anyway I really wanted you here. I will never forget how you saved Frank’s life and I will always be grateful for that.” Her eyes widened. “Oh Hal, you should let Sgt. Ryder be one of Frank’s men. He has that edge Frank likes in his men.”

Sgt. Ryder shook his head. “I don’t quite think I have that edge I saw Frank display. I think I’ll stick with Captain Slagel.”

Hal laid his hand on Sgt. Ryder’s shoulder. “You have no choice. You’re my right hand man. Well . . . we’d better go. We have to meet with my father and Robbie in a couple hours and I wanted to take Elliott around.”

“O.K.” Ellen said. “Josh is home if you want to drop your things off there. Just . . . stay out of his room.” She cringed. “And stay away from Cole, he’s nasty today too. Stepped on a nail and Andrea had to give him a tetanus shoot. Cried like a baby.” She winked then laughed.

“We’ll do that.” Hal walked with Sgt. Ryder from the lab. “Anyone else?”

“Um . . .” Ellen raised her eyes to the ceiling. “Yeah, Hap. He had an

argument with Trish. And um . . . Fred because Lynn is premenstrual. Also avoid Ben and Todd because they've been fighting for a week."

Hal was actually being sarcastic when he asked Ellen. Never did he expect a list. "We'll make a mental note. Thanks. Oh and El . . . any news on Hank."

"Who?"

"The man that was killed."

"Oh." Ellen shook her head. "No. Haven't figured out the animal yet. Danny's been pestering me too. He wants it to be headlines in the paper."

"Yet have someone else write the story." Hal added.

"How true."

"We'd better get going." Hal lifted his hand in a wave as he stood by the door with Sgt. Ryder. "We'll see ya later El." He and Sgt. Ryder started to walk toward the main door. As they approached it, Melissa and Marcus waked in.

Sgt. Ryder stopped cold as he stared at Marcus.

"Hi Hal." Melissa said as she held Marcus' hand. "Is Ellen here, she wanted to see us sometime today."

"In the lab." Hal pointed.

"Thanks." Melissa smiled and kept moving.

"Captain . . ." Sgt. Ryder pointed. "What . . ."

"Don't ask." Hal opened the glass door. "This is Beginnings. I told you something is odd about this place. You should see what Ellen has in her and Dean's lab."

Sgt. Ryder took one more look back at Marcus. "I don't think I want to."

Hal chuckled and led Sgt. Ryder out.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

"How's it feel?" George's voice carried into Dean's hide-a-way lab.

Dean only raised his eyes from the microscope to the voice that made him sick to the pit of his stomach. "How does what feel?"

"To be working for the better side."

"I worked for the better side. Now I'm . . ." Dean turned around to see George with Frank standing behind him looking so serious. "Now I'm biding my time."

"Working I see."

"Viewing what . . . what you have."

"I see." George took another step into his lab. "And are you finding it interesting?"

"I'm finding agent's I have . . ." Dean took a breath and cleared his throat.

"Is there a problem?" George asked.

"No." Dean closed his eyes. He didn't want to tell George that he was trying not to laugh as Frank kept holding up 'rabbit ears' behind George.

"Good." George walked by Dean and began to exam what the lab had.

“We set this up just for you.”

“And I appreciate it.” Dean widened his eyes to Frank to tell him to quit it.

Frank laughed silently then switched to cold looking when George turned around. “I think you’re wasting your time with this man sir. He’s been nothing but irritating since he has arrived. I think you should let me take him out and shoot him. He’s one of those Beginnings people he told me.”

George smiled as he faced Frank, not seeing the middle finger Dean shot Frank. “Colonel, we’ll just give him more time. He’s brilliant and has a lot to offer. Isn’t that right Dr. Hayes.” He spun to Dean and when he did, Frank flipped Dean off.

“I have more to offer than you deserve.”

“Oh!” Frank balked loudly. “Listen to this little man and his arrogance. I really think . . .” A soft subtle thump interrupted Frank’s words. He tried to cover up by fake sneezing. “Excuse me. I think we should leave him be. Who wants to be around him anyhow.”

Another thump and Dean tried to act as if he too didn’t hear it.

Thump

“Did you hear that?” George asked.

“Hear what?” Frank asked.

Thump-thump.

“That.” George said.

“What?” Frank asked.

Thump-thump.

“That. That noise. You don’t hear that?”

“Was your trip long sir?” Frank asked so serious.

Thump-thump

“There it is again.” George spoke excited. “You are not hearing that?”

“Hearing what?” Frank lifted his hands. “All I hear is my stomach growling. Man.” He rubbed his own stomach. “I need food. Do you need food. I bet you do. Let’s go.” He grabbed George’s arm.

George blinked several times. So confused. “Maybe, maybe I just need to rest. I had to chase a moving train for close to a half a mile.”

“My God.” Frank gasped.

George began to leave the lab. “The conductor left me behind.”

“Bastard.”

George stopped in his leaving. He looked back at Dean. “I’ll be I touch Dean.”

“I won’t hold my breath.”

“You!” Frank pointed at Dean. “Are a rude man. This is the president you know.”

Dean rolled his eyes as they left. He started to deal with the thumping that came from under the counter when he noticed Frank pop his head back in, smile and flip Dean off again. Dean just shook his head, then laughed after Frank left. He had to give it to Frank, it was really amusing to Dean watching Frank totally mislead George. But Dean had to wonder, how amused would George be if he found out the whole time, he was being played for a fool. Hopefully George would be long gone and shriveled up somewhere before he realized the likes of Frank out smarted him.

Beginnings, Montana

Joe was supposed to be directly on his way to Robbie's house. But instead he found himself following that weird bird sound. Like a sick canary or something, the amphibian sang loudly then went sour. It irritated Joe's inner ear and caused it to itch. It didn't sound right. It didn't sound normal and Joe didn't have to follow it too far at all. It seemed to come from Henry's house. And it dawned on Joe what it was, when he heard the bird sound worsen, heard a series of thumps and then the cheers of the two eccentric, inventive mechanical men of Beginnings. They had to be working on the stun system for the SUTs.

Strategically set up was how Joe described in his mind, Robbie and Jess' house when he walked in for their secret afternoon meeting. He was the last to arrive. Robbie, Jess, Hal and Sgt. Ryder, along with even John Matoose were there. Maps were on the table and a computer in the diningroom. "Sorry I'm late. I was following the sound." He stood with the others around the table. "Robert. Why is John here?"

"Well." Robbie hesitated before answering. "I figure we have to keep an eye out for him anyhow until this all goes down, we might as well put him to work. And we will. All right." Robbie drew everyone's attention to the map spread out on the table. "I have given this a lot of thought. I'm not as anal as Dean so no one gets printed copies of the plan. So take notes if you want."

All eye shifted to Hal, who pulled out a small note book. He looked to the faces who stared at him. "What? Oh are we making fun? Fine. Well, don't ask me any questions if you forget."

Robbie swayed his head. "All right. Right here. Binghamton Alabama is where Frank and Dean are. Both. As spotted by John and Jess." From under the map Robbie pulled out another. "This is a drawing of the compound Jess drew. It's not scale, but it's relative to the plan. In the main area of the base, off the training area are four buildings. These are not including housing or the hospital. These are the buildings that John and Jess spotted Dean and Frank in. Which is good because there is four of you going. Buildings., A, B, C, D. See the buildings? Now here is the plan . . ." Robbie raised his eyes and began to spew forth quickly the details, using a pencil as an indicator. "Each of you will be armed, rifle, hand gun, grenades, gas and so forth. Northing for Frank or Dean and nothing heavy. Knowing my brother he'll be able to get a hold of arms. Now. We're gonna have to do this fast and in order to do it quickly and efficiently, exhaustion has to play a pivotal part. Because of that, I will fly you down, leaving here at four-thirty the morning of the thirtieth. I'll drop you off seventeen miles north off of Binghamton. You'll walk the distance. I'll return to Beginnings at approximately 11:30 which should be about the same time, taking the hike easy, that you get to the wooded area around the base. One hour. One hour rest is what you take. During that time you will set up the audible de-scrambler, position yourselves here, about thirty yards from the side gate. At 12:30 you set it off. According to Danny it should take ten seconds for the SUTs to stop. And that's what they will do. Just stop. Which is good, because they all just stand there anyhow. They will be stunned, but only for forty minutes. You will go through the side gate here." Robbie indicated. "Most of the men at this

time will be training or in the field. You should have no problem on base. You will go to building 'a' first and scout as a team. These buildings are not big so if you hustle you shouldn't have to spend anymore time than five minutes in each building looking for Frank and Dean. Now back in Beginnings, ten minutes before de-scramble time, Sgt. Ryder and myself will take Ellen and all the kids out of Beginnings and head to Jordan. There are fifty UWA soldiers there armed and with Sgt. Ryder and myself, with them, El and the kids will be safe. We won't return to Beginnings for four hours. At which time, Sgt. Ryder will say with El. There's no radio contact. We can't take a chance, so timing is everything. Four hours should secure enough time for you to get in there, get them and meet the Bowman men."

Joe looked up. "So basically you won't know anything until we get home."

Robbie shook his head. "No. I figure you should arrive back home the next morning. Hal has two men leaving Bowman tomorrow afternoon. They will go to Gillian and camp out until you guys hike there from Binghamton. Then they drive you home."

Jess lifted his hand. "Us walking in there seems easy. But it all hinges on whether or not Danny and Henry's altered Auralnator works. What happens if it doesn't."

"Plan B." Robbie answered. "There's only four of you. Fifty if you include Frank. But . . . there are two hundred SUTs and about two hundred and fifty society soldiers. That's a lot. You'll be outnumbered so . . . if the invention doesn't work, you'll know right away. Plan B is simple. You place on the society uniforms we kept from the defectors, you go to the side gate. Only four guards there. Each of you will be armed with a pocket Auralnator and you should be able to at least, being dressed like that, get close enough to them to zap them."

Joe waved out his hand. "The invention is going to work. I hear them cheering over at Henry's. They'll have it down pat."

"I think so too." Robbie said. "But they said the most they can do is forty minutes. Forty-five tops. The moment the SUTs come to and realize something is up or they see you. You not only could have those two hundred SUTs, but those other soldiers as well chasing you through those woods. The whole idea is to sneak in unnoticed and without drawing attention and to get back out. Unseen. Now . . . Everyone might want to have a seat, because we're gonna learn the base inside and out." Robbie walked to the computer that was on the table. He pulled up a program. "Remind me to compliment Danny on his upgrade version of that digital camera. The pictures turned out really nice." Robbie waited until everyone was seated. Standing next to the computer with his hand on the mouse, he began to show the pictures one at a time like a slide projector. "Here is the base."

Click.

"This right here is a good shot of the four buildings. A, B, C, and D." Another click of the mouse and Robbie kept explaining. "O.K., now here you see some of the SUTS. According to Jess and John they concentrate mainly in the front. Lining up like their own wall." Robbie clicked again, only this time the picture caused moans. Robbie looked at the screen. "Oh." He looked to Jess.

Jess shrugged. "Had to do it. Sorry."

"Ok." Robbie pointed. "This here is a shot of Frank's fine work buried

in a hole. Thanks Jess for slipping that in there.” Robbie clicked the mouse again. He smiled “And here’s Frank behind the building with Dean.” He clicked again. “And here’s Frank posing like Hulk Hogan.”

Joe grumbled and ran his hand down his face.

“Here’s Frank posing like Mr. Atlas. Frank being Elvis. And here’s Frank . . .”

“Stop.” Hal said as he stood up slowly. “Robbie. Can you zoom in. I want to see my brother.” Closer Hal moved to the computer screen. His face lit up in awe. “I need to see my big brother. Please.”

Jess, seeing how computer illiterate Robbie was being at that moment stood up and helped out. He zoomed in as close as he could get. Close enough to cause an emotional gasp from Hal.

Hal’s finger touched upon the screen. “Frank.” As his index finger ran down the face, Hal tilted his head. “Frank?” He turned around and looked at his father. “Dad? Did they do something to him?”

Joe placed on his glasses and looked. “His hair grew some. But nope. Why?”

“His face. It’s so . . . so . . .”

“Mean?” Sgt. Ryder tried to finish the sentence.

Robbie snickered. “No, scarey.”

Again Hal looked. “What the hell happened to him?”

Very solemn and very serious, Joe answered. “Life.”

^^^

What was the big deal with this Sgt. Ryder guy? That was the question that kept popping into his mind along with the question. *Why does he keep having to hold my kid?* Henry ponder these and other questions that seemed to be the center of his universal thoughts as he wandered the streets of Beginnings. He wanted to be at El’s, but oddly enough she was at the chapel. Henry wasn’t a church goer so he just waited. But the second time he went to Ellen’s, that Sgt. Ryder guy was there. Ellen bragged about him. Henry couldn’t figure out why, Ellen wasn’t specific. Just that he made the list of her heroes. Henry in his thoughts closely examined the situation and debated if he should start to get jealous of this newcomer. If Henry was a woman, he’d find the Spanish looking gentleman attractive, but would El?

Knowing that being alone with Ellen would be next to impossible while she was playing hotel hostess, Henry went on a search for someone to talk to. He walked into the social hall figuring if all else failed, at least Josephine would be there. She was the bar fly, attached to the second to last stool. And it was still early enough that Henry could carry on a conversation with her before she lost all ability to speak clearly.

Henry knew he may be out of luck when he walked in. Four people were in there. Johnny who really looked like he had too much to drink, slumped on his hand staring at Bev none the less who was across the room. Josephine was there as usual, and so was Cole the pervert. He was hitting on Josephine.

It was either leave or interrupt Johnny’s stare at Bev, so Henry made his way to Johnny.

“Hey John.” Henry pulled out a chair awaiting the drunken

conversation.

“Oh hey Henry.” Johnny sat straight up.

Henry did a double take to Johnny. No slurring. Not glossy eyes. “You aren’t drunk.”

“No. I’m on call. Why?”

“I thought you were drunk.”

Johnny snickered. “Why would you think that?”

“You’re staring like a lost puppy dog at Bev.”

“Oh, not lost. Confused and grossed out.”

“Huh?” Henry asked.

“She has this thing on her neck behind her right ear. A little purple mark. Wait . . .” Johnny whistled. “Bev.” He waved his hand for her to join.

“Johnny.” Henry hunched.

“Yes Johnny?” Bev hurried over smiling.

“Show Henry that gross birthmark you have see if . . . Hey!” Johnny lifted his hand when Bev turned on her heels and walked away. “Anyhow Henry. She has this circle mark there.”

“O.K.”

“Have you see it?”

“No.” Henry shook his head. “Why do you care.”

“Aside form the fact that it is really gross. I have seen it before. I just can’t figure out where.”

“Oh, I saw that movie.” Henry snapped his finger. “Space invaders. All these people had this mark on their neck.”

“Yeah!” Johnny said. “But it isn’t where Bev has it. I have seen it before. God.” He ran his hand down his face. “You have to see it.”

“That’s O.K. Hey Johnny wouldn’t that be so sci fi if Bev was an alien and that mark was her mark and . . . and she was the one eating people up in the woods.”

“Oh my God.” Johnny looked back at Bev. “What if she was attacked by something like her, not an alien and she became one herself and now she is attacking other.”

“Good thing we buried Marv.”

“But we didn’t bury Hank.”

“Who?”

“The other guy that died.”

“Shit.” Henry looked horrified. “We should stop talking about this. I’m getting scared.”

“We should go to the morgue and locked the drawer Hank’s body is in.”

“It’s not locked?” Henry asked.

“Why would it be.”

“Oh it should be locked. As leader I think that should be a new rule.”

“Then you should go lock it.” Johnny said. “Just incase that awful mark is the mark of some sort of demonic beast. I mean, look at her Henry. She’s like a vixen. She has that look.”

“I’m gonna go lock that drawer right now.” Henry stood up. “You wanna come?”

“Nah.”

“Come on Johnny. Come with me.”

Johnny raised his dark eyes. "Are you scared Henry."

"Well yeah, what if this Hank guy comes back to life."

"O.K." Johnny finished his drink. "Let's go." Johnny stood up. "We really should find out where Bev was when these killings happened."

"That could be her feeding ground. And if she turned into a bat or an animal that could be the cause of the wacky signal."

"Oh." Johnny gasped in thought. "It just hit me."

"What?" Henry asked as they walked to the door.

"Vampires can not see their reflection, nor can you take a picture of them. No movies were ever made about tracking devices. What if that's why the tracking goes batty."

Henry took one more look at Bev. "This is all making sense now. Joe is right. It is like a Stephen King Novel." They walked out side and moved to the clinic. Henry noticed Johnny had stopped. "What's wrong Johnny?"

"What is Rev. Bob doing?"

Henry looked across the street to where Johnny stared. Rev. Bob stood off to the side of the chapel doorway peeking in but seemed as if he didn't want to be noticed.. "I don't know."

"Is someone in the chapel?"

"Last I passed, your pap and Hal were."

Johnny snickered. "Praying. Is something going down that we don't know about?"

Henry quickly looked at Johnny. "I don't know."

"Well what ever the reason is that they're in there praying, seems like Rev Bob is just as curious as us."

Henry swallowed and started walking looking back at Rev. Bob. A preacher staring at two people praying? It made no sense. And if something indeed was going down with Joe and Hal, then like Johnny commented, Rev. Bob sure looked curious. But there was a problem with it. Henry would have to tell Joe about it. Being curious was one thing. Being curious and a number one suspect was another.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

September 30

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen's hand shook so bad she could barely measure the coffee into the basket. She had to keep stopping, staring at her shaking hand, calming her heart that beat out of control. She hadn't slept. She had no intentions of sleeping. How could she. In less than nine hours it all would be going down. And to Ellen, every single person she cared most about in Beginnings, had their life at stake. She could lose them all. Then what would she do?

So deep in thought Ellen was she never heard him walk into the kitchen. Just the feel of a firm hand laying over hers, taking the scoop from her made her look up. Sgt. Ryder, smiled at her, but it was a smile of concern.

"Here, let me." He told her.

"Thanks." Ellen move back, folding her arms.

"You were awake all night."

"How did you know."

"I slept on the couch remember. I could hear your clicking fingers coming from that little office. You must have been working on something important."

"Yeah, I was. I was working on keeping my mind off of everything. I am so sorry if I kept you awake."

"No." Sgt. Ryder swayed his head as he placed the lid on the coffee pot and then put that on the burner. "I never sleep completely when there is something like this about to happen. Any raids we have made with the UWA. I paced all night." He turned on the burner. "So normal. Any person that's worried about something they are about to embark on the next day, can not sleep right before doing it. Their mind is in a million different places, thinking a million different things. What if this, What if that."

"You are so right."

"Want to know what the shame of it is?" Sgt. Ryder asked her.

"What is that?"

"The shame of it is, everyone worries. No one sleeps, yet every paces alone and it gets worse."

Ellen blinked in surprise at Sgt. Ryder perception. "That is so true. Why is that?"

"Don't want to bother another with your fears. Perhaps we don't want to sound any less than we want other to perceive us to be."

"If that's such a shame Elliott, then if you weren't sleeping and you knew I was awake, why didn't you talk to me. You thought I was working, huh?"

"No, not at all. I knew you were worried. I just figured the last person you needed to tell you they were restless was one of the two people who would be guarding your life."

Ellen looked at his serious face then she watched a smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He watched Ellen turn somber. "It will be all right."

"I hope so." Ellen rubbed the chill that swept up her. "Because I have a

lot to lose if anything goes wrong. No wait, I have everything to lose.”

^^^

Joe was still sipping his coffee when Henry arrived. Earlier than Henry should have too. Joe figured Henry hadn't been to sleep yet either. Dressed so unlike himself in the very pre dawn hours, Joe, wearing brown camouflage looked into the hall to make sure no one was there.

“Sit down Henry.” Joe pointed to the couch. “Then I'll head to El's.” He kept his voice low and sat at the same time as Henry.

“What's up Joe.”

There was so much hesitation. Joe stared at his folded his hands. “A lot can happen today. You know this.”

“Joe, look . . .”

“No Henry, hear me out. A lot can happen today. You know this. I wanted to talk to you before I left. This is for real Henry. Today, you have to take everything serious. You are on your own today. And if something should go wrong . . . you can be on your own for a very long time.”

“Joe nothing is going to go wrong.”

“I hope and I feel it won't. But just wanted to make sure you fully understand something. I worked my ass off for Beginnings. I helped build this place and I would die for this place. Goddamn it Henry, don't you screw it up. Now this past week of you being leader was all fun and games, all the big show. But come this afternoon it may end up being real. I know you have it in you to be strong. You have to run this place strong. Promise me you will.”

“I promise Joe.” Henry lowered his head.

“Good. And one more thing Henry. I broke the trust of my son. Dean. Anyone who's involved with this rescue operation by telling you what was happening. I trust you. You as leader need to know. It's wrong to leave you in the dark. But . . . one person knows I told you the details of this plan. And if something goes wrong. If we get set up out there. It's on your head. And this person will inform Robbie of this and I can't guarantee what my son will do to you.”

Henry looked nervous. “What do you mean Joe.”

“You know you're a viable suspect in this George thing. You know no one wanted to let you know the plan for fear of you telling George. I told you the plan. You know Henry. Others may suspect something when they see we're gone. But only you know the full details of what's going down today. Where we're going and what we're doing. If something happens that it gets leaked to George. It will look like you were the one.” Joe stood up. “I'd better go.”

Henry stood with him also and they walked to the door. “I want you to know Joe I understand fully. My heart and my prayers are with you guys today. And with me, on my life, every detail is safe.” He opened the door. “Just . . . just bring Frank and Dean home.”

Joe gave Henry a single slow nod and they left the house, never seeing Andrea, still in her robe, standing in the hall by the livingroom. She dropped her head and walked back to the bedroom.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

George stared at the short scientist who reminded him a lot of Dean with dark hair. Stared at him for a long time before speaking. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He adjusted his glasses. "He went for a walk last night and never returned."

"Lt. Murphy as well?"

"Haven't noticed him in days."

"Any clue where they went?"

"We don't know."

George nodded. "All right. Go on back to work as usual. The sergeant. Sgt., Landers that came with me, I'll get him to program a search party to look as soon as it gets light enough in the woods."

"Thank you." The scientist rose up from his seat.

George thought as he leaned back in his chair and tapped into his inner feelings. As much as he hated to admit it, something just wasn't right. And unlike the chopper noises, and the thumping, this wasn't his imagination.

^^^

Just as Dean tossed his tee shirt over his head, he heard the familiar knocking coming from the bedroom closet door. Shaking his head and then glancing with a look of concern when he saw the time, he moved to the closet and opened it. Frank walked in. "Frank. What are you doing here. I thought this time of day you do whatever it is you do to make yourself look busy."

"Something is up." Frank told him.

"What do you mean?" Dean asked.

"O.K. I'm with them, doing the training thing. And two of the sergeants that came with George suddenly joined and started to watch."

"Yeah so."

"So, they take the men off somewhere according to George's instruction."

"They took them from you?"

Frank shrugged. "They told me they had a training video to show them., I was going to go watch when I saw that Landers guy. He grabbed about a dozen SUTs and took them with him."

"Again . . . so."

"So, this Landers guys is a programmer. He's taking a dozen of them. I think to program them to do something. I got a feeling Dean something is going down. There's too much movement on base today. Get that chemical ready and get it ready fast." Frank backed into the closet. "I have to go before they see me over this way."

"Frank wait. It's not ready."

"Then get something ready. Because I'm not wasting anytime. I see anything suspicious happening. We hit George, take out as many of these higher ups as we can, we grab Richie, get a jeep and get the hell out."

Dean watched Frank vanish through the closet. He worried. If Frank's

gut was singing to him then Dean better listen because Frank had that instinct. And with that, Dean hurried and got dressed. Just to safeguard anything, he had to get to the lab and find away to get rid of his test subjects he had frozen in the freezers at the lab.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen's throat swelled and she could barely breath as she stood by her front door. They had gathered up their maps and plans. Robbie called, the chopper was ready. And Joe, John, Jess and Hal slowly walked through the door.

Trying to appear brave and hopeful, Ellen gave a proud smile to Jess and Hal as they walked out. And lost it totally when Joe laid his hand on her cheek. Immediately she gasped emotionally, clenching his hand, then clenching Joe into an embrace.

“Easy Kiddo.” Joe whispered. “Everything will be all right.”

“Be safe Joe. Please be safe out there.”

“I will be. And I'll be back . . .” He kissed her on the cheek, then stepped back. “I promise you that. I'll be back with your husband.” Joe smiled. “And Frank.”

THE RESCUE

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie's return to Beginnings was signified by the chopper noise. Hearing this alerted Sgt. Ryder to proceed with the plan to meet Robbie at the hanger and he did. He watched the chopper land and he waited by the hanger structure. Robbie looked a little tired to Sgt. Ryder as he walked from the chopper, tossing his sunglasses inside, running his hands through his hair and walking with a slight slant to Sgt. Ryder.

But Robbie grinned. "Dropped off the four horsemen."

Sgt. Ryder handed Robbie his headset radio. "Been monitoring this for you."

"And?"

"There's a buzz about town. About security."

"What are they saying?" Robbie asked.

"Just that in was odd that you flew the three J's and Hal to Bowman. And someone spotted Joe out of his normal attire."

"Nosey fuckin people in this town. Nothing gets passed them." Robbie placed on the headset and fixed the ear piece.

"Yes, well in about an hour it will all be going down and well on it's way to being over. That's not a lot of time. What could go wrong."

Robbie cringed.

Sgt. Ryder looked oddly at him. "What's wrong?"

Robbie held up a finger and spoke into his radio. "Yeah, I'm back what's up." Robbie closed his eyes.. "You heard nothing. Shit. All right. I'm on my way."

"Did I speak too soon."

"Looks that way." Robbie picked up the pace to the awaiting jeep. "Sector thirty two again. Henry sent two men up there this time." Robbie jumped in the jeep. "They haven't returned. I have to get up there."

"You'll need help, do you have a man meeting you there." Sgt. Ryder got in.

Robbie fluttered his lips as he started the jeep. "Are you kidding. No one will go up there with me."

"Don't say no one." Sgt. Ryder looked at his watch. "We have an hour. I'll go."

"I appreciate it. Two of us can check it out a lot faster. Let's swing by my office first to get armed." Robbie drove off in the jeep with a screech.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

"Goddamn it Frank." Joe griped covering his nose as soon as they entered the wooded area near the base. "It's an open invitation for him to get busted with this damn smell."

Jess pointed to his left. "It's over there. We won't smell it as badly

where we're setting up."

Joe adjusted the large sack he carried and looked at his map. "Let's hope." He checked out the time. "And we'd better get moving on setting this thing up." He peered up. "Lots of tree where we need to be. Four speakers and a de-scrambler to set up. Now which two of you three are gonna be my climbers."

Hal, Jess and John all looked at each other. No one volunteered.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie drove the jeep faster back into town than he should have. "How much time?" He asked Sgt. Ryder.

"Thirty minutes. We're still good."

Robbie looked at his blood stained hands. "You help me unload these bodies into the clinic. We'll deal with this later. Jenny knows we're picking up the kids. You go to the school and get them, I'll get El at the cryo, we'll meet at El's to get Josh and then we'll head out."

"Sounds good."

Robbie stopped the jeep. "Shit."

"What?"

"Henry."

Henry looked so serious as he slowed down, looked at the two body bags in the jeep. He didn't say anything he just kept walking into the clinic.

Andrea, Jason and Johnny were in the lab when Henry knocked once on the door and then walked in. "I need two of you now to go to the morgue. We just got two more bodies from sector thirty-two."

Andrea who was sitting, slowly stood up. "Get Ellen."

"Ellen is busy at the lab. Can you handle it?" Henry asked.

"I think you should get Ellen. Two more." Andrea closed her eyes. "Sweet Jesus."

Henry looked over his shoulder to see Robbie and Sgt. Ryder carrying in a body bag. "Look. Who's gonna handle it?"

Johnny stood up. "I don't know what I'm doing but, I will. Jason. Want to help."

"Sure. I can use a change of pace."

"Hold it." Andrea called out, stopping Johnny and Jason. "Don't you two dare." She faced Henry. "This is gone on long enough. Four men are dead. I thought Joe was wrong. We were wrong."

Henry was lost. "What?"

"Andrea." Jason said her name firmly.

Johnny huffed. "Andrea come on."

"No." She shook her head. "We should have said something. Two more lives were lost in our silence. Henry." She looked at Henry. "I believe if you speak to Ellen. She has answers and these senseless killings can stop. She know who is doing them."

Jason stepped forward. "Andrea. I can't believe . . ."

“Ellen knows who is doing this?” Henry stared at the three faces. “Shit.” he stormed from the clinic lab. He saw Robbie and Sgt, Ryder walking back down the hall. Henry walked at a quick pace backwards. “Robbie stay close. I might need you.” Henry bolted from the clinic.

Johnny was red faced as he looked at Andrea. “How could you do this. We agreed . . .”

“No.” Andrea held up a scolding hand to Johnny. “We agreed to keep quiet what we found out in her reports only if no one else died. Two more lives Johnny. Two more lives. They could have been spared had we let Joe know.”

“No they couldn’t have,” Johnny shook his head. “You know that. We all know that. Inconclusive those results were.”

“They were conclusive enough for me!” Andrea yelled.

Johnny twitched his head in his hostility and barged from the lab.

Jason didn’t show anger. That wasn’t his style. He walked slowly to the door. “Andrea there were a lot of variations. I pointed them out. What did you mysteriously say to me a little bit ago. Today is not a day for mayhem. You prayed it was a peaceful day. With you opening your mouth, you may have just caused the disruption right now you so much sought to keep away.” Without saying anymore, Jason also left the lab.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

The area was pretty thick in the thirty yards off of the side gate. Joe wondered as he stayed in the small grade assembling the de-scrambler if all the trees would cause some sort of interference. But little did Joe realize it wouldn’t be the trees.

“Dad.” Hal whispered, keeping low and crawling his way to Joe.

Seeing how his son moved alerted Joe. “What’s wrong.”

Hal pointed up to Jess who was hidden in the tree.

Joe looked up.

Jess pointed south.

First Joe closed his eyes then peered to where Jess indicated. Four soldiers stood lifting bushes and branches and they lifted them from where Frank’s mass grave was. “Damn it.” Joe clenched his teeth and looked at his watch.

“They found the bodies Dad.” Hal whispered. “It could mean trouble. Is this ready.”

“Just about.”

“Can we go ahead.”

“We still have twenty-five minutes. What did Robbie, say timing is everything.”

“Yeah but . . .” Hal looked back over to the Soldiers who started to walk back to camp. “Can Frank and Dean really take that chance.”

“They’re gonna have to.”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen knew time was short and then Robbie would be down to the cryo lab to get her. She had engrossed herself into her work to take her mind off of things and now she felt the rush to complete it.

She had returned her specimen trays to the back room, and coming out she saw Henry. He didn’t look pleased. “What’s wrong?”

“Where’s the autopsy report El.”

“Which one?” Ellen casually walked to the sink and washed her hands.

“Both.”

“They aren’t done.” Ellen shook her hands of the excess water and as she did, she saw Henry’s eyes move to the counter where she did her work. Did she and Henry see the paperwork on the counter at the same time? Paperwork she wanted to put away. Henry saw something he wanted because he moved to the counter with seriousness and Ellen flew to beat him there.

“El.”

“Henry.”

“El, look.” Henry ran his hand through his hair. “Now is not to time to play games. I need to know what you know about the killings.”

“Not much Henry.” Ellen spoke fast. “See we were running a lot of tests when Dean up and left and he is the . . .”

“El!” Henry yelled then calmed himself. “Two more men were killed. Now, if you know something, you tell me. Now please.”

“I don’t . . .”

“Ellen. I have reason to believe that you not only know what did the killings but you also know . . . who.”

“What do you mean, you have reason to believe.”

“Do you know.”

“No.”

“I’ll ask again. Do you know.”

“I’ll tell you again. No.” Ellen’s eyes moved to the counter to the reports.

Henry’s eyes moved there. It was a race of reaches and Henry won, slamming his hand on the clipboard and lifting it.

“Henry.”

Henry didn’t think he’d understand what was written there. No answers he thought. He thought wrong. His eyes widened as he raised them above the sheet and looked at El. “How long have you known this?”

“Let me explain something . . .”

“How long El. This is so wrong of you.”

“What is wrong? That I didn’t release findings that are inconclusive.”

“This says . . .”

“I know what it says.” Ellen snatched the chipboard back. “But it doesn’t match up completely. And that is why I didn’t say anything.”

“I’m sorry El.”

“What do you mean?”

Henry started to walk grabbing his radio. "I mean I'm sorry." He spoke into the radio. "Security . . ."

"I'm sorry too Henry.

"Security, head to the school and pick up . . ."

Crash!

To the back of Henry's head--hard--sailed the clipboard. It broke when it hit him, sending Henry to the floor and the bottom piece of the clipboard flying. Ellen dropped the piece she held, bent down, and felt Henry for a pulse. Feeling one, and hearing the call of his name over and over the radio, Ellen bolted from the lab.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

George snapped forward with a concerned look on his face as he held the phone tight to his ear. "What do you mean something is going down? Where . . . where did they go? When? Shit. You stay clear and out of sight and call . . ." George raised his eyes when his office door opened without a knock. Leonard walked in. "Call me back." George hung up. "What's wrong?"

"We just found every officer that used to be stationed here and the ones that are missing."

"Where."

"In a shallow grave outside the gates. All with a single bullet to their heads."

George stood up. "Frank."

"Amnesia?"

George tilted his head in confusion. "How did he get it passed Dr. Morris. How did he fool a teacher from Harvard into . . ." George's hand pounded on the desk. "Find Frank and Dean. Watch them. Surround them until I get there." George walked around his desk to the door. "Get Chuckie on the phone have him have the train ready. Call Nashville and have them send the other train."

"What's going on?" Leonard asked. "Why the trains?"

"Fate helped us out by finding those bodies. I just spoke to Beginnings. Some very key people left very early this morning dressed in Camouflage. Something is going down and it's going down now. We have to leave," George stepped from the room, stopped and looked at Leonard. "Move!"

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Henry." Robbie raced into the cryo-lab as Henry moaned and picked himself up from the floor. "What happened."

Henry grabbed on to the back of his head and brought his fingers to his view. Blood laced his fingertips. "Ellen."

"Ellen did this? Why?"

“Because Robbie.” Henry bent down to the autopsy results on the floor. He handed them to him and moved to the door. “She trying to cover up for him. Why I don’t know, but we have to get to her and get him.”

Robbie read the results. “Shit Marcus?”

“Looks that way. Come on.” Henry ran from the lab with Robbie right along side him.

It was supposed to go as plan. How much more simpler could it have been. This is what Sgt. Ryder questioned to himself as he walked out of the school. Trying to figure out why Ellen showed up and snatched everyone up. Heading out into the street and to the jeep he saw Robbie and Henry.

“Where are they?” Robbie yelled as he ran to Sgt. Ryder.

“Jenny said Ellen took the kids.” Sgt. Ryder got in the jeep.

Henry jumped in at the same time as Robbie. “Did Jenny say Ellen got Marcus.”

“Oddly enough yes.” Sgt. Ryder answered.

“Where did they go?” Robbie asked.

“Jenny said home.” Sgt. Ryder started the jeep and they drove toward Ellen’s house.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

Jess hunched, hurried his way to Joe. “Joe.”

“Done.” Joe brushed off his hands.

“Joe we have movement.” He handed Joe the binoculars.

Joe peered through them into camp. “Christ.”

How convenient and easy it was for George to learn that Dr Morris was at the lab building on the second floor. There was no knocking, there was no hesitation, George along with one of the Sergeants he brought with him burst into the small office Dr. Morris was at.

Dr. Morris stood up.

The sergeant extended his revolver point blank at Dr Morris’ head.

George was gruff and cold when he stared at Dr. Morris. “Did you know Dr. Dean Hayes from Harvard?”

“I uh . . .” Dr Morris stuttered.

“Answer it!”

“Yes. I taught him.”

George took a slow breath. “You have served the society well. Because of that you have one chance and once chance only to save your pathetic life. Did you cover up Frank’s amnesia because you knew of the connection to the two?”

The fear dropped from Dr. Morris’ face. He stood tall. “Yes.”

“Shoot him”

“Dean come on.” Frank beckoned. “Is it or is it not gonna work.”

“I don’t know Frank.” Dean shrugged as he filled the syringe. He capped it. “It worked on the rabbits and Lt. Murphy but it didn’t work on . . .” A single gun shot startled Dean and he dropped the syringe.

“Shit.” Frank looked up when he heard the shot. His hand reached down for the syringe. “We have to get out of here.”

No sooner did Frank speak those words and he and Dean moved to the lab door, that it opened. Eight armed SUTs marched in, one society Sergeant and Leonard.

Frank’s hand reached quickly for his revolver. “Get down Dean!” Just as he pulled it out, the SUTS swung their aim at Dean. Frank stopped.

George walked in the room. “Put it down Frank.”

“Fuck you.” Frank aimed directly at George.

“You have one shot at me.” George said calmly. “Then you and Dean will go down. Put down the weapon.”

“You won’t shoot Dean you need him. And as for you . . .” Frank’s thumb pulled down the hammer. “If it’s between you and me. I’d rather die than see you walk.”

“Don’t test me Frank! Don’t!” George yelled. “You wanna try it go ahead! Put down that gun now or I will order them to shoot him.”

Frank shifted his eyes quickly. “You won’t shoot him.”

“Test me. Take that chance.”

Dean breathed heavily looking at the rifles all pointed at him. “Take the chance Frank. Kill him.”

“Put down the gun Frank now!” George ordered.

Frank did not.

George snarled and looked to his SUTs. “Shoot him.”

The pumping of eight rifle chambers went through Frank.

“All right!” Frank yelled out and looked at the aim on Dean. He released the hammer and lowered his arm. Immediately the gun was snatched from his hand.

George pointed the gun at him. “Raise your arms. Now. And put your hands behind your head.”

Slowly Frank lifted his arms. “Dean, between you and El I have surrendered enough for one life fuckin time.”

“I didn’t tell you to surrender Frank. You should have killed him.”

“Then what? Go home and tell El I let them shoot you. No fuckin . . .”

“Hey!” George yelled and motioned his head to a SUT. “Knock his big ass out.”

Frank twitched his head, lowered his arms and before he could react he felt the butt of a rifle slam against the side of his head. Frank’s eyes rolled and his towering body crashed to the floor.

George put the gun down. “Four of you men carry him and follow me.” He moved to the door. “Leonard. Stay with him until Landers gets back here. Take care of that little fellow Richie. Then you use Lander’s escort to get to the train station and wait for the other train. We’ll meet you back home.”

“Wait.” Leonard took a step. “Why don’t we just take them together.”

“I need them both and I need to separate them now. Apart I have more

leverage.” George stormed out and the four SUTS picked up Frank’s motionless body and carried him out.

Dean still did not move. He watched the four guns aiming at him and then Leonard turned to face him after George had left.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Not often did Henry get so angry that his emotions took over and he became a totally different person. “Ellen!” he barged right into her home.

“Henry.” Ellen came racing from the back hall.

“Where is he?”

“Who?”

“You took him from the school. Where is Marcus?”

“I don’t . . .” Ellen saw Robbie and Sgt. Ryder walk in.

Sgt. Ryder looked to Robbie. “We have to get them out of here. ‘T minus ten Robbie.”

“Henry.” Robbie took a step. “There’s something we have to handle.”

“I don’t care!” Henry blasted. “Right now. I need Marcus. Where is he El?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ellen stayed calm. “Now if you’ll excuse me . . .”

“No.” Henry reached out snatching her back. “Listen to me. You cracked me in my head, knocked me out. I need Marcus. If he is responsible . . .”

“He’s not.”

“You’re test results said . . .”

“The DNA didn’t match up completely Henry. So they weren’t a hundred percent right.” Ellen argued. “Now I am sorry I hit you in your head. But what am I supposed to do. Let you send security to get a child? Let you pick him up. Then what?”

“We keep him contained until you prove otherwise.” Henry said.

“No. Bullshit. You know this community.” Ellen hands flew about. “There would be lynch mobbing and you know it. I can’t take that chance.”

“And I can’t take the chance of him running around. Where is he.” Henry asked firmly.

“I don’t know.”

“El.”

“I don’t know.”

“Ellen!” Henry screamed, his face was red. “I’m not fuckin around here El. Where is he!?”

“Don’t you take that tone with me. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Henry clenched his teeth. “Right now I am the leader of this community and the people’s welfare is my best interest. I am sorry I offend you, but I need Marcus.”

“You don’t know for sure it’s him.”

“And you don’t know for sure it’s not! Are you willing to take that chance? Are you! How do you know El? You know enough to suspect him yet

you hide him around your flesh and blood. Four men are dead. Four El. If I were you, no matter how small the chance, it would be too big of a chance to take around the lives of my kids. And one of them is my kid.” Henry calmed down.

Sgt. Ryder shifted his eyes to Robbie. “Robbie.”

“Henry.” Robbie called out.

Henry held out his hand keeping his stare on Ellen. “I will not let word of this get out. Just let me have him. You do what you have to do now and we will run whatever test we need when you get back. Right now . . . give me Marcus . . . please.”

Ellen with her arms folded close to her, closed her eyes. “He’s in the back with Joey.”

“Thank you.” Henry rushed by her to the hall.

Robbie let out his breath. He turned to Sgt. Ryder. “Elliott, let’s load Ellen and the kids into the jeep.” He looked at his watch. “It’s ‘t’ minis six . . .” He stopped talking and looked when Henry came back in holding some sort of cloth.

“Robbie.” Henry stated firm. “I want full scale search. Get every man available out there now! I want every inch of this community searched and covered along with sector thirty-two. We have to find Marcus. He has Joey.” Henry moved to the door in a hurry, as he passed Ellen he less than gently laid into her chest the cloth he held and then Henry barged out.

“O.K.” Robbie held up his hand. “Elliott. Get Ellen and the kids out and to Jordan. Now! I’ll find Joey.”

“Got it. El, are the kids in the back . . .” Sgt. Ryder saw her looking at the cloth in her hands.

Ellen’s face was white and horrified. “What have I done?” She murmured. “Oh God” She closed her eyes. “What have I done.”

Robbie motioned his head to Sgt. Ryder to get the kids. He moved to Ellen. “El.” He reached down and took from her the cloth she held. When he retrieved it in his hands he saw it wasn’t a cloth at all. It was Joey’s white shirt, nearly torn to shreds. A stream of blood streaked it.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

How long had Dean stared at Leonard. A few minutes that seemed like an hour. The turning of the lab door made his heart jump.

Sgt. Landers walked in. “Jeep is out front. You ready?”

“There’s something you have to take care of first. That man Richie Martin. Find him and kill him. Take your men and make sure the job gets done. I’ll get Dr. Hayes to the jeep.”

“Are you sure?” Sgt. Landers asked.

“Look at him.” Leonard pulled out a gun. “I can handle him. Richie’s at the gymnasium now. Go.”

Sgt. Landers indicated to the four SUTS that still aimed at Dean. They followed him out.

Dean, silent, listened to them leave the main lab. He could hear the fading of the boots as they marched down the hall.

“Let’s go.” Leonard moved his gun using it as a pointer for Dean to walk ahead of him

Dean moved slow, feeling the heat of Leonard’s body so close behind.

“Move faster. Let’s go.” He nudged Dean.

“Oh I don’t think so.” With a tightly clenched fist, Dean stopped cold, spun around and with everything his small body had he nailed Leonard with such a force in the side of his face, Leonard’s head flung to the side and his nearly six foot tall body toppled. Instead of running at that second, Dean took advantage of Leonard’s weakened moment. Dean, swung his right fist out, hitting Leonard in the face again, and swept down his left hand into Leonard’s arm, knocking loose the revolver. Before the gun could hit the floor, Dean grabbed hold of it, straightened it in his hand, stepped back, clicked the hammer and fired one deadly shot into Leonard. Dean watched the blood splattered from Leonard’s head and the body dropped to the floor.

Stunned. But only for a split second. Dean looked at the revolver. “God, that was such a Frank thing to do.” And with Richie on his mind, Dean took off toward the gymnasium.

Five society soldiers and then a minute later Dean? Joe watched with his hand on the de-scrambler. “Where are they going?”

“Into that building.” Hal answered.

Joe looked at his watch. “Something’s wrong. We still have three minutes. Fuck it. I’m hitting it.” Joe’s hand moved for the button and he depressed it. The loud bird whistle went off and he and Hal along with Jess and John moved in a low running position to the open side gate. Joe pulled out his revolver staying back, watching the SUTs at the side gate stop cold. “It worked.” He told them. “Jess you come with me we’ll go to building ‘B’ where we last saw Frank. Hal, you and John follow Dean. I don’t know if the de-scrambler got the ones in that building. Take no chance. Let’s go.”

Rushing armed and ready, Joe, Hal, Jess and John, stormed through the side gate passed the stunned SUTs. But in their determination and drive to make it to the two designated buildings. They never saw the truck, with Frank and George, speed through the front gate.

Richie just had stepped off the ladder from fixing the high over head light in the deck. A high gymnasium type building with cement floors used for indoor drills. No sooner did his foot hit the floor that he heard the far doors open. He turned around to look. In through them walked Sgt. Landers. On both sides of him two SUTs.

“Hey.” Richie called out nervously. “What’s up?” Richie’s heart raced when, at a steady medium pace they marched to him.

“Ready!” Sgt. Landers called out.

“Huh?” Richie wondered. “Shit.”

They took two steps and raised their rifles.

“Aim.”

Two more steps and the chambers clicked.

Richie froze. “Oh God.” His eyes closed and opened again when he heard the slamming of the doors again.

The aims of the SUTs dropped, and them and Sgt. Landers turned

around at the intrusion.

Dean stood there. Ready he lifted the revolver and fired . . . nothing. “Oh fuck.” Dean looked at the gun then at the men.

Sgt. Landers knew Dean wasn’t their target. “Repeat.”

“Shit.” Dean hurled the gun out, beaming Sgt. Landers in the head. Then racing as fast as he could, Dean shot his body through the four men, barreling through as if they were bowling pins, startling them some from their firm stance, and knocking himself off his balance. Still running, Dean stumbled and rolled himself up never missing a beat in racing toward Richie. Dean grabbed Richie’s arm spotting the door behind them not ten yards away.

“Ready.” Sgt. Landers ordered.

“Run.” Dean pulled at Richie, peering through the corner of his eyes to see the rifles raise.

“Aim . . . Fi . . .”

BOOM!

The clash of metal was heard as the rear doors burst open and through them came Hal and John gun raised.

“Fire!”

Hal dove to Richie knocking him down, and at the same time, John extending out his gun, raced in the gym, leaping sideways in front of Dean as he fired out. Shots tailed from the SUTs and Sgt., Landers blasting into John as if he were target practice at the exact same instant he blocked Dean.

He hit one SUT but John went flying backwards with his rain of blood, knocking Dean to the floor with him.

Ignoring the bullet that grazed his left arm, Hal rolled himself up to a one leg kneel and still holding his gun he fired out. It took six shots but he downed the SUTs and Sgt. Landers.

From their stare at Leonard bloody body on the floor, Joe and Jess both lifted their heads to the sound of distant rapid gunfire.

Joe immediately bolted to the door. “Let’s go.”

Jess raced out after him.

In the quiet blood bath of a gymnasium, Dean counted six. Six shots John had taken. On the deck floor, Dean knelt by John’s trembling body. He held his hand over the stomach wound that seemed to bleed the most.. John’s blood seeped over Dean’s fingers. “Hold on.”

John’s eyes were barely opened but they made contact with Dean’s. “Fr . . . Frank.”

Out of breath Dean raised his eyes to Hal. “They . . .”

Before he could finish his sentence, Joe and Jess came racing through the back door.

“Dear God.” Joe slowed down his run seeing what had happened. Seeing John Matoose laying on the floor. “We can’t find Frank.” Joe couldn’t take his eyes off of John.

Dean looked up to Joe. “They took him.”

“Where?” Joe asked.

“To the train station.”

Hal put his gun away. “Where’s that?”

Dean shrugged. "I don't know."

"I do." Richie said. "I can show you."

Hal smiled. "Good Richie."

Dean still held his hand on John. "You know him?"

"Of course." Hal gave a quirky smile. "Dad, look it's Richie."

"Hey Mr. Slagel."

"Goddamn." Joe twitched his head. "We'll have the happy reunion later. Right now we need to get Frank. Take us Richie."

Dean turned his head to Richie. "There's a jeep right outside the lab building ready to go."

Richie stood up. "Let's go then."

Hal, Jess, Joe and Richie began moving to the door.

Joe stopped. "Dean. Let's go."

"I'm not leaving him. I have to get him to the clinic."

"You can't help him Dean." Joe said. "Look at him."

"I have to try." Dean said with passion. "I have to try."

"Dean, for crying out loud. Time is not a luxury here."

"Yeah it is Joe. Time is a luxury John afforded me. Every single bullet he took should have been mine. And I'll be damned if I will walk away from him when his heart is still beating, when he is still breathing. I won't walk away until I give him the chance he gave me."

Joe let out a slow breath. "Richie. Take Hal. Dean, can you stabilize him in forty minutes."

Dean gave an 'you got to be kidding look' to Joe. "I . . . I can try."

"Try hell. Do it. Jess and I will take you and him to this clinic. Stabilize him, get what you need so he can survive the trip back home." Joe turned to Hal. "We'll meet you at the side gate area and use that jeep to get to Gillian."

"Gotcha." Hal backed up with Richie. "If you aren't there. We'll assume you're in here. See ya in a bit." Hal ran to the door.

"Hal." Joe called out. "Be careful."

Hal nodded.

"And bring your brother back!" The deck doors slammed and Joe knelt down to the floor. "Let's go Jess, let's help move him."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

It had to be the scariest sound Henry heard as he neared the last warehouse that set with its rear entrance flush against a small wooded area. Grunting. Animal grunting. Henry broke a sweat holding out his gun. He knew that sound well. He leaned against the wall inching his way slowly to the vocal sound he knew belonged to Marcus.

He raised his weapon fearing so much what he would see when he turned to the back of the building. Fearing seeing Joey's body in a sick resemblance to Hank and Marv. The corner of the building grew closer to Henry and so did the grunts and then . . . another voice. Joey's.

"They'll think you're me. It will work." Joey's too deep voice spoke.

Every ounce of tension left Henry's body and he lowered his gun

peeking around the bend and seeing Marcus and Joey hiding. Joey wore clothes way too big for him, Clothes--that by the give away horizontal stripes--belonged to Marcus. And Marcus wore ripped clothing that belonged to Joey. Clothing Joey must have squeezed on him and it ripped in doing so. So explained the shredded clothes, and the blood on Joey's nostril explained the blood on the shirt. Joey's famous nosebleeds. Henry smiled listening to Joey explain how they could get away with him living with Melissa and Marcus living with Ellen. How they really looked alike.

Henry moved back and grabbed his radio. "Robbie. Stop the search. I found them. They're fine."

"Got it Henry, but me and the men are gonna search the area while we're here."

"Why?" Henry asked.

"Tracking was picking something up passed the field. It's time to end this thing. Don't you think?"

"Yeah. O.K., let me grab these two boys, I'll bring them to Tracking with me and see what's going on."

"Henry . . . Henry. Watch Joey with your life. O.K.?"

"With my life." Henry hooked on his radio to his belt and before he showed himself he called out. "No one is in trouble, Don't run away from me."

"Shh." Joey inched to Marcus. "Watch. It's uncle Henry." He saw Henry come from around the building.

"We have to go to Tracking. Can you guys come with me? Wanna see the beeps? Joey?"

Joey deepened his voice more and graveled it. "I'm Marcus. And this is Joey." He nudged Marcus.

Marcus squealed.

"O.K. Marcus." Henry nodded his head to Joey. "Let's go."

Even at his height of six foot two, the high grass in the field came up passed Robbie's chest hindering his movement. "Anyone anything. Cole?"

"Nope."

"Dan."

"Nothing."

"Jeff?"

"Nada"

"Bert?"

"Ernie."

Robbie snickered. "Asshole. Tracking come in. Mark you seeing anything?"

"Whatever it is, is still at the end of that field. It's at a stand still Robbie. Well it looks like they are at a stand still. Hold on Henry just walked in." Mark said.

Henry shut the door and walked to the monitor leaning over Mark's shoulder. "Nothing?"

Mark's finger touched the screen. "See they're staying . . ."

"Shit." Henry grabbed the radio. "Robbie come in."

"Yeah?" Robbie answered.

“Whatever it is, is moving your way.”

Robbie heard the fast ruffling. “I hear it.” He whispered into the headset. “Gentleman get ready.”

“Robbie.” Henry spoke rapid. “They’re moving fast. I think you should pull back.”

“I think we should end this right . . .” A scream. Bert’s scream was heard and Robbie spun to see the movement in the grass followed by a geyser of blood. “Fuck!”

“Robbie what’s happening?”

Another scream, another movement of grass and more blood.

“Pull out!” Robbie ordered “Pull out now!”

“Robbie.” Henry called out. “What’s happening.”

“Something’s up here Henry.” Robbie waited for his men and then he saw Jack in the middle of his run disappear into the high grass, scream and then nothing. “Henry, we lost another one.”

Henry hand slid down his face as he heard the screams and gunfire. “Robbie get out of there! Get out now.”

Robbie couldn’t see what it was that was doing it. His aim went in circles as he shifted around watching Cole, Dan, and Jeff run his way. “Move it! Move it!” He waved his free arm.

“Robbie get out of there.”

“I’m seeing something!” Robbie raised his weapon as he watched the grass move at an incredibly high speed in a seeming chase after Jeff. “Jeff run!”

Jeff moved his legs as fast as he could but he made one error. He thought he could get what it was. In a backwards run he raised his weapon.

And then Robbie saw what it was. They leaped up from the grass. And dove at Jeff. Jeff went down.

“Oh my God.” Robbie raced to Jeff as did Cole and Dan.

“Robbie get out of there.”

“I see them Henry.” Robbie raised his weapon. “I see . . .”

Jeff sprang up from the grass, screaming, his rifle swung out, he spun around as he desperately fought to free the sharp tooth jaws that were attached to his face. His hands gripped the body of it pulling at it.

Robbie had a clear shot. So did Cole and Dan. A clear shot of the one that had Jeff and the ones that now dined on the bodies of Bert and the other two. But Robbie couldn’t bring himself to shoot. None of them could. “Henry . . . Henry . . . they’re babies.”

The radio dropped from Henry’s hand.

Mark looked up. “Did he just say babies?”

Henry grabbed the radio cringing at Jeff’s scream. “Babies?”

“Marcus . . . plural. They look like baby Marcus’. Oh God there’s . . .” Robbie shouted in the radio over Jeff’s scream, and the grunting and squealing that became the painful background noise. “There’s ten, twelve. Oh God Twenty.”

“Shot them!” Henry ordered.

“I can’t. They’re babies.” Robbie inched to Jeff.

“Robbie shot them. They are killers.”

Robbie felt the pain in his throat his eyes shifted to Cole and Dan. “We have to.”

Dan. looked panicked. “They’re babies.”

Robbie closed his eyes briefly as he brought the scope of the rifle to his view. "God forgive me." His finger depressed on the trigger, the bullet sail into the rippled and thick leg of the Marcus that clenched on to Jeff. The baby squealed loudly and flew off. "Grab him and fire."

Robbie, Cole and Dan. raced for Jeff firing. A Marcus leaped at Robbie. He caught glimpse of the fast moving blur coming at him. His fist raised in a fast swatting action, hitting the tough skin creature like a baseball, but not before he felt the sear of his skin as the Marcus' teeth grazed against his cheek before it hit the ground.

Cole and Dan lifted Jeff with one hand while firing blankly into the field at the numerous genetically altered babies which scattered away from their prey but not without taking some with them.

Robbie fired also as they all backed up as fast as they could. "We can't get them all."

Henry listened with his eyes tightly closed and his hand gripping so hard to the radio he could have busted it. His head was lowered as he heard the gunfire. "Just . . . just move out."

There was silence.

Henry's head lifted he was filled with fear. "Robbie. Robbie come in."

More silence.

"Robbie."

A hiss of static and Robbie's emotional voice came through along with the sound of a running jeep. "Oh God Henry we lost three. . . Down . . . down the gate. We're bringing in Jeff."

Robbie wiped the blood from his cheek as he drove then looked behind him to Cole and Dan who held on to Jeff in the back of the jeep. Was it really Jeff? If Robbie hadn't seen him go down, he would have never recognized him. And it wasn't the massive amount of blood that covered Jeff's face that made him unrecognizable, it was the lack of Jeff's face that caused it.

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

It was in the distance as Hal and Richie pulled to the train station. The locomotive rolling down the tracks and away from them.

Hal looked over to the speedometer as Richie drove. "You can catch it."

"What?"

"Hit the gas you can catch it."

"The train."

"Yes."

"Then what?" Richie looked at Hal as his foot depressed the gas peddle.

"Pass it. Just do it."

The jeep jolted as Richie shifted gears and neared it. "I hope you don't want me to pull on the tracks cause I have news for you Hal this jeep won't stop it." He looked over to see Hal loading a clip into a gun. "Neither will those

bullets.”

Joe realized it wasn't a time to be impatient, but the insensitive side of him had to be, he looked at his watch then pushed open the operating doors a little. “Dean?”

“Joe please.” Dean operated. “A few more minutes.”

Joe whistled as he shut the door and looked to Jess. “We're screwed.”

“Yep.” Jess looked at his watch. “Big time, cause them things are gonna wake up in fifteen minutes.”

The movement, the pain, the whistle. Whatever it was that brought Frank to consciousness, he was grateful. He groaned as he held onto his head and sat up. He looked at the crates that surrounded him and then shifted his eyes around. He could see the outside moving. “God.” As he stumbled to his feet he felt for a gun. He had none. Swearing in his mind he assessed the situation. He could see the back of the car he was in, there wasn't any behind him. The door at the end could be his escape. But Frank couldn't let himself do it. He knew George was on that train and he wasn't leaving without taking down George. But first he had to get out of that car.

Frank laughed a ‘ha.’ and thought how stupid could they be. He spotted the guard's back through the window of the door to the train. “That's my guard.” He smirked and snuck up to the door. Hunching down., he reached up and felt the glass. Frank smiled. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around his right fist. As he stood his left hand crossed over gripping onto the handle of the sliding door.

With a grin Frank sprang to his feet. Loudly he grunted as he crashed his shirt covered hand through the glass, shattering it, and gripping the head of the guard. He yanked his head through the busted window and slid the door open with a vengeance at the same time. It was a Frank-style, sideways guillotine and the head of the guard rolled to the floor.

The wind of the moving train hit Frank as he pulled the body in, took the rifle. There was some blood on his shirt, but Frank didn't care, he placed hit back on and stepped from that car. It was time to find George.

Next car.

Standing off to the side, Frank peeked in. Two soldiers. Easy enough. With the butt of the rifle Frank busted the window, spun the weapon aimed, and fired two shots. Biting his bottom lip and nodding with arrogance, Frank slid that door open and walked in.

It must not have dawned on Frank at that instant that sound traveled. Because his firing was an alarm that alerted other soldiers. “What the fuck?” Frank blurted surprised when the far end of the car he was in opened and a brigade of Soldiers plowed in. He began to fire, backing up and running out the back of the train. He slid the door shut--as if that would help--and heard the sear of a bullet as it sailed so close to his ear. His eyes caught the ladder on the side of the car and Frank clenched it, swung out and climbed up.

“There!” Richie pointed to Frank seeing him run over top of the car.
“He’s trying to escape. Honk the horn. Alert him.”
Richie honked. “What the hell?”
Frank disappeared when he made it to the end of the car.
“Richie speed it up.”

It was a wide mouth open grin that graced Frank’s face as he looked up the car he just climbed from to see the awkwardly moving soldiers running his way. How stupid he thought they were . All they had to do was turn around and they would have had him. But instead that chased him out and over that car.

Frank looked into the window of the next car and if it was possible, his grinned widened.

George.

Frank didn’t have a clear shot, A soldier stood with him. But all he had to do was take out that soldier and he could get George. Break the window, and shoot.

Crash, pump, fire. Down went the soldier. And totally enjoying the panicked look on George’s face, Frank--feeling like Jason from Friday the Thirteenth--slid open that door looking like the homicidal maniac going after his victim.

Frank pumped the chamber and fired. Nothing.

George took his momentary opportunity and bolted toward the next door. Frank dropped the rifle, charged out with two steps, leaped forward and sailed into George. They crashed the floor of the moving train just as the back door of George’s car burst open and the remaining soldiers that had chased Frank before came in.

Frank jumped up bringing George with him as a shield. He backed up to the door holding George in a brace to his neck. “I’ll snap his neck!” Frank yelled out.

The soldiers all aimed.

“Nah.” Frank smiled. “Better yet.” Still holding George with his right arm, Frank raised his left, and in it was the syringe. With his teeth he uncapped it. “Bye-bye George.” Frank grunted slightly for a dramatic effect and George screamed painfully when the needle of the syringe stabbed into his neck and Frank plunged the liquid into him. Frank slid the door behind him opened and shoved George forward to the soldiers. Frank then raced to the next car but not without being chased.

The jeep flew passed the train and Hal could see Frank running and looking up as he did. “He’s looking for a ceiling hatch.”

“Should I go back. We’re near the front of the train.”

“No.” Hal stood up and moved to the back of the jeep.

“What are you doing.”

“Pull as close as you can to the train.”

“What?”

“Do it.”

“Oh God.” Richie was never one to drive with his eyes closed, but he felt like he wanted to at that moment. He neared so close to the train he felt the

heat of the locomotive. “Hal don’t . . .”

“Stay close by.” Hal balanced and reached out., “Ready and . . .” he leaped from the jeep, catching the ladder of the second to first car. His body swung back in forth as the jeep moved out and turned around. Hal stopped swinging enough to climb up.

In Frank’s run he saw it. The jeep with Richie driving. He looked back then ,moved to the window, pounding against it.

Richie saw him and pointed up.

Frank nodded with a thumbs up. He looked to the ceiling hatch, keeping his eyes peered on Richie. He couldn’t figure out who Richie was honking and indicating to at that moment, but Frank knew he was screwed when the back door to that car slid open and the firing began.

Hal nodded to Richie as he leaped in his run to the moving car Frank was in. He spotted the ceiling hatch open and Hal dropped to his stomach extending his red gloved hand in. “Frank, come on.”

Frank saw the UWA glove and gripped the hand that levered him up. Another hand braced his arm and Frank scurried to the roof of the train kicking the hatch closed with his foot.

Hal fell backwards from the force of pulling Frank up. And the combination of his loss of balance and the moving train caused Hal to roll. Just as he sailed face forward off the side, the speeding ground so close, he felt the grip to his ankle and the weight of his body being snatched back up. The metal edge of the train slid against his gut as he was pulled to safety. On his stomach he caught his balance. And when he felt the release of his ankle he began to roll himself over.

“Are you . . . UH!” Frank shrieked in the shock of seeing Hal.

“Frank.”

“Fuck. Hal!”

“We have to get out of here.”

“Hal!”

“Frank!” Hal’s eyes shifted.

“Hal!”

“Frank!”

“What!”

“SUTs.”

Frank looked. “Fuck.”

Both Slagel’s who still weren’t standing, grabbed hold of the roof and stood. At the end of the car, shooting and coming their way were soldiers.

They took off running toward the front of the car.

“Climb down!” Frank ordered as he passed Hal going over the edge in a jump and gripping the ladder.

Hal repeated Frank’s actions and both brothers held on to the rungs. They could hear the tromping of the soldiers coming their way. “Now what Frank?”

“Jump?”

Hal looked to the moving ground then up above him. “Sure why not.”

“Ready?”

“You first.”

“Ha! Baby. Move with the train.” Frank took a breath and jumped in the same direction that the train moved. Seconds after he started rolling on the ground away from the train, Hal was rolling right along with him. They rolled for while and when they stopped the train was moving onward.

Frank picked himself up, lifting Hal and embracing him. “Oh my God.”

Hal grinned. “I’m still moving, wait.”

“No.” Frank swung hi around. “God look at you.” Frank kissed his brother. “Man.”

As Hal was set to his feet he saw Richie pull up. “Come on Frank. We have to go back and help dad.”

“Dad? Dad’s here?” Frank asked as they ran to the jeep.

“Yeah.” Hal said, jumping in.

“Does he know you’re alive.”

Hal’s mouth open then shut, he bit his bottom lip and looked to Richie. “Drive faster Richie.”

“Jesus Christ Dean, come on.” Joe yelled.

Jess looked at his watch. “Times up.”

Dean held a knapsack. “Let me finish getting supplies to keep him alive.”

Joe’s hand covered his own face.

“SUTs.” Hal stated as he Frank and Richie pulled to the side gate.

Frank fluttered his lips. “If we had the weaponry. We can take them.”

“Nah.” Hal smiled. “Let’s just stun them.”

“Stun them?” Frank questioned.

“Yeah.” Hal inched his way back to the woods. “Stun them and walk right in.”

Frank nodded. “That’ll work. How?”

Hal uncovered the de-scrambler. He pressed the button.

Frank closed off his ear at the annoying bird like whistle. He leaned to a silent Richie whispering. “When we go find my Dad. You know what to do. Right?”

Richie nodded.

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie held a cloth to his face tightly in the examining room when Henry walked in. “Henry, how’s Jeff?”

Henry shook his head. “It’s not good Robbie. I . . . I had to call El back.”

Robbie closed his eyes. “Henry, we have to . . .”

“Sgt. Ryder is keeping the kids with the UWA soldiers in Jordan. We

need her back here Robbie. We'll watch her."

"How did you know about it?"

"I just did." Henry reached out and grabbed Robbie's hand removing the cloth and looking at the bite mark. Henry stepped back hiding his gag. "Yep, we need her. For the injuries and . . . for the problem."

"How do you mean?" Robbie asked.

"Well, if she can create them." Henry raised his eyebrows. "Maybe she can figure out how to kill them."

^^^

Binghamton, Alabama

"Done." Dean came out of a back room. "Ready?"

Joe tossed his hands up as he and Jess stood by the Gurney where John Matoose lay. "It's a bout time."

"Sorry Joe, I had to get supplies."

Joe grabbed hold of the Gurney and pushed it with Jess. "We'll carry him once we get outside."

"Joe?" Jess asked. "Who hit the de-scrambler again."

"Us!" Hal said as he and Frank walked in.

"Dad!" Frank charged to his father. "Oh man. Did you see Hal."

Joe's gratefulness in seeing his son was overshadowed by Frank's lack of common sense. "No Frank I didn't. Hal, I'll be damned, you're alive."

"Joe." Jess pushed on the cart. "What did you say to that little guy. Family reunion later?"

"You got a point."

Frank looked at John Matoose as they wheeled him to the front. "Shot huh?"

Dean grumbled. "You're an ass Frank."

They arrived at the front. Joe took hold of one side of John. "Now we'll take him out as quickly as we can. I'm assuming . . . Richie?" Joe said Richie's name in shock when Richie walked in. "I thought you'd be waiting."

Richie held open the door for Joe and Jess who quickly carried John. "They're out there Frank."

Hal and Dean looked confused. "Who?"

Joe's loud, "Christ" carried in the clinic.

Hal hurried out along with Dean. Richie and Frank took their time walking out last.

In front of the building was every single society soldier on base. And they were armed.

Joe shifted his eyes around. "Any suggestions?"

"Yeah." Frank stepped forward and ahead of Joe and Jess. He faced the society soldiers. "Gentleman. What do you have to say?" Frank shouted out.

The boots clicked in a stomping on the ground. The large group of men joined in formation. "One, two, yes we can, Colonel Slagel is the man. Ooh-rah!"

Frank grinned and turned around to face a shocked, Dean, Jess, Hal and Joe. "Meet Beginnings Newest army members, Trained by me. Now tell me

who gets the Neville points. Ha!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

October 1

Beginnings, Montana

Robbie swayed his head, handing back Henry the Beginnings paper with the huge headline, 'KILLER BABIES SEIZE BEGINNINGS.'

Henry chuckled also as they headed into tracking. "National Enquirer again?"

"This time true." Robbie said. "Hopefully Ellen's poison is working."

"And if not . . ." Henry opened the door to tracking. "We all worked our asses off to get those fences up. We'll keep them out until we kill them."

"Hey Mark." Robbie said. "Any movement in sector thirty-two?"

"Nope. It's been fading steady."

"Yes!" Robbie gave Henry a high five. "Mad scientist El."

"She said it wouldn't work though."

"Hey, it kills rabbits right?" Robbie smiled. "A stomach is a . . ."

A loud high pitch alarm beeping began to go off.

Henry stepped to the screen. "Mark."

"Holy shit." Mark pushed his chair back. "We're getting invaded, their coming to the back gate." Black blinking lights went mad. "Henry?"

"How many?"

Mark clicked on the computer screen. "Oh shit. Two hundred and seventy-three."

Robbie raced to the door yelling into his radio. "Security hit the . . ."

Joe's voice interrupted him. "Robert."

"Dad, not now we have an invasion."

"That's why I'm calling you. We knew we hit tracking. It's us."

"You." Robbie stopped and lowered the microphone. "Henry, it's my dad."

Henry looked puzzled. "He's not that big."

Robbie made a scoffing face. "Dad, what's going on."

"Here. Let him explain." Joe said.

"Hey baby brother." Frank spoke. "Guess who's back and gonna kick your ass right out of that number one Neville position."

Robbie grinned. "Frank."

^^^

Ellen giggled as she nibbled on crackers and read Danny's paper in the clinic lab. The head line that read 'Killer babies seize Beginnings' didn't make her laugh as much as the sub-headline that stated, 'Mad scientist Dean denies it all'. Engrossed and waiting for her blood to stop spinning, Ellen stopped smiling and crushed the cracker in her hand when she heard Dean's voice in the lab.

"Miss me?"

A near silent emotional shriek escaped her as she spun around, "Dean! She raced to him flinging her arms around him and plastering him with kisses. "Oh . . ." She gasped out and clenched his face. "You're alive."

Dean very seriously looked at Ellen. "I needed this first. O.K.?" he

softly placed his lips to hers and kissed her long. "I love you. I love you very much."

"I'm so proud of you Dean."

Dean saw her mouth open again and he laid his finger on her lips. "Go stand by the window."

"What?"

"Just look out the window. O.K."

"O.K." Ellen agreed to the odd request and moved over to the small lab window.

Dean unhooked his radio from his belt and spoke into it. "Now."

Ellen turned from the window back to Dean. "What did you say?"

"Ellen, look out that window. It's what you waited for."

Ellen's head turned to the pane of glass, as soon as she did she saw the small grade and every ounce of her breath left her, when rising over the top of it she saw Frank. Her mouth opened and her fingers pressed the glass. She let out an joyful sob.

Frank stopped on the top of the grade and waved.

Ellen spun to look at Dean. "Frank."

Dean motioned his head back toward the door. "Go on. Go see him."

Ellen ran. She slid to a stop at the lab door, backed up, and kissed Dean again. "Thank you. Thank you." She let her hand slide off his face as she ran in a excited stumbling manner out the double doors of the clinic, jumping down the steps and charging toward that grade.

Frank just seemed to far away, standing on that hill the sun blaring behind him. Ellen's heart pounded out of her chest as she drew closer to him. She blasted Frank so hard with the weight of her body as she flung herself to him, Frank stumbled in his balance as he lifted her from her feet. Frank dropped carefully to his knees, then to his back, bringing Ellen on top of him in the grass.

His face pressed close to hers then Frank kissed her, letting his hands feel her body. "El." He breathed out her name, kissing her again. "Oh El. Let me look at you."

Ellen pulled back but still held on. She closed her eyes when she felt his huge hand glide across her face. His lips touched tenderly to hers and she opened her eyes to look at him. So close he was. It had been so long since she looked this closely at Frank. But there he was. His dark eyes, glossed over, stared deeply into hers.

"I'm home."

A single sob came from Ellen and her body shook. She pressed her lips hard and with gratefulness to Frank's. And Frank kissed her like he had been waiting to do. And not caring who saw, he kept kissing her, rolling her over and laying his body on hers as he did.

^^^

It was uncomfortable enough for Dean to walk into Joe's house. Especially knowing what Joe loaned Frank and Ellen the house for, but did that Richie person have to be there. Dean could have denied the reunion, or break his word to Frank. He didn't. Because if he did, he could lose all leverage he had

in his marriage with Ellen. Happy reunion as promised. But now it was times up. Dean looked at Richie who sat on the couch. He figured Richie was new to Beginnings and probably had some sort of strange attachment to Frank. That was why he was there.

Awkwardly Dean smiled at Richie then called out. "Frank! Times up!"

"Fuck." Frank laid on the bed with Ellen, fully dressed. "Don't go."

"I have to. Dean said one hour." Ellen trickled her hand down his face.

"This sucks."

"Frank . . ."

"No, El. I just got back. I just want to be with you." Frank kissed her lightly.

"It's not like I won't see you."

"I know but it sucks."

"So you said." Ellen stood up from the bed after kissing him once more. "But Frank, you have to lighten up."

"Lighten up?" Frank got off the bed as well. "I don't have you. You're married to fuckin Dean. You won't sleep with me. All this time apart and . . ."

"And what Frank." Ellen tilted her head and looked at him. "All this time apart and you'd want our first hour to be having sex? Come on, you and I are more than that. I missed you. I really missed you."

"You're right. We're passed that." He kissed her. "But you're still married to Dean. And you claim you're making the marriage work." Frank smirked at Ellen's gasp. "Sure you are." He then cringed when he heard Dean yelling for him to hurry again. "All right!" Frank shouted.

Ellen closed off her ear. "God Frank."

"And stop that." He swiped her arm down. "That's a Dean thing. Come on El, tell him you're staying with me."

"I can't. I'll be back."

"El, I'm having a rough homecoming adjustment here." Frank complained. "I don't have you. I don't have a house. They gave it away."

"Well Frank, they thought you were dead."

"You knew I wasn't."

"There was nothing I could do." Ellen walked to the bedroom door. "I'll see you later."

"Oh!" Frank snapped his finger. "Shit. I almost forgot. I have a surprise for you."

Ellen smiled. "A surprise. How sweet."

"Yeah. Come on, you'll like it." he grabbed a hold of her hand.

Richie heard the bedroom door open and he stood up. "I'm nervous."

Dean raised one eyebrow and looked over to Richie oddly. "O.K." He too could hear them coming.

Frank stopped Ellen before they entered the living room. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

Frank covered her eyes and led her blindly into the living room.

Ellen giggled. "Frank. It must be big."

El?”
“About a hundred and thirty pounds.” Frank grinned at Richie. “Ready

“Yeah.”

Dean was so lost he tossed his hands up.

Frank removed his hand from Ellen’s eyes. “Ta da!”

Ellen screamed when she saw Richie. No sooner did Richie say her name, extend his arms and step to her . . . Ellen had hit the floor. She passed out.

Dean rushed to her. “Shit. Frank. What the hell.”

“Oh man.” Frank chuckled. “Sorry Richie.”

“She’s out cold.” Dean grabbed hold of Ellen’s face. “Why did she pass out.”

“I guess the shock of seeing her brother.” Frank said.

“Her . . .” Dean looked t Richie then Frank. “You didn’t tell me that was her brother.”

“You didn’t tell me Hal was alive, so there. We’re even.”:

“Frank.” Dean said his name with edge as he and Frank knelt over Ellen. “What the hell is the matter with you. Her brother is alive and you sleep with her first before telling her.”

“Uh . . . Yeah.” Frank said. “I missed her.”

Dean grumbled. “You’re an ass Frank. Help me lift her up.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

October 2

Beginnings, Montana

“A brother meeting?” Hal questioned as he and Robbie walked toward the field house. “Is Frank always this odd?”

“Yep.” Robbie answered. “He said you can’t go back until we have this brothers meeting.”

“For what? Does it have to do with the field workers we gave you guys?”

“Who knows. It’s Frank.”

“He hasn’t changed has he?” Hal questioned as they neared the structure. “Before we talk to this Cole guy, Is he gonna be any less a dick to me today.”

“I think.” Robbie said. “I heard Josephine hooked him up last night because if his run in with the killer babies.”

Hal stopped walking. “Does h get Neville points for that?”

^^^

“Johnny pay attention.” Jason instructed in the clinic lab.

“Where’s Andrea? Shouldn’t she see this new technique too.”

“Who knows.” Jason commented. “Probably with Ellen and Jenny. Now when you administer . . .”

“Oh my God.”

“What?” Jason saw Johnny peering closely at him.

“You have . . .” Johnny’s finger moved closely to Jason’s neck. “You have a purple mark right there. What is that?”

“Oh.” Jason’s hand covered it. It was the same mark as Bev’s. “It’s from the cryogenics process. An electrode caused . . . Johnny?” Jason looked up. Johnny was leaving the lab. “Where are you going?”

“I have to do something. Jason, does anyone else know about that mark.”

“No.”

“Thanks.” Johnny took off running.

^^^

A weird happy look glowed upon Cole’s face as he rocked back and forth in his office chair awaiting the dreaded Slagel brother three in full force. He hummed an old tune that he felt was appropriate. Rocking and waiting. And then he stopped. He heard the sound of cracking wood in his office. So close, Right behind him. Cole slowly swivelled his chair to the noise.

Robbie and Hal heard the loud scream of Cole’s followed by a crash come from his office. Both brother’s pulled out their weapons and bolted in. It

looked like a fountain of blood shooting up from the floor. A muffled snarling filled the room and Hal and Robbie raced to behind the desk.

“Oh shit.” Robbie aimed watching the Marcus ignore him and Hal as he devoured Cole. Ripped flesh flew about like snow flakes.

“Shoot it.” Hal said as he aimed.

“You shoot it. I can’t,” Robbie shook his head.

“Neither can I. It’s a baby. You shoot it.”

“You.”

“No you.” Hal insisted.

A single close range shot rang out, blasting the Marcus and sending it’s body flying across the room and smacking into the wall.

Frank shook his head and put his revolver away. “Neville points.” He looked over his stunned brother’s shoulder too a dead Cole. “Aw man. I just started to like him.”

Robbie had a smart comment to make, but he saved it when he saw the broken floor boards. “Look.” He pointed

“Fuck.” Frank squatted down to the floor. “They dug their way in.” He stood up. “Robbie get a team. We’re gonna start a quiet search of this community. Hal, cover this hole.” Without saying anymore to them, Frank left the field office barking orders into his headset as he did.

^^^

Jenny was saddened as she stood bedside of John. Ellen was checking the intravenous. “Will he ever wake up.”

“Hopefully.” Ellen told her. “We’re keeping him sedated until his body strengthens.” Ellen started to leave the room.

“Thank you for taking care of him.”

“He saved my husbands life Jenny. Not that I forgive him, but I owe him.”

“I understand. That’s why I helped Joe all this time following him. I feel as if I owe this community.”

“You don’t.” Ellen told her. “What he did is not your fault. O.K.” Ellen looked at her watch. “And I’d better get going. I want to help Dean out by doing Cole’s autopsy.”

“I can’t believe those things are running around Beginnings.”

“Well Frank just radioed and said it looked good. Dean thinks he has a way to kill them. That’s where he is at now.”

“Good luck.”

Ellen smiled as she left the room. “Thanks. You too.”

^^^

The tunnels were still damp from the previous nights rainfall. And Joe and Danny’s footstep tromped through the tunnels.

“Joe, I’ve seen this before.” Danny said as he shined his flashlight. “A movie called It’s Alive.”

Joe chuckled. “Hey, I saw that too.”

“Why are we still looking. Frank gave the all clear.”

“Because my son has a million things on his mind and I just want to double check. Bare with me Danny and look down here with me.”

“O.K.” Danny shrugged. “But if we find one. You shoot it.”

^^^

Quantico Marine Headquarters

From a hospital bed, a pale and coughing George took the phone that Steward handed him. He fumbled to hold it to his ear. His left hand was distorted and shriveled in toward the wrist. “Go on.” George spoke weakly into the phone. “Before we speak. Give it.”

“I here by claim I do this against my will.” Rev. Bob stated. “I hope what ever Frank hit you with works.”

George coughed. “You’re lucky I am obligated to family. All I ask of you is to run my meetings. I’ll take care of you if anything happens. Now . . .” George coughed again, his voice was raspy. “Did you find it?”

“Not yet. The case is being checked as we speak.” Rev. Bob looked up as he sat behind his office desk when his door opened. Bev walked in.

So sad Bev looked.. “Is that him?”

Rev Bob nodded. “Hold on George, Someone needs to speak to you.” He handed the phone to Bev.

Bev sniffled. “Hello Daddy. How are feeling?”

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

The black gloved hands held a screwdriver in the dark secret lab room. Near the lock of the freezer case, the hands worked at breaking the lock. Finally with a scratch of metal the lock loosened. The hands lifted the case. A loud audible siren went off. The lid closed and the screwdriver dropped.

Joe quickly looked at Danny. “The freezer alarm”

They both took off running.

^^^

Those very important notes Dean failed to label regarding Marcus had to be in his private office at home. He had looked everywhere else. It was his last place to look. Walking into the house he could hear music playing. “Josh, it’s just me!” Dean called out. “And what is he doing home? Josh?” Dean walked toward the music delaying his trip to his office. “Josh, you’re supposed to be at work. Josh.” Dean stood before the teenager’s bedroom door. “Josh.” He knocked and the music stopped. He turned the knob on the door and opened it.

“Oh wow.” Dean grinned as he looked into the extremely neat and almost sparkling clean room. “Josh. Good job.”

From behind the open door, Frank peeked his head. “Thanks Dean.”

“Frank. What are you doing here?”

“Cleaning my room.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Hey I can’t live in a pig sty. Man, how did you let Josh get away with the mess.”

“Frank.” Dean huffed. “You aren’t . . . you aren’t living here.”

“Dean, I lost my house. You took my family. Guess what Dean . . .” Frank grinned. “I’m home.” He nodded his head. “And I really like it here too.”

“Oh my God.” Dean closed his eyes.

“Yep Dean.” Frank swatted Dean’s arm as he walked out of Josh’s room and passed him. “One big happy family.”

^^^

Joe and Danny held high hopes of catching whoever it was, but they knew they were too far away to catch up to the running footsteps that had faded down the tunnels. They hurried to the open back lab.

“Damn it.” Joe picked up the broken lock.

“They almost got in there.” Danny said. “Good alarm system.”

“Yeah it worked.” Joe shook his head.

“Hey Joe.” Danny spoke sneaky.

“Yeah Danny.”

“The uh case is unlocked.”

“Yeah so.”

“We should peek.”

“No we shouldn’t.”

Danny leaned into Joe. “You really should take a look in this case. Aren’t you curious. Huh? I mean, you are leader again, right?”

Joe shifted his eyes to the case. “I really should know what so important that someone is breaking in there.”

“Yeah you should. Go on Joe, look. Go on.” Danny edged on.

Joe reached for the lid. “Danny. Did you see what was in here when you installed the alarm. Is that why you’re being like this?”

“Who me? No. Look Joe. Go on.”

“This is wrong.” Joe gripped the lid. “But what the hell.” He lifted it up and a hiss of cold white steam emerged. After it had cleared, exposed in the freezer was another case. Lights blinked on the bottom of the metal lined structure.

“Hmm.” Danny held his finger to his lips. “What is that.”

“It’s an animal cryogenic case.”

“It’s frosted over.”

“Yeah it is.”

“You should clear away that frost Joe.”

“What do you know?” Joe asked.

Danny shrugged. “Nothing.”

“You know something.” Joe pointed, then hesitantly brought his hand

to the frost. “And I’m gonna find out.” His hand moved to the glass of the cryogenic case.. The body heat from the palm of his hand melted away the frost in his swipe. “Dear God.” Joe gasped and stepped back. “It’s Brian.”

^^^

“Doesn’t look good. Didn’t get it.” Rev. Bob told George on the phone as he looked up to his open office door. “Here.” Rev. Bob extended the phone to the hand that still wore the black gloves.

George coughed again, his left hand pained him from clinging to the phone. But he needed to talk to his closest Beginnings contact. “No luck?” George closed his eyes. “Nono. Don’t worry about. Don’t take another chance. Please. My doctors are working on this. Yes . . .” George closed his eyes. “Lay back for awhile. I mean it. They’re gonna be heating up the search for you. This disease is nothing. If they get you, they’ll kill you on the spot. So stay low. Because as always, your life means more to me than mine . . . Johnny.”

^^^

NEXT . . . IN RETROSPECT