

THE RIPPLE

by

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Stories are told in many ways  
From beginnings to end as with most  
But in order to know THE RIPPLE  
I give you the epilogue first



## EPILOGUE

January 29

BEGINNINGS, MONTANA

They were covered with sores, Joe Slagel's hands were. Sores that tried to heal but had their difficulty. Soon, he prayed, they would be well on there way to doing so. His hands reached into a basin, dipping the stained cloth into the warm water, he wrung out the excess moisture and began to lift it. Above the water's rim he raised it, stopping before his cloth's destination to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand. His forehead that ached and still carried a body temperature well above normal. The water from the cloth dripped down his face that never once before began to show its fifty-nine years, but was beginning too. Taking a deep breath he laid the cloth, warm and soothing, on the cheek of Dr. Andrea Winters. Her trembling fevered body, did not even feel the cloth. Her brown eyes rolled slightly back into her head, never knowing Joe was standing over her. Trying to break her fever, trying to clean the blisters that formed upon her dark complected skin.

Joe sniffed through his nose, it was hard to do. The congestion was still there. The too deep of a breath, tickled his throat and Joe turned his head away from Andrea, coughing loudly. Deep, chesty and rumbling.

"Pap." Johnny Slagel who headed with a quickness into the clinic room filled with moaning patients, stopped and slowed his towering thin body. "You're not supposed to be out of bed yet." Wearing his bloodied and stained blue hospital scrubs, Johnny walked to his grandfather reaching for the basin of water.

"John." Joe tried to scold in his weakened voice, he merely caused himself to cough again. "I'll be fine. I'm getting better. You four need my help."

"Three." Johnny's hand released the tin basin. "I can't find Godrichson. If he can move and he's not sick, he should be here." Johnny, sounding so frustrated, ran his hand across the top of his short black hair.

"Jason is taking care of something." Joe finished wiping off Andrea. "He'll be back."

"What can be more important than now?"

"Trust me, John." Joe lifted the blanket slowly over Andrea, picked up the basin and moved to the next patient. "Besides . . . he's feeling it now."

Johnny swallowed harshly. "I . . . I didn't know." Swinging his head slowly, he merely lifted his sad eyes to his grandfather. "You were one of the lucky ones, you made it through."

"Am I lucky, John? Are any of us who are watching this again lucky?"

"No." Clenching his fist, Johnny pressed it down onto the blanket of the bed he stood next to. "I uh, I have to go, Pap. I have people to help."

"It's almost over, Johnny. Almost."

## Druga-Marchetti/The Ripple

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“Again.” Turning away from his grandfather, Johnny felt it go through him. He heard a single scream. A short cry out, deep and heart filled.

“No!” Ellen’s voice was heard coming from down the hall.

Johnny flung his head back, eyes tightly closed. He opened them slowly to look at his grandfather who’s head had dropped. Holding back his every emotion, his stare met Joe’s and they both knew the cause of Ellen’s scream. “Dad.” Johnny’s heart sunk and he raced from the room.

Four doors down, as he entered the room, his fears were confirmed. Ellen’s arched body hovered a bed, her arms clinging and her body shaking.

“El.” Johnny called to her his voice cracking.

“No.” She shook her head. “Not Frank.” Hard she pressed her lips to those of her husband, who lay still, his final battle of heroism had come to an end.

“El.” Johnny’s hand reached out.

Ellen lifted her head, running her hand down Frank Slagel’s face. A face she had stared into for over half her life. “I’m done.” She took a deep breath. “I can’t take it anymore. I’m done.”

“We need you.” Johnny moved to her with passion.

“I’m finished, John.” Ellen spoke in monotone, walking past Johnny and stopping at Henry Kusakari as he too bolted in the room.

Henry’s expression said it all when he saw Frank, holding back the bangs of his longish, coal black hair, he watched Ellen move slowly by him. “El.”

Ellen kept walking.

“Johnny?” Henry questioned.

Johnny lifted a sheet over his father’s body. “He thought he could beat this, Henry.”

“So did I.” Looking once at the door, Henry spun to Johnny. “I have to go after her.” As Henry stepped into the hall, he saw her. Ellen was opening the double glass doors to the clinic somberly walking out. Rushing down the corridor, that was lined up with beds, Henry followed her out. “Ellen.” He called to her. She kept on walking. “El, wait.”

Ellen turned around, her face was streaked with tears.

“Where are you going?” Henry, out of breath moved to her. “We need you in there and you know it.”

“I can’t do it Henry. The last person I love that could die, just did.” She shook her head. “I did this before. So did you. I won’t do it again.”

“But everyone in there is your family. This isn’t like the old world. This is Beginnings. You know every single person in there suffering. You have to help too, El. They need us.”

“There’s nothing we can do Henry and you know it. Nothing. The ones that will die will just go. And the ones that are coming out of it, the very

few, will make it on their own.” Ellen stepped back from him, her hand, shaking so badly reached up and covered her eyes. “I just want to . . . I just . . .” She began to cry. “Want to quit.”

“I won’t let you.” Henry took hold of her pulling Ellen tightly to him. “I won’t let you give up, El.” His hand cradled her head against his chest. “I promised Frank. I promised him I’d take care of you and Billy and I will.”

“Billy.” Ellen cried her son’s name as she buried herself in Henry’s chest. “At least I still have Billy.”

“Yeah, and a few more.” Henry pulled back some placing his hands firmly on her saddened face. “We’ll get through this and we will go on. We will.” He hunched down some to be at her eye level. “Just work with me through this just a little bit more. Help me El, don’t quit on me now.” Gently he laid his lips on hers. “I need you. Johnny needs you.”

“What went wrong, Henry? What?”

“I wish I knew.” He pulled her back into him, into his arms. He had to hide his hurt and desperation. Henry had to be strong. But it was hard for him. Especially as he stood there, holding his friend in his arms, staring at the now silent and near dead streets of Beginnings.

Ellen shivered long and loud, releasing a final exasperation of her tears as she pulled back from Henry. “Come on.”

“You’re sure?” Henry asked and grabbed her hand.

Ellen nodded, and she began to walk back to the clinic with him. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

Moving slowly with Ellen, Henry stopped when he saw him making his clinic approach. He moved more sluggish than when Henry last seen him. “Jason.” Henry called out to him as he seemed to be in his own daze. “Jason, we’ve been looking for you.”

Jason Godrichson’s even thinner body, swerved some as he reached for the handle of the clinic doors. So weakened he faced Henry and Ellen who approached him.

“Jason.” Henry saw his face, the blisters that were starting to form. Blisters that weren’t there three hours ago when he saw him last. The scolding voice Henry was going to use disappeared when he knew Jason was sick. “We needed you here. Things were bad. You shouldn’t have been out. Where have you been?”

Opening his mouth to speak, Jason coughed loudly, his body shook as he did. Grabbing his chest and catching his breath, Jason, with wobbling eyes looked to Henry. “Stopping this.”

NOT WITHOUT LOSS

CHAPTER ONE

Fourteen Months Earlier - November 15

PRESENT DAY BEGINNINGS

The noise of disgust was loud when it emanated from Joe Slagel after he sipped his first taste of coffee. There was something about the coffee beans in Beginnings they couldn't get right. A quick shiver of his head and a shrug, Joe prepared himself and took another sip. It was better. It always was after the first step of torture. Carrying the cup carefully he moved to his diningroom table and pulled out his chair. His morning routine. Coffee and whatever he could grab to read. Lifting his half square glasses and placing them on, Joe grabbed what he believed to be the most interesting piece of literature ever to cross his eyes.

A letter.

Bringing his coffee to his lips again, he spread out the white sheet of paper, smoothing the folds with his hands. It was a letter that should have frightened him beyond belief. It didn't. The inspiration the information gave Joe filled him with a spark of energy he had lost. Though it was a foreshadowing of bad, it was an invitation to good.

At first he skimmed the letter with disbelief when Jason Godrichson handed it to him the night before. Then Joe looked at it every chance he had. Reading it, thinking and planning. With his coffee, and a more clearer mind, Joe read the letter again. It was a letter Dr. Jason Godrichson had sent to himself.

*--As I sit here writing this, I go against everything I have ever told myself I wouldn't do. On the bottom of this letter, you will find the missing formula you need to complete the Regressionator time travel process. The missing pieces that probably seems so far away. I am using the last of my power supply to send this to you. I do this because I sit here in a weakened and dying state. My body is failing me, just like so many others in Beginnings. A virus has struck us. One that is not only strong but fatal as well. It kills eighty-percent of those it strikes. It has taken most of the lives in Beginnings. I've not much time left, and I send this letter back to myself in hopes that what I am facing can be stopped. We believe that the virus may have somehow began through the vials in the cryo-lab case. And because all of the printed information about these vials were alien to me, we were ill-prepared. Whatever it was, seeped forth causing this destruction when a malfunction in the cooling unit of the case went unnoticed. The antidote, the answer to it all, was definitely in the case. Because Henry, Johnny and Ellen, the ones who worked with the vials, are the only ones who show immunity. But now everything in that case has gone bad. There is only one way to stop this, one man that can stop this. You must take the formula and complete the Regressionator. You must go against all of your time beliefs and bring back Doctor Dean Hayes. If he can't stop this from happening, he can beat it once it starts. He is our, your,*

*the future of Beginnings, only hope. It can be done. Herein in the arrival of this note, is your proof--*

Joe glanced over the formula scribbled at the bottom. A short one line formula he didn't understand, nor cared to. That wasn't his concern, that was Jason's. Folding the note back up, Joe placed it in a crisp envelope. He'd put it away until it was time to pull it back out. Until then, it couldn't be seen. The pummeling news that the note warned of paled in comparison to what the note actually meant. It meant change. Change for the better to divert the worst.

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The 'boom' of the main field house door opening, ricocheted like a cannon through the quietness of Beginnings. Lunging into the doorway, arms out some, Henry looked as if he were in attack mode. His nose crinkled, his head went frantically from side to side causing his hair to whip about. Left to right he looked, then smiled, and with the leverage of slightly bent knees Henry dove forward. He landed hard, face first on the cold autumn ground. Slamming his hands in frustration to the dirt he stood, and as if faster than his thirty-four year old body allowed, he took off running.

The brush of Henry's wiry speeding body into him, sent Cole in a spin. He gained his footing and watched Henry, zig-zagging as if making a new path. Henry would run, stop, dive and after a grunt, get back up again.

Scratching his head, Cole lifted his hand "Henry! What are . . ."

"Can't talk now." Henry faded vocally and bodily. "I'm on a mission."

Cole closed his eyes. "Oh, no. Not again."

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The feeling of the cloth on the sleeve of his shirt felt so real to Ellen Slagel in her dream. The coarseness of it's denim as it slipped through her fingers when he pulled his arm harshly from her as she reached for him. "Dean, wait." She chased him, running her fingers through her dark blond hair that flew about in her run. "I need to explain."

"Explain?" Dean spoke in an almost laugh. "Explain what? That you lied to me?"

Ellen stared at Dean's mad yet, hurt face. The expression in pain that was there. Was it magnified in her dream, or was it there when it all happened two years earlier? So many of her dreams, like the one she was having, were filled with the times she was mean, or deceitful to him. It was almost as if--even if it was just her subconscious dream state--that she was trying to

change it, to make it all right. And this dream was no exception. “Dean, I want to talk to you about this.”

“Then we won’t talk on the street.” Dean stormed faster to their home, bolting open the door and walking in first.

Ellen followed and halted when she saw Joe on the couch. Mid-dream confusion set in. “Joe? Wait. Hold up. Joe you weren’t here when this happened. What are you doing here?”

Joe stood up from the couch, he laughed loudly, running his hand down his face trying to catch his breath. “Give her hell, Dean.” He walked to the doors, wiggling his fingers and smiling

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “This isn’t right.” She couldn’t figure out why Joe was not only being intrusive in her ‘make-it-better-with-Dean’ dream, but he was being so immature as well. “O.K. Dean, time out.” Her raised hands formed the letter “I”.

“Ellen, what now?” Dean ran his hand over his face.

“Joe wasn’t here when this happened for real. He ruined it. Can we just back . . .”

“El.” Dean moved forward and grabbed her hand. “All these dreams, you have to let it go.” He clenched her hand tighter.

Ellen felt it in her dream, the feel of his skin, the touch of his hand. “I can’t. It’s my way to try.”

“Try to do what? Change the past. You can’t.” Dean shook his head. “Let it go. I have to leave now.” His hand pulled from hers.

“But, Dean.” Suddenly Ellen’s hand felt empty. “Dean?” No longer was she standing in her living room but the morgue of the clinic. Standing there facing Dean as he lay on that table. Horrifying the solemn dream she was having. “Dean!” Not wanting to be there, wrestling with herself to awaken, Ellen jumped up in bed calling out. “Dean.”

His heavy, loud sigh outward filled the silent bedroom, as Frank stopped in the checking of his revolver to turn his head slowly to his wife who sat up in bed.

“Frank.” Ellen saw the expression on his face. She looked up to his tall body and to his dark eyes that took a moment to stare at her, just stare.

Subtly Frank shook his head, placed his revolver in his shoulder harness and grabbed his black leather jacket off the foot of the bed. He opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing and just walked from the bedroom.

Gripping his coat with his frustration, Frank stopped in the hall. He looked back over his shoulder and peeked through the ajar door to Ellen who sat on the bed. Her legs brought up, a pillow cradled to her chest. After a moment of debate, Frank decided the best thing was for his bitterness and her grief not to merge. And with that decision, Frank left.



With a slight moaning hum, Andrea folded her hands in a prayer fashion. A small smile was on her face as she sat at her diningroom table. “Hungry?”

Joe finished up his scrambled eggs. “Very. Thanks.” He stood up, grabbed his plate and took it into the kitchen. When he came out, he reached for his cup and downed his coffee.

“In a hurry as well.” Andrea stood up.

“Big day, Andrea.” Joe grinned. “Big . . . big day.” he began to leave.

“My.” She followed. “You are in good spirit’s. Big day meaning, you’re finally telling Frank about us?”

Joe stopped, cringed and faced her. “No. That’s not it.”

“Then what?” Andrea nearly chased Joe to the door. “You are so upbeat.”

“And with good reason.” Joe grabbed his coat. “We’ll talk later.”

“Can I have a hint?” Andrea asked with a manipulation look.

“Well. O.K.” Joe placed on his jacket. “A little one. It has to do with Dean.”

The smile went to a forced one on Andrea’s face. “Dean? You’re . . . you’re smiling about Dean?”

“Yes.” Joe gave a pat to Andrea’s cheek. “Let’s just say, and this is telling you a little more than you should know, let’s say I can’t wait until he returns.”

The air from her gasp precluded any words as she reached for his arm and halted his leaving. “Joseph. Dean . . . Dean isn’t returning.”

“Yes, he is. Soon.”

“Joe.” Andrea added a pacifying tone as she stepped into him. Something was not right. She knew Joe wasn’t acting himself, and his words about Dean confirmed it. “Joe. Um, Dean isn’t on vacation dear. He . . . he died.”

“I know this. Christ Andrea, why do you think I’m so excited about his rebirth.” Joe opened the door and drew up a thinking look. “Was that what it’s called. Yeah. Rebirth. And I told you too much. See ya.”

Mouth hanging, Andrea raised her hand and readied to speak but the door closed. She folded her arms close and lowered her head. The doctor in Andrea immediately began thinking. The drug Salicain, the one used on Joe, popped in her mind. She hoped what she had witnessed with Joe was just a temporary mental repercussion of the drug. Temporary, because Beginnings would be in trouble if it was permanent. Henry would be in charge.

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Frank saw them as he made his approach to the back gate to do his rounds. The feet that stuck out from the bushes. Feet that moved some, covered in a pair of tennis shoes, connected to the wiggling lanky legs that Frank knew well. Staring down, with his hands on hips, he watched at what appeared to be a struggle somewhere within the big helpless bush. “Henry. What the hell are you doing in that bush?”

“Nothing now, Frank, thank you very much.” With the crinkling of leaves, Henry scooted himself out. “You scared him away.” Henry brushed himself off.

“Scared him away? Who? Marcus? Was Melissa’s killer baby running around up here again?”

“No, not Marcus. She keeps him pretty much chained up most of the time. No, a mouse.”

Frank tried not to laugh. “A mouse? You saw a mouse?”

“Yeah, down near the field house. I was fixing a hatch, and I started to chase him.”

“Uh!” Frank’s shriek shut him up. “The field house is a mile away. Why were you chasing a mouse for a mile?”

“To catch him.” Henry stated with fact.

“Why? Were you hungry? I heard that the Japanese put . . .”

“Ha, ha, ha. You’re just the funny guy today aren’t you. No Frank, I wasn’t going to eat him. I hate rodents.”

“Then why in the world were you chasing a fuckin mouse for a mile. Don’t you think that’s just a little neurotic?”

“Neurotic? Don’t you think it’s a little *stupid*, to be asking *me* why I’m chasing a *mouse*?” Henry leaned forward with his every accent on his words.

“Don’t even be treating me like I’m the dumb one here. I wasn’t the one buried in the bush.”

“You’re not the dumb one? Well when’s the last time you saw a mouse?”

Frank didn’t answer.

“Then I’ll tell you--Mr. Big shot, Mr. Make-fun-of-my-heritage, Mr. Funny guy--since before the plague. I know *I* haven’t seen any mice, rats or any types of rodents since then..”

“O.K., so there was a mouse, so what? I think the point should be, why you were chasing the thing for a mile at six-thirty in the morning.”

“No, Frank, the point should be, where did he come from?”

“The field house.”

Grunting loudly, Henry smacked himself in the face. “Forget it.”

Henry had reached that point. He had enough of Frank to jump start his morning in the wrong direction. Frank just wasn't understanding what Henry was getting at. There was something in Beginnings that no one had seen for quite a long time. It made an unexplained entrance and pretty much anything unexplained burns through Henry until it got explained, at least to himself. "I'm going Frank." He began to walk away, defeated in his trapping of the furry white creature.

"Henry, wait." Frank trotted up to him with a look of seriousness. "I want to talk to you."

Seeing how Frank had switched his demeanor, mood and mode--not an uncommon occurrence for schizophrenic Frank--Henry saw no harm in it. No mental harm in it. Apprehensively he faced him. "Sure, what's up?"

"It's about Ellen." Frank saw he had Henry's attention. "Last night, she was doing good and today . . . today another dream set her off. I want to know if you can check on her for me. See how's she's doing."

"Yeah sure, Frank. I will. But why don't you?"

"Come on, Henry." Frank shook his head and swung his hand about in a cutting motion. "I wanna help her. I do. I just, I have a hard time being so understanding when she gets like this over him. And I end up not helping her at all."

"You're helping. You really are. Trust me. And you're gonna have a hard time dealing with her grief. You're human."

"I am."

"Yeah and . . . just remember it's a long process, it takes time. She lost her friend, a good friend." Henry explained.

"I know. But I'm having a hard time here Henry living up to that friend's memory."

"I have a theory on that." With a raise to the corner of his mouth, Henry lifted his finger, taking on 'The Theory-man' look. "When someone dies, people tend to forget all the bad things that they ever did in their lives. Remember in the old world when some postal worker would knock off his branch, and then kill himself? And all the neighbors would talk about how nice he was. It's the canonization theory. All dead people become saints in the eyes of their loved ones." Henry noticed the far-off, clueless look on Frank's face. "I lost you somewhere didn't I?"

"Um . . . go back to the part about the postal worker."

"Never mind. I'll talk to you later." Henry began to walk away.

"Henry." Frank saw him stop and turn back around. "Thanks. I appreciate what you're doing for her. You make her smile."

"No Frank, I make her talk. You make her smile. When you see Ellen laughing or smiling when we're together she's talking about you."

Frank's head lowered in appreciation of Henry's words. "Thanks for

telling me that. I thought she was talking about Dean when she was laughing.”

Henry shook his head sadly. “When she talks about Dean . . . she cries.” He closed his mouth tightly. “I have to go.” He moved, pointing backwards with his thumb. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded, placed himself in the security mode again, and turned back to do his perimeter checks. As he started walking to the back gate, he saw him. Sitting there, playing in the dry leaves as if he owned the place, was that mouse. Quickly, Frank stepped forward, bringing down his heavy and large boot upon the mouse’s tail. Watching it squirm to get out of its foot-trap, Frank bent down and picked it up, holding it by the tail he nearly squashed. “Look at you.” He laughed, shaking his head, watching the mouse squirm. “A big guy too. Won’t Henry be happy.” With his forefinger and thumb, Frank flicked the mouse in the head, rendering the squeaking rodent motionless. “Whoops.” Shrugging, Frank shoved the mouse in his jacket pocket and returned to doing his rounds.

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Jason Godrichson’s hands trembled so fiercely as he clenched the homemade cigarette between his two fingers. He brought the butt to his lips as he worked slowly and with excitement on the formula that he copied from the bottom of his letter. The letter Jason supposed, he’d never see again. But that didn’t matter. The formula would work, it had to.

As he coughed that tickle from his throat from too large of an inhale, Jason heard that familiar sound. The flash of light in his lab, the sound of a power surge. Not as predominant as the one the night before, but the same none-the-less.

Jason turned his stool slowly to see the hopping rabbit. He would say the rabbit looked confused, if rabbit’s could look that way. Smiling, Jason walked to the rabbit, bending down and picking it up under its front paws. Around its neck was a rope, attached to it--a note.

Laughing with a ‘hee-hee’, Jason excitedly set the rabbit down on the counter and quickly undid the note. He read the note out loud. “*You are ten minutes away from completing the formula and making it work. Hurry and look at your watch.*” Jason did, and he started to laugh. “Oh I just amuse myself sometimes.” Shaking his head he replaced the note back on the rabbit, the rabbit would need that for when Jason sent him back again. He moved to his work and took another puff of his cigarette before glancing at the furry friend who sat by him, awaiting his repeat travel.

CHAPTER TWO

Henry listened to Joe as he spoke, really listened to Joe. But somehow Joe saw it written all over Henry's face as they sat across from each other in Joe's office. Henry's mouth hung open.

"Henry." Joe snapped his finger. "It's true. What do you think?" Joe smiled.

"I think . . . I think you're searching."

"Searching? What the hell do you mean searching? I'm being very serious here." Joe leaned back in his chair. "You don't think it can be done, do you?"

"No, Joe I don't. Time travel is not possible. It isn't."

"Regressionating."

"Whatever. And I can't believe you believe him."

"And I can't believe you don't." Joe stated. He wasn't getting ruffled by Henry's lack of an open mind at the moment. "Who was the one staring at a goddamn wall for months?"

"But this is different, Joe. You're talking time travel here. I'm the one who always listens before making my judgment. You, you on the other hand scoff at anything that sounds like its coming from a science fiction movie." Henry tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Maybe the Salicain impaired your judgement."

"Don't!" Joe snapped forward. "Don't you dare throw that one at me young man. I was totally aware when I was under the Salicain. Tell me why you don't believe this."

"Can you tell me why you do?" Henry asked. "Why are you so convinced?"

"I told you, I read the letter."

"Then let me read the letter." Henry suggested, perhaps his eyes could see what Joe did.

"Can't do that Henry. Council or not, the next person that reads that letter will be Dean."

"Dean is dead."

"He's coming back." Joe insisted.

"No Joe, he's not. He's dead."

"Oh, why am I even arguing with you about this?" Joe waved him off. "This whole conversation will be moot and you won't know anyhow. Only the person traveling through time will know that Dean had originally died." Joe folded his hands, his serious look on his face told Henry that he thought Jason was telling the truth. "Trust me when I tell you, the letter was the

truth.”

“Joe, now just let me be rational for a second please.”

“When aren’t you?” Hands out to Henry, Joe leaned far back in his chair. “Shoot.”

“He’s living out his delusion.” He heard Joe laugh. “No hear me out. He’s living it out and pulling you in. Anyone can write themselves a letter and say it’s from the future. Anyone. That is really stupid . . .”

“Yeah.” The intrusion of Frank’s comment interrupted their little meeting when he just waltzed in. He handed his father a clipboard. “What’s stupid?”

“Oh . . .” Henry shook his head. “Jason sent himself a letter.”

“Hey, that is stupid.” Frank crossed his arms. “And speaking of letters. Can you repeat your theory on the postal workers again?”

“It wasn’t a theory on postal workers Frank, it was a theory on grief.” Sighing loudly, Henry gripped the arms of the chair to stand.

“Wait a second.” Frank held his hand out. “I have something for you.”

Joe saw it. He knew Henry did not. That certain gleam in Frank’s eye. That slight raising of his left eyebrow and the smile that tried to hide. His son was up to something, and Joe waited with baited breath.

“What is it, Frank?” Henry plopped back down into the chair.

“This.” With a subtle ‘thump’ on the desk, Frank lifted his huge hand exposing the dead mouse. “Your friend.”

Henry jumped back, his chair squeaked as it nearly fell over. “Frank!” He saw Joe turn around in laughter. “This is not funny, Joe. Your son is an asshole.”

“Oh, my God.” Frank shouted. “Here I was being nice, giving you your pal that you searched for and you call me names.”

“You’re right. Sort of.” Henry adjusted himself in his chair, pulling further from the desk. “Where did you find him?”

“Right where you saw him. In fact right after you left I picked him up.”

Henry looked up to Frank who so arrogantly and proud ran his hand down his goatee. “Frank? That was six hours ago. You’ve been carrying around a dead mouse for six hours?”

“I didn’t think he was dead . . . not at first. But, if you want him to be alive we can pretend.” Frank grabbed the rodent and moved it to Henry, speaking in a high pitch voice. “Hi Henry.”

“I’m out of here.” Henry jumped up, shook his head at Frank then at Joe who still had his back turned laughing. “Frank, there is something wrong with you.”

“Me?” Frank dropped the mouse to Joe’s desk. “You were the one chasing the mouse around. A mouse.”

“You still don’t get it, do you.” Disgusted and perturbed Henry walked

to the door. "Joe we'll finish later."

"Henry." Frank called to him.

"What?" He hesitated as he opened the door.

"Don't you want your friend?" Frank's response from Henry came in the form of a loud slamming door. He laughed and turned back to his father who was tossing the dead mouse in the trash. Frank sat down. "I hope he doesn't forget to talk to Ellen."

"Why is Henry talking to Ellen?"

With a slight shrug, Frank leaned in his chair. "He helps. A lot more than I do. I think she tells him things that she feels she can't tell me."

"About Dean?"

"What else. Everything now in her life revolves around him."

"Do you think it's a good idea to have Henry helping her so much?" Joe asked. "Do you worry?"

"Nah." Frank shook his head. "Henry's my friend. And . . . he's El's friend. She really needs that now and I'm just letting her have it."

"You've seemed to have mellowed since Dean died. You're doing really good with this, Frank."

"Thanks. It's tough. And I'm trying. Especially since me and El are back together."

"Let me ask you a questions." Joe folded his hands and leaned on the desk. "Would you and Ellen be back together, if say Dean wasn't dead."

"Dean is dead."

"Answer my question." Joe beckoned harshly.

"I don't know . . . no." Frank answered. "When we buried Dean, it seemed like we buried all of the problems."

"If Dean were alive today . . ."

"Dad, can we not talk about Dean. It depresses me."

"We have to talk about Dean, Frank." Joe smiled widely. "He's coming back."

"Dean's coming back? What? You mean we're having a seance or something?"

"No you idiot. We're bringing him back."

"From the dead?"

"No he's never going to have died." Joe raised his eyebrows.

"Dad?" Frank looked at him oddly. "Dean did die. I watched him die."

"You'll forget about it." Joe chuckled.

"Are you all right?"

"Never been better." Joe reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

Frank, whose mouth was open, shut it. He whistled some Beatles tune while tapping his fingers together as they were folded on his lap. "So." He

cleared his throat. "When is your next appointment with Andrea. You know, to see if the effects of that drug . . ."

"Frank! There's nothing wrong with me. What I'm . . ."

Joe's office door opened and Johnny peeked his head in. "I'm off, Pap."

Joe looked up to him. "Be careful out there. And try to bring back as many as you can. We are really over stocked from harvest. Plus the greenhouses are filled. And anyone who's seems sane. Anyone."

"Got it." Johnny gave a thumbs up. "See ya, Dad. Pap."

Frank spun in his chair to question the run, but the door shut. He turned back to this father. "Dad? Anyone who seems sane? What's up with that?"

"Well Frank a little excitement never hurt anyone. It's been quiet around here for the past couple of weeks . . ."

"Quiet? Oh yeah you would think, you were the drone for a while. We've had excitement. Didn't we just finish off the lasts of the SUTs? Aren't we planning on a run and hit to New Mexico?"

"Uh . . . maybe."

"Maybe? Maybe?"

Joe rolled his eyes at his son's dramatics.

"What is this maybe about running to New Mexico?" Frank huffed. "You know by the stats there are more of those SUTs. Don't tell me I have to start calling you George."

A grunting moan escaped Joe. "Christ. We'll go to New Mexico, Frank. There's just something important that has to be done first."

"Like what?"

"Like bringing Dean back."

Frank immediately stood up. "I'm getting Andrea or Jason. I really think . . ."

"Sit!" Joe ordered and waited for Frank to do so. "Now, I'm not off my rocker on this one Frank. I am not. If I didn't believe it to be true, I wouldn't have this attitude. Jason Godrichson gave me the proof I need and it convinced me that his time machine . . ." He saw Frank laugh. "His Regressionator, really works. What?"

"A time machine? Dad please."

"Yeah well we had fifty frozen people in our tunnels and no one thought that was possible, did they?" He saw the smile drop from Frank's face. "Exactly. Now the run to New Mexico will only have to wait until we do this."

"It can't wait, Dad. It really can't. You just said so yesterday."

"I know. But this is important, Frank. Can you trust me on this?"

"I will if you trust me on the New Mexico situation. Give me a scout

troop to go down there and I'll go . . . I'll go with you on this bringing Dean back from the dead thing."

"I'll give you the scout troop. Get them together."

"Thank you. Now . . ." Almost afraid, Frank returned to the conversation about Dean. "I've watched movies. How are we gonna . . . um, bring Dean back with out screwing up."

"Very carefully. We have to examine what will change and what won't. In fact I was gonna ask for your thoughts on the George situation and would it have been different if Dean didn't die." Joe saw Frank open his mouth. "Don't answer right away. Give it thought. It's important. But what's more important is bringing Dean back. It's more important than you know."

"Why?" Frank asked.

"I can't tell you that."

"Give me a hint."

"No I'm not giving you a hint. Just trust me. And go back to work."

"All right. And I'll work on those thoughts for you." Frank stood up and moved to the door. "I hope this works. I really do. This community needs Dean."

"More than you know." Joe said solemn.

"I'll talk to you later." Frank opened the door.

"Oh Frank?"

"Yeah?" Frank slid as he stopped in his exit.

"Here." Joe reached into the trash can. "Take your friend." He tossed the mouse to him.

It bounced off of Frank's chest and he caught it. "You know what? I'll get Henry again with it." Frank shoved it in his pocket. "Make him think there's more than one." Laughing, he left.

Joe laughed too, thinking how squirmy Henry was about the mouse, then he stopped laughing. "Wait a second . . ." He stood up. "Where in the hell did a mouse come from?"

^^^

*"El, please don't cry. Please."*

Ellen remembered hearing Dean say that. She remembered how tight her eyes were as she laid on the floor in the hole. Dean with her, nearly on her, trying to calm her down. She trembled so bad as she cried. Memories seeped through her mind of the last hours, seconds with Dean.

Ellen opened her eyes and looked at the bright sun that warmed her through the chilly wind. Unprotected by buildings or trees, she sat in the underdeveloped section where they had buried Dean. She closed her jean

jacket tighter around her bent up knees. Dean's jean jacket. An article of clothing Ellen seemed to not take off or have far from her. It still smelled like him and Ellen prayed it never lost that. She had already lost Dean himself.

Trying so hard not to, Ellen kept remembering their last moment. She closed her eyes and saw his face. The lips that brushed against hers trying to calm her. Dean's face that held not one bit of fright, even though they knew they could die. She just wanted to feel what he felt. She just didn't want to be alone, or face the fact that she would never see him again. A part of her knew it. That moment, as they laid amongst the dirt, her heart was telling her that it would be the last time she would ever touch Dean again. And Dean knew it also. She could feel it when he gave into her. His lips and his body said it all.

That last moment with Dean was one she should have regretted happening. But it wasn't, it was one she cherished. Feelings that she never knew existed came out in that time when she faced her death. And even though she always knew how strongly Dean felt about her, in that tunnel, in his arms, she felt it more than ever before.

Her numbing cold fingertips picked at the long grass, pulling some out and tossing it. Never would Ellen had imagined that when Dean Hayes died, he took with him such a part of her, that she felt lost.

"This should have been the first place I looked." Henry spoke softly behind her, bending down and laying his hand on her shoulder with comfort.

"Why . . ." Ellen wiped her eyes. "Why are you looking for me?"

"To see if you're all right."

"I'm not."

"I know."

Ellen reached up to her shoulder, grabbing Henry's hand. Her other hand ran down the mound of dirt that was still so fresh it failed to grow grass. "I miss him." She started to rock back and forth. "I miss him so much."

"El." Henry's knees fell to the ground, he put his arm around the front of her pulling her into him. "It takes time."

Ellen dug the back of her head into Henry's chest, holding onto his arm so tightly. "I'm trying to be strong I am. It's just so hard."

"And it will be."

"And now Joe wants me to meet him and Jason tomorrow so I can relive that whole entire day all over again. To tell them about that day. I can't, Henry."

"Why does Joe want . . ." Henry closed his eyes tight. "El, did he tell you they can bring Dean back?"

She nodded.

"El, please don't get your hopes up. Please." He took his hand from hers and wrapped his other arm around her.

"I'm not. But they said they need my help. How can I talk about it, Henry? I can't talk about him. I can barely make it through the day without him."

"Then you shouldn't get involved. Put it out of your mind what they're saying they can do. Ignore it."

"I can't. I want it to work. I want them to be able to bring him back." Ellen began to cry. "With my whole heart I want it to work."

"So do I, El." He lightly kissed her.

"Tell me it will work." Ellen painfully listened to Henry's answer. His silence. "Henry?"

Henry couldn't say anything though he wanted to. He didn't want to add to the sadness he already felt seeping from her. But besides feeling Ellen's sadness, he felt something else. Anger. Anger toward those who were leading Ellen down a path of misrepresentation. And he had to try to do something to stop that before they led her too far that she wouldn't come back.

^^^

With a loud shivering vocal chill of excitement. Joe brushed off his arms as he stood in Jason's lab. "Son of a bitch. It works."

"Awesome isn't it?" Jason asked, taking notes as he spoke. "Did you feel anything weird. Any burning?"

"None." Joe shook his head. "But that was a five minute trip. What about when you use the uranium?"

"Same. The energy needed to expel your physical being is the same, it's just the power supply to do it that's different. And that was very brave of you to go through."

"What the hell." Joe waved his hand. "Hell, I was a vegetable for a few weeks, what else could be worse."

"Barbequed."

The smile fell from Joe's face. "Valid point." He rubbed his hands together. "All right. Now that we know it works. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow we interview Ellen. So we can find a opportunity doorway. Is Frank thinking about what you told him?"

"Yes." Pulling out a stool, Joe waved to a caged rabbit and sat down. "Now when will we go?"

"Tomorrow night should be good. That way, if it works, no one will see you return from the time trip. Not even me, I should be at the social hall."

"Sounds good." Joe spotted Jason's cigarettes. "Can I?"

"Sure." He set his clipboard down. "You know Joe, this goes against

everything I thought I'd do. You just can't change history that much."

"True." Joe lit up. "But we're not only changing history. We're changing the future and that has to be done. It has to be. Besides, not much can happen just by bringing Dean back. At least I don't think. But a lot can happen if we don't."

Jason made his way across the lab to the coffee pot he had set up. He pulled two cups forward but stopped mid-pour to the sound of screeching tires outside of his lab. He gave a curious look to Joe. "Is that Frank?"

"Shouldn't be." Joe answered.

A double hard knock was the warning for his entrance. Henry walked in bringing with him a very strong presence. He closed the door.

"Henry." Joe smiled. "What brings you here?"

Henry shifted his eyes from Joe to Jason.

Joe saw that. "What's wrong?"

"It has to stop Joe. Stop it right now." Henry stated. "I mean it."

"What are you talking about?" Joe asked.

"This." Henry's hand motioned around the lab. "Dismantle this illusion."

Jason took offense. "Henry, this is my life's work. I don't appreciate you speaking about it like that."

"And I don't appreciate what you two are doing to my friend." Henry snapped. "It's bad enough that almost every single person has gone through a personality metamorphosis since Dean died, but to mislead the person who is taking it the worst is wrong. Dead wrong. She hasn't even begun to make that much progress, don't throw her back."

Joe slowly stood up. "Throw her back? Henry. I'm trying to help Ellen."

"Is that what you call it?" Henry asked. "Help? No, Joe. Helping Ellen is walking her through what she is feeling. Telling her it's OK to cry. Giving her ways to get beyond this. That's help. Giving her false hope, is not."

"Henry, we're not doing that." Joe said. "And we certainly aren't stopping with this plan. Aside from Ellen needing this, more so the community needs it."

"The community just needs to move on Joe." Henry spoke with passion. "You can't stall things on one man's H.G. Wells infatuation."

Jason gasped a grunt that seemed a prelude to a vocally blasting statement.

Joe held up his hand. "Does insulating this man make you feel better? It works, Henry. I know, I just went through it."

Henry laughed in a ridiculing way. "Listen to you." He shook his head. "You of all people, Joe shouldn't buy into this. Things happen for a reason. People, they leave us. It's God's will and there is nothing we can do about it."

We can't change that. We certainly can't reverse time and we can't bring Dean back. So quit telling everyone that." Henry, with an angry spin and exhausted of argument, flung open the door and left.

Jason raised his eyebrows a split second after the door slammed. "Well."

"Well." Joe cleared his throat. "Won't he feel like the fool tomorrow?"

"Absolutely." Jason agreed and held up the pot. "Coffee?"

"Sure, why not." Joe looked back to the recently closed door and shook his head with a chuckle. He looked forward to his relaxing coffee after the closed minded ignorance filled riot act he was read from hyper Henry.

CHAPTER THREE

The broken windows were blackened out by the trees that overgrew like a forest. At one time it was well maintained, but in the oval office where Steward Lange stood, the dead world was painfully evident.

His smaller frame body stood behind the desk. His eyes glued to the thick dust covered surface of it. He watched the answer to a question posed two weeks early, drop before his eyes. The question . . . what happened to George Hadly?

It had been two weeks since Steward had his last communication with the former president who was assuring him that Beginnings was on its way down. Two weeks of waiting. Doing nothing. It could have been considered a waste of valuable time. In fact, many who worked with Steward insisted it was. But loyalty made Steward hold out.

It rattled and spun before settling on the dust covered surface of the desk. Steward reached down and picked up the thick gold ring. His eyes raised to Sgt. Timothy Doyle, complete in a Caceres Society uniform.

“Where?” Steward asked.

“Two miles north of Beginnings.” Sgt. Doyle answered. “And it was tricky. We tried to get into Miles City, thinking the president was held up there with some of our Enhanced soldiers. But Beginnings has wiped that out.”

“So you started a search?”

“Actually. No.” Sgt. Doyle shook his head. “In avoidance we took the longer route back. With some hopes of possibly seeing the president at the meeting place. That’s where we found the ring.”

“Maybe he left this behind as a message.” Suggested Steward.

“No.”

“How can you be so sure?” Steward asked.

“Because we located that ring amongst the human remains we found. Evidentially tossed and left for the animals to feed upon. But enough was left to determine it was President Hadly.”

“So they found him out.” Steward turned and moved to the window. “Just as we suspected.” He peered out, wishing he could see more of the city that George Hadly vowed to return to.

“Preparations have been in limbo for two weeks. Things were put on hold. What now?”

“Now.” Steward spoke softly. “We make sure all efforts were not in vain.”

“Sir?” Sgt. Doyle questioned not really understanding.

“We continue on. We follow through.” Steward turned from the

window and faced Sgt. Doyle. “We finish what the president started. Rebuilding the society.”

^^^

The note left on Henry’s door that read, ‘*Henry, plan to arrive a little earlier at the quantum lab tomorrow--Joe*’ filled him with bitterness. Wasn’t Joe listening to anything he said? He hoped that the so-called meeting of events would turn out to be a reality check for Jason and Joe. And instead of them finding the perfect time frame for when they could save Dean, they would discover truth and see that both of them swam in such a deep vat of wishful thinking, they were drowning in delusions.

He crumbled the note within his fist and tossed it on his diningroom table. Taking off his coat Henry saw his journal, pencil inside still sitting where he had his morning tea. Henry really wanted to place an entry in that journal, a routine he had done nightly since he arrived in Beginnings. A routine that stopped the moment Dean died. It seemed from that point, all the things Henry like to jot down seemed so minuscule in the scope of things. And almost embarrassed to write those trivial matters, Henry stopped. But it was time again, it was a sense of therapy. And Henry did have the mouse story to share even if only to the pages of his journal.

In the midst of the thought, Henry remembered. Ellen. She had asked a week before to see the earlier journals. As if she wanted more memories, even if they were Henry’s, of Dean. Henry turned her down. They were his secret thoughts, but the more the dwelled on it, the more he realized it wasn’t a bad idea.

Running through his mind the happier years, Henry opened the cabinet in the diningroom and searched out which of the four journals had that time frame. Finding it, Henry tucked the book under his arm and started to leave. He stopped when he remembered something else. The noodles he made that Ellen loved. Thinking, along with the memories, good food would help, Henry went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Every good intention thought left Henry and they were replaced with vile ones. Ones of Frank. There, perched on the top shelf of his refrigerator, complete with a note that read ‘thought you might be hungry’ was that dead mouse. Biting his lip in disgust, Henry grabbed a towel, tossed it over the mouse before handling it, and stormed from his house.

^^^

The big oversized sweatshirt that used to be Johnny’s hung long on Alexandra’s tiny five-year old frame. Placed on over her pajamas, it not only

was warm after her bath, but it played into the story Frank told her. Alexandra believed that it was a new rule in Beginnings, if it was winter you wore either more clothes or a coat in the house. Though it was wrong to tell Alexandra why she was wearing extra clothing, it was better than answering why Ellen wore that jean jacket in the house all the time.

“All done.” Frank smiled then kissed Alexandra’s tiny nose. “Can I comb your hair?”

“Henry will.” Alexandra replied.

“Sweetie, Henry’s not here. You won’t see him until tomorrow.”

“That’s OK, I’ll wait.” Alexandra giggled and took off.

Frank set the comb down on the bathroom sink and shut off the water he ran into the tub for round two. He really wasn’t wanting to deal with the child arguments of getting a bath, but as soon as he walked down stairs, he knew no argument would be had from Billy.

It was obvious that Billy didn’t want to be there, but to appease Ellen he was. Like he was sort of forced to do every night, Billy sat on the couch next to Ellen, staring out as if waiting for escape. Sitting patiently while Ellen just gazed down to him. A lost look on her face as her fingers touched his hair. Frank knew why Ellen did that, she didn’t have to tell him. Billy looked so much like Dean it was scary. And Ellen needed him around her.

“Bill.” Frank called out as he moved to the couch. “Bath’s ready.”

Billy smiled. “Thanks.” He jumped from the couch and darted up the steps.

Ellen looked up to Frank. “He must really want to take a bath.”

“I’ve been bribing them.” Frank sat down next to her. “You know, giving them extra play time before . . .” Frank’s speech slowed down as Ellen just fell in a lean into him. “Before bedtime.” He put his arm around her and laid his lips to her head. She snuggled more against him as if wanting to crawl inside of him. Frank held her tighter. Just as they settled into the hold, a knock at the door caused them both to jolt.

Frank looked over his shoulder. “Come in.”

Henry stepped inside. “Hey. Am I interrupting?”

“No.” Frank answered.

Ellen sat up. “What are you doing here?” She asked.

“I came bearing gifts.” Henry held back his huff of irritation at Frank. “You may like it.” With one arm still behind his back he handed Ellen the journal. “Second-year here.”

Ellen gasped out a quiet ‘oh’ as her hand moved across the hard book. “Henry, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. That was the time frame that I fought with Dean the least.”

Ellen smiled. “I’ll read it all.”

Frank was ready. "Seeing how your still hiding something behind your back, I'm taking it that's for me."

Henry grinned with a tilted head. "Yep. Something special for you. Because you, Frank, are the special guy."

"I am." Frank said proudly. "So . . . what is it?"

Standing before Frank, Henry took on a smug look. "Before I give you your gift. I would like to say . . ." Henry flung out the cloth tossing the carcass of the mouse upon Frank's lap. "You're an asshole."

Ignoring Ellen's loud 'Oh my God!' Frank laughed and tossed it back to Henry. "He's your friend."

"Well you . . ." Henry threw it back in his lap. "Killed him."

"You . . ." Frank stood up and tossed it back still laughing. "Wanted him."

"Not in my fridge." Henry tossed it back harder.

"Hold it!" Ellen called out stepping to them. "Why are you two playing with a dead mouse in my livingroom?"

"El, your sick husband has been playing with that dead mouse since six-thirty this morning." Henry whined.

Ellen turned to Frank who threw the mouse to Henry. "Why?"

"I was saving it for Henry." Frank defended.

"He put it in my fridge, El." Henry slammed it in Frank's gut and it rolled to the floor.

"Out!" Ellen ordered. "Right now!"

"Oh!" Frank held out his hand. "Way to go, Henry. Pissing her off."

"Me?" Henry nearly shrieked. "I brought her a gift."

"But you had to go and ruin it." Frank pointed to the door. "Go on. Get out, you heard her."

Henry laughed. "I don't think she was talking to me, Frank."

"She wasn't talking to me." Frank ridiculed. "El? Who did you kick out?"

Ellen only glared. She shook her head with a slight roll to her eyes. "Both. I'm going in the kitchen, when I come back, I want you both out."

So shocked, Frank watched her. "I can't believe it."

Henry slightly shook his head. "She threw us out. It really is unlike her."

"True." Frank nodded. "But, she's having a hard time."

"We should leave her alone to read my journal."

"She probably needs that." Frank took a thinking breath. "Social hall?"

"Why not." Henry shrugged.

"Let's go." Frank led Henry to the door. He grabbed his coat and both of them left.

Ellen heard the shutting of the door. Letting out a breath of relief, she lifted her glass of water to her lips and took a drink. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she thought about the 'hot potato' game that happened in her livingroom and shuttered more. It was safe to go back. They were just fooling around, Ellen knew it, but it still irritated her. Feeling herself calm down, Ellen placed her glass in the sink and went back to the livingroom. She wanted to read that journal. Moving to the couch, Ellen stopped cold. Her inner anger began to rise. Henry and Frank did indeed leave, but they forgot to take the dead mouse. It still laid right where they dropped it, on the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

November 16

Standing almost in intimidation but not meaning to, Frank reviewed the single sheet of paper. His eyes moved from what seemed to be a list, to Ellen.

“Do you think it’s O.K.?” Ellen asked frazzled. “I mean this is what they wanted me to say today. I can be there. I just can’t speak it.”

“You don’t have to go.” Frank said. “I’ll tell my dad and Jason when I drop this off that you won’t be coming.”

Ellen shook her head. “No. I need to be there. I’ll answer any questions they have. It’s just . . . letting the words come from my mouth. I’ll get upset. It was our last day together.”

“I understand.” Frank leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “And I have to go.”

“Will you be there?” Ellen asked following him across the livingroom.

“Yes. I will.”

“Good.” Ellen folded her arms. “Frank?”

Frank stopped just before opening the door.

“Frank?” Ellen stepped to him whispering. “Do you think it will work?” Her heart wanted to drop when she saw the same expression Henry had given her. “Frank?”

“El.” He let out a breath. “I don’t want to answer that.”

“Why? Because you don’t think it will work?”

“No. Because I want it to work so bad, my judgement is clouded.” Frank lowered his voice. “I really want it to work.”

His words made Ellen’s mouth tense up as she fought the emotions of hearing Frank talk about someone he had fought tooth and nail with since the day they first met. “Be careful.” She told him as he started to leave.

“Always.” Frank gave a sad smile and left.

Ellen stood there for a while, and then it was time, she knew, to pull herself together. It was the day they finalized the plans to bring Dean back.

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“Henry!” Joe yelled with depth as he clapped his hands loudly together. “Wake up and listen to what we’re saying.”

Henry rubbed his eyes and sprang up from his lean on the counter in Jason’s laboratory. “Sorry, Joe. Go on.”

“What the hell’s the matter with you anyhow?” Joe shook his head. “I never saw you fall asleep like that.”

“Your son, Joe. At three o’clock this morning your son is sticking a dead mouse in my pants.”

“Christ are you two still playing with that thing?” Joe asked.

“Not me, Joe. Frank. You know what they say.” Henry stated. “Simple things amuse simple minds.”

“Be that as it may. You need to start working on rodent control.”

“Aw.” Henry whined. “I haven’t any idea how to kill them.”

A bright look hit Joe. “Never mind. We’ll get Dean to do it.”

Henry grumbled and dropped his head back down to the counter.

Joe reached out and lifted Henry’s head up by the hair. “Stand up.”

“Why?” Henry asked with suspicion.

“Just stand up.” Joe repeated then looked at his watch. “Jason, it’s been seven minutes.”

“That it has.” Grinning, Jason walked over to his computer. He began typing. With a hard accented hit, he struck his final key. “There.” He turned and faced Henry. “Now, this is your transfer.” he handed Henry a silver two inch box, set in the middle, a small black keypad. “This has to go through with you. When you’re ready to return, punch in the code, which is your birthday, and it re-powers the Regressionator. To me and Joe it will be a matter of three seconds that you are gone. But for you, it will be however long you are there. Got that? Now . . .”

“Whoa.” Henry’s feet slid as he felt himself being pulled by Joe and Jason. “Where am I going?”

Joe pulled him along. “Behind that wooden archway.”

“For what?” Henry asked, nearing it.

“To walk through.” Joe explained, leading Henry to the other side of the archway facing the lab. “You have to go this way, so you can see the lab when you walk through.”

“Actually you can go through either way.” Jason explained not paying attention to the confused look on Henry’s face. “But it won’t have the same effect if you go through the front of the archway and come out facing the wall.” Jason began to walk back to his computer.

“What . . .” Henry felt himself being shoved closer to the archway by Joe. “Wait.”

Joe didn’t pay any attention to Henry’s apprehension. “He’s almost there Jason let me know when.”

“Wait!” Henry pulled away. “What is going on?”

“Think of it as a trip, my boy.” Joe slapped him on the back. “A trip back in time six or seven minutes.”

“What?!” Henry shook his head, his hair flinging about. “No. I’ve seen what he does to those rabbits, Joe. I’ll be charcoal. No.” He felt himself being pushed.

“It’s the only way, Henry.” Joe grabbed him again. “I did it. Jason, fire away.”

Henry’s eyes widened in horror as the sound of powering was heard and suddenly the entire archway was filled with a bright white light. “No, Joe.” He felt pushed.

“Don’t forget the code or you won’t get back.” Joe shoved him. “Have a nice trip.”

“No!” With a warm shock through his body, Henry was pushed through the whiteness. His long, loud scream ceased as soon as he emerged on the other side. Standing there was Jason and Joe, they faced his entrance. And sleeping on the counter was himself. Henry’s mouth dropped open.

“Son of a bitch!” Joe exclaimed as he saw a shocked Henry. “Jason, I guess you did prove it to him.”

Jason quickly looked at his watch. “I’ll mark the time. Henry, walk around so you can go back through. We have to wake you up now.”

“Huh?” Trembling and not wanting to believe what he was seeing, Henry punched his birthday into the small keypad. He watched Joe and Jason wave to him as he stepped slowly backwards through the archway.

He didn’t face the bright white light this time, his back did, but Henry felt the warm sensation as he went through again. Landing on the other side, his face still holding the expression of shock, he was greeted with another surprise. Three bright flashes of light hit him in the face. “UH!” He screamed covering his face. “I’m blind. I’m blind. Your machine blinded me!”

“Oh for crying out loud.” Joe said with disgust. “I took your picture.” Bending down, Joe picked up the three instant pictures that fell to the floor. He began flapping to dry them.

Henry rubbed his eyes. He grew annoyed at the floating green spots that dangled in his view.

Jason, proud, pulled Henry back into the lab. “So, what did you think?”

“I think you’re both nuts.” Henry swung his hand out as if waving about the residue of the flash in his face. “Parlor trick. I don’t know what you guys did to me when I was sleeping but you two . . .”

“Henry!” Joe yelled. “You went back in time. Now believe it for Christ sake.” Joe looked down at the developing pictures and laughed. He quickly showed them to Jason, then Henry. “You really looked funny when you came through.”

Henry’s heart still raced. “Don’t you think you should have asked for my permission before you shoved me through something that uses extreme heat?”

Joe and Jason answered at the same time. “No.”

Though in a way, Jason proved his machine to Henry, it still irked him. Before he could yell at the two older gentlemen anymore, Ellen walked in.

“Hey, everyone.” She spoke softly shutting the door then shivering. “God it’s getting cold out there. Sorry I’m late. It’s really going to . . .” She saw the expression that still hung on Henry’s face. “Henry?” She walked up to him. “Are you all right? You look weird. And were you sleeping, you have a red mark on your cheek.”

“Check out the shots of Henry.” Joe showed her the photos. “Funny, huh?”

Ellen smiled and reached for the second one. “Could I have this one Joe, he looks so cute with that expression on his face.”

“Sure go ahead.” Joe shrugged and shoved the other two in his pocket.

Ellen giggled and looked at the picture. “I’ll put this on my dresser mirror at . . . Henry why are you posing for pictures for Joe?”

“El.” Henry firmly grasped the tops of her arms, placing his face close to hers. “I went through the time machine. I saw myself sleeping on the counter. Ellen . . . it works. It really works.”

It was if Ellen was shot with an arrow of hope. All the air escaped her warmly. “Henry?” Her eyes questioned him.

Henry nodded to her slowly. “You know what this means don’t you?”

“We can . . .” Without another word Ellen quickly embraced him. “Oh, Henry thank you.”

Joe was annoyed by this. Especially watching as Henry held Ellen tight, lifting her from the ground. “Why are you thanking Henry? It’s Jason’s machine.”

“Sorry.” Ellen, for the first time in a long time smiled genuinely and walked to Jason. “Jason. Thank you. I’m so sorry I doubted you.”

“Ellen.” There was a tone of reason in Jason voice. “There’s still a chance it may not work.”

Tilting her head with a quirky look, Ellen glanced up to Jason as if he were silly. “Joe’s going, right? If so how can it not work.”

Jason grabbed her hands then motioned his head to the semi circle of set up chairs in the center of his lab. “Why don’t you have a seat. We’re expecting Frank and . . .”

“I’m here.” Frank walked in leaving the door ajar. As he always did his views went to Ellen. He saw a different look on her face. “El?”

“Oh, Frank.” She rushed to him. “Henry went through the time machine.” She reached out grabbing his arms. “It works. It really works.”

A quick shift of Frank’s eyes went to Henry.

Henry nodded.

Frank’s eyes closed. “We stand a chance of doing this.”

Biting her bottom lip with a smile, Ellen nodded. She turned around to face Jason and Joe. “I can’t wait any longer. Can we get started?”

Jason agreed with that. “Absolutely.” He grabbed homemade

notebooks and handed Joe one. "There's enough seats for everyone. Just be seated and as soon as Andrea gets here, we'll begin."

Joe looked quickly to Frank. "You were supposed to drive her here with you."

"I did." Frank said as he sat next to Ellen.

Another glare from Joe went to Frank. "Did she suddenly turn invisible?"

"Frances Slagell" Andrea entered with a bluster. "Sweet Jesus, what is the matter with you?" She walked up to him and slapped him in the arm. "I told you I was stuck in that seatbelt and to help me. But no, you had to up and leave me there."

"That's because I was tired of hearing your bitching all the way up." Frank argued.

"I wouldn't bitch all the way up if you didn't drive so insane." Andrea snapped.

"I wouldn't drive so insane if you didn't make me that."

"Can I help it if you are immature." Andrea folded her arms. "Handle it."

"Handle it?" Frank looked at Joe. "Dad. Are you dating this woman?"

"Hold it!" Joe held up his hands as he sat down. "My personal life is not why we're here. Jason would like to . . ."

"You are!" Frank snapped. "Did you stop to think that she isn't all . . ."

"Frank." Joe tried not to yell anymore. "Enough. Jason. Start this."

"Thanks, Joe." Jason pulled his chair up first. "Now before I explain what's going to happen, I want to tell all of you something, especially you Ellen. We are going to *try* to bring Dean back. *Try*. Yes the time machine works, yes we may divert Dean from dying in that explosion, but there is something else that may stand in our way--destiny. Some people believe that when it is your time, it is your time. Dean died on November 1<sup>st</sup>. There is still a possibility that if he was meant to die on that day, when the Regressionator returns, Dean may still be dead. I just wanted to clarify that ahead of time." He saw Ellen's happy expression drop. "I'm sorry Ellen, but that is a fact we may have to face. With that in mind, let's move ahead." Holding his pencil, he pointed to Andrea. "Medical. Andrea."

"I checked the records." Andrea said. "And I think it is safe to say that nothing medically happened in the past two weeks that would be changed by Dean's coming back."

"Good." Jason noted, and watched Joe do the same. "Frank, did you think about what your dad asked you to?"

"I did." Frank nodded. "As far as the SUT's go, we would have wiped them out in Miles City anyhow. But as far as the George thing goes, I can't see how that would be effected. He was cocky. He thought my dad was

down. Ellen and Dean were both dead. He walked around. He got caught.”

Henry interjected. “So as long as the time tables of events aren’t disrupted, it should be fine.”

Jason answered. “Yes. It’s vital that we try to disrupt it as little as possible.”

“But no one will know.” Henry stated. “Right? Only Joe.”

“And . . . you.” Jason pointed to him. “Joe will have interaction. Joe can be a time culprit. So there has to be a constant. Someone other than Joe who can verify all and any changes. We decided on you.”

“Me?” Henry was shocked. “Why me?”

“You’re logical. You will carry in your possession that letter that Joe wants Dean to have. You will also carry in your pocket the computer disks to Beginnings history. You carry this because you will never leave the doorway of the time machine. You will never interact with anyone in a different time. And because you are traveling through, anything you have on you will not change like everything else.”

Henry understood. “I get it. The history I carry in my pocket will state that Dean died. And when we get back, and I go to History, what I pull up will be totally different because it would have all changed. And . . . I can see what rippled and what didn’t.”

“Exactly. Hopefully with minimal contact from the Regressionator to anything in the past, not much major should ripple. Any questions? Frank?” When he didn’t get any responses, Jason turned his focus to Ellen. “Ellen, you did a great job of mapping out that last morning. The events that led up to the explosion have to be accurate. I have to set my time machine accordingly. Now . . .” Jason pulled forward the sheet. “You mentioned you left Dean at the tunnel entrance about six-thirty in the morning. You said you returned right after. You didn’t mention a time. How long was it until you returned?”

“Not long.” Ellen answered. “I wasn’t able to see Frank. I went right back. Ten minutes to walk to holding, ten back to the lab.”

“So twenty minutes he was alone.” Jason noted when she agreed. “At any time did you look at your watch?”

“Yes.” Ellen answered.

“What time did it say?”

“One o’clock.”

A unison ‘huh?’ erupted from the room.

Joe held up his hand to bring silence. “How could it be one o’clock?”

“My watch is broke.” Ellen said. “It always says one o’clock.”

Jason closed his eyes briefly so as not to get upset. “So it’s safe to say Dean was alone in the lab from quarter till until seven o’clock.”

“Yes.”

Joe let out a breath. "That's our time frame."

"Tight." Jason added. "Ellen, how long after you got to the lab was the explosion?"

"Not long after." Ellen described. "I got there. Third word and literally boom it . . ." Her eyes widened. "Oh, am I dumb." She reached into her coat and pulled out paper. "This is the print out. I brought it incase you needed it. Right there is the time the detonation was triggered."

Jason grinned when he looked at the printing start time. He gave the sheets to Joe. "Ten after. Frank, are you sure, if Ellen's not there, there would have been enough time for you to save Dean?"

"Without a doubt. Because I had him." Frank's hand instinctively went out and he stared at his open palm. "I had him in my grip when the second bomb went off. I . . . had him." There was so much silence in the room that it was loud enough to snap Frank out of it. He blinked a few times, rolled his hand into a fist and looked to Jason. "How are you going to assure Ellen gets out of there."

Joe decided to answer. "The site of me alone walking and talking to Dean should be enough to convince him to get Ellen the hell out of there. He gets her out, she gets you, you get him with plenty of time to spare."

Henry raised his hand slightly. "Time is important. You don't have much, Joe. You have to get in the lab and get out before Ellen sees you."

Joe nodded. "I can do that. Ellen took the tunnel from holding. As long as I hit the east tunnel before she hits the main one, we'll be fine."

Henry had so much debate on his face. "I don't know Joe. You still stand a chance. You'd have to walk those miles through the tunnels. Anyone can see you. And the window is what, fifteen minutes maybe?"

"Well what do you expect we do?" Joe asked. "Do you have another idea?"

"I do." Ellen said in a daze like voice. "Would an hour be enough time?"

Jason snapped a look at Ellen. "An hour? When was Dean alone for an hour."

"That morning." Ellen answered. "I remember him in the bedroom around five am. Then I fell back to sleep. He didn't wake me up until just before six, then I woke up the kids."

"Where did he go?" Jason asked. "This is important."

"He was having coffee and reviewing notes in the diningroom." Ellen explained.

"There were no night guards." Frank spoke up. "This is even better. Fuckin George took them off schedule. I was walking a beat. But that night I was in holding."

Henry snapped a finger. "And Joe, you could walk to the garage, grab a

jeep and drive. No one is up and about that time of the morning.”

“Especially me.” Jason said. “Before we were taking a big chance of me coming into the lab and seeing you. Now, this . . . this could work.”

“It will.” Joe gave an assuring look to Ellen. “And I’ll do the best I can.”

Ellen peacefully smiled at him. “I know you will.”

“So.” Jason spoke up. “It’s settled. We have our window. We know nothing major will change. Now all that’s left, is to do it. Tonight at ten . . .” Jason smiled. “We bring back Dean.”

REWINDING THE CLOCK

CHAPTER FIVE

A part of Henry felt as if his stomach were going to explode, it fluttered out of control in nervousness. Henry was being titled by Jason, 'The Logisticalizer'. A responsibility, bigger than he wanted, was given to him. A responsibility he would be sure to brag about. Finally Henry felt justified in writing in his journal again. But in his excitement to prepare, he didn't. So he promised himself he would make it a point to do so right after the time trip.

Walking the excess nervousness off seemed like a good idea at first, but the five miles were a lot more than Henry expected especially with the temperature dropping. He only wished he would have taken that offer for a ride from Joe, otherwise, Joe wouldn't have waved arrogantly to Henry when he zoomed right by him.

Lungs froze, legs tired, Henry arrived. Everyone was there. Of course Henry knew that, they all passed him in his route.

"Henry." Ellen gasped his name out in a near whisper when she saw him walk in. She hurried to him.

"Hey, El." Henry replied. "Everyone ready?"

"Just about. Jason's making the final adjustment. Or something like that." Ellen's eyes shifted down. She saw he carried in his fist rolled up paper. "What's that?"

"Check this out." Henry stepped closer. "I copied my recent journal. I don't want to lose the thoughts I had before Dean died."

"Why didn't you just bring the journal?" Ellen asked.

"I thought of that. But, I'm curious as to what my thoughts were if Dean had never died. I'll get an idea of what went on in my personal life. Not that I have one."

"Oh how clever." Ellen smiled. "Because you know your journal will change. And speaking of change, Henry." Ellen reached into the jean jacket and pulled out an envelope. She folded it, hiding it some. After shifting her eyes to Frank who stood by Joe, Ellen handed the envelope to Henry.

"What is this?" Henry asked quietly.

"I need you to hold that. And I want you to give that to Dean after you walk through that time door and he's still alive."

"I don't understand."

"That letter is my thoughts and feelings to Dean. Thoughts and feeling I would have never had if he didn't die. He deserves to know them."

Henry folded the letter and placed it in his back pocket. "And he will."

Somewhere in Jason's review with Joe, Frank's mind wandered. Not to any thought that pertained to what was going on, but to the keys that dangled from Joe's back pocket and the little round blue key chain attached to it.

Frank remembered that key chain. He remembered it well. No older than ten, Robbie had given that key chain to Joe. Robbie was so proud of it. It was the grand prize in the gum ball machine and Robbie got it on the third try. He believed it was priceless and the soft plastic object ended up being just that. Priceless. It was a token of Robbie's innocence back then, a token Joe carried on him always even though the white lettering had disappeared.

The zipper of the pouch brought Frank from his reminding stage.

"History of the past three weeks." Joe said. "We really don't need to go back any further."

"Why don't we?" Frank interjected. "Why don't we just go back, knock off George early enough so he can't come up with the plague idea and that's that."

"Knock him off early enough?" Joe asked. "You mean as a child?"

Closed mouth, Frank bobbed his head from side to side. "That would work. I mean, if you think you can do it."

"Frank." Joe snapped. "I'm not killing George as a child. Besides, that would cause one of those ripples Jason wants to avoid."

"But a good one." Frank held up a finger. "There won't be a plague."

"How do you know?" Jason presented the question, "We don't. We don't know if someone else will develop one that none of us are immune to or . . . someone else would become president and do something else to destroy the world. We just don't know. Ripples can be bad."

"Speaking of ripples." Henry interrupted. "I have a question. What happens if say, we warn Dean. Dean gets Ellen out. She gets help. You Jason overhear Dean is in trouble and run to aid Frank . . ." Henry paused when Frank snickered. "Anyhow . . . let's say you die back then. The second explosion gets you. What happens to me and Joe? Will we be stuck?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "The return trip door will always be open. Don't worry. Now if we can just get started . . ."

"Wait." Frank held up a hand. "Does this mean you could be dead right now?"

"In a sense." Jason answered. "If, let's say I died in that time frame. Yes."

"Whoa." Frank scratched his head. "So who brought *you* back?"

Jason who readied to position his hands, stopped. "What do you mean?"

"If you died then you wouldn't be here, but you are, so that means, someone else got the letter, fixed the time machine, went back, saved you so you could come back and save Dean. Right?" Frank asked.

Slow was the blink Jason took amongst the gasps. So seriously he looked at Frank.

“Right?” Frank repeated.

“Right.” Jason answered just hoping to silence him. “Now, let’s . . .”

“Who?” Frank spoke up. “Who did it?”

With a slight breath of irritation, Jason replied. “You. Now if we . . .”

“When?” Frank asked.

Growling was the sound in Jason’s tone. “Yesterday. Only you don’t remember because time changed.”

Frank gave a thumbs up. “Got it.” He saw the stare his father had locked on him. “What?”

“You’re a moron.” Joe told him then handed Henry the history disks and the pendant to return. “Let’s do this.”

Jason tapped a few times on the keyboard of the one computer. He looked up to check the position of Joe and Henry. “Remember the code.” He tapped again. “Everyone else step back.”

Frank, Ellen and Andrea moved a few feet back. Nervous and filled with anxiety.

Joe took one second to glance back at everyone. “Let’s hope none of you are here when we return.”

“Ready.” Jason called out. “Good luck.”

Joe and Henry stood waiting. With the humming sound of power, the archway brightly illuminated and with a ‘go’ from Jason they stepped through.

Gone. Silence.

“What now?” Ellen asked as Andrea placed her arm around her.

Jason looked up from the computer. “In about five seconds this moment may all be . . .”

The loud power surge humming interrupted Jason and the archway lit up again.

The expressions on Joe and Henry’s faces matched when they stepped through the light. Slightly parted lips, eyes wide, faces pale.

Joe’s heart sunk. Everyone was right where he had left them. Still standing the same. His eyes shifted to Henry.

“Joe?” Henry whispered. “No.” He closed his eyes.

So much silence filled the room along with a somberness. To Jason, Frank then Andrea, Joe looked. Finally and most painfully his stare met Ellen’s. “Ellen, listen . . .”

Ellen smiled. “Boy, Jason, were you wrong.”

Jason was drowning in his disappointment. He barely could get the words out. “Ellen, what do you mean.”

She had an emotional chuckle to her. “You said . . . you said we

wouldn't even remember this moment. I have to go." She backed up. "Oh, God, I can't wait to see him."

His lowered head lifted and Frank spun to Ellen. "El, wait."

Ellen stopped as she opened the door. "Come on, Frank. I can't wait." She lifted her hand. "Look I'm shaking. Bet me he's in bed."

So helpless, Frank looked to Joe. "Dad?"

After a hard swallow, Joe stepped forward. "Ellen, listen. Sweetie there's no point in it. If you guys remember us going through then . . . then it, it didn't work."

Strained was her smile, but it was still there. "Joe. Really. You went back right?"

"Yes."

"You warned Dean right?"

Joe just nodded.

"It's you Joe. It's you. How could you have failed." Saying no more and not wanting to wait for Frank, Ellen flew out.

Every ounce of Joe's insides wrenched with his emotions. It took everything he had to stay in control when he heard the jeep start. "Dear God." he closed his eyes.

Frank slipped from his own disappointing sadness and raced to the door. "Dad, I have to go after her. I have to take you jeep."

Joe just lifted his hand. "Go."

With a brief closing of his eyes, Frank paused, tilted his head, gained control of what he was feeling and raced out.

Another shutting of the quantum door, another pounding of Joe's heart. He ran his hand slowly across the bridge of his nose. "What have I done?"

Compassionately, Andrea stepped to him. She gently laid her hand on his cheek. "Joe. You did all that you could. You tried."

"Yeah, Joe." Henry laid a hand on Joe's shoulder. "You tried."

"Joe, you knew this was a possibility." Jason added.

"Tell me." Joe lifted his head. "Just tell me. Our history, our memory is that Dean and Ellen were both trapped in the cryo explosion. Frank got Ellen out, but Dean was caught right after, in the second explosion. Is that . . . is that how it went down?"

Jason hesitated before answering. There was a nervous twitch to his jaw. "Exactly like that."

"Then I failed." Joe said.

"No." Jason corrected. "We all failed. This was a group effort."

"But this was also a father's effort." Joe said sadly. Slow he walked across the lab, needing the air, needing to get out of the time lab. "And trust me, there's nothing worse than failing your kid." He stepped and looked back

to everyone. "Nothing."

^^^

How fast had Ellen driven to town. Faster than safety dictated. Frank, expecting to find Ellen at home or at Dean's house, screeched the jeep to a stop when he saw her racing toward the clinic.

"El." He called out as he jumped from the jeep.

"Hey, Frank." Ellen paused on the steps. "He wasn't home. Bet he's still working."

"El."

"I have to check." Turning and opening the double glass doors, Ellen ran down the silent halls of the clinic and straight into the dark lab. She took a few steps in, slowing down with each one. "Dean?" She whispered out. She heard the footsteps and her heart pounded. Wide grinned Ellen spun to the door. Her smile fell.

"El." Frank walked in. "Let's go home."

"I have to find Dean." Ellen said. "I wonder where he . . ."

"El, knock it off."

"What?" Ellen snickered.

"Stop this." Frank walked to her. "No one knows you better than I do. And you know . . ." Frank's voice softened. "You know it didn't work."

"No. It had to work. It had to." Ellen barged forward.

Frank sprang out his arm stopping Ellen and pulling her to him. He felt her fighting, trying to break free. "It didn't work."

"Frank. No . . ."

"El." His deep whisper carried to her and with heavy truth. "For as much . . . for as much as I wanted it to work. He's not coming back. He's not."

Ellen shivered a breath and pulled away from Frank, stepping deeper in the lab. "Why? Why didn't it work? What went wrong?"

"Fate." Frank answered. "The best person that could, went down there and he tried. Nothing was probably more convincing than my Dad." Frank closed his eyes at Ellen's whimper. "But fate wouldn't allow it. Things are meant to be."

"No. For the first time, in all the tragedies that we had, we had a chance to take one back. Change it. And we blew it."

"We didn't blow it. No way. We gave it the best shot we could." He spoke passionately. "If we were meant to be able to change time, you would be sitting right now at Dean's house, never feeling the pain of this moment. And I wish to God, El, I wish with all my heart, you weren't feeling this."

"I wanted him back."

“I did too. For this community, for me, but especially for you and the kids. But now we have to put it behind us and go on. We have to. For as empty as we feel, we have to face the fact. Dean’s . . . .Dean’s not coming back.”

Ellen felt the ringing of her sadness in her ears first, helpless her hands reached blindly out. She gripped Frank’s forearm only briefly before sliding it off and turning toward the counter. Hands grasping the edging, Ellen’s head dropped and she began to cry.

Right there, and all over again, Frank’s heart broke for her.

^^^

Never one that held his alcohol well, Henry stopped at the social hall to have a few drinks. And not one gave its desired effect. No numbing of the disappointment and pain he felt. Heading home, Henry planned on writing in his journal. But he stopped right before his front door when through the corner of his eye he saw it. Two doors down, in the house where Dean and Ellen once lived, the light in the bedroom was on.

It was stupid, but a twinge of hope hit Henry and he bolted over. He spent the last hour at the social hall, only hearing from Frank--when he came in to snatch up a bottle--that Ellen was bad. Into Dean’s house Henry ran and straight up the steps. He closed his eyes when he hit the doorway and Ellen was sitting on the bed.

“I’m sorry, El.” Henry started to leave. “I saw the light and wondered who . . .”

“That’s all right.” Ellen had a box before her, and she held up a sweatshirt.

“Are you O.K.?” Henry asked.

Ellen’s hands gripped the grey shirt that Dean wore around the house. “No. What happened, Henry? How did it not work?” Ellen didn’t even look up.

As Henry went to answer, Joe did. “Can I . . .” Joe stepped inside the bedroom. “Can I be the one to tell her?”

“Sure, Joe.” Henry moved out of the way. “I’ll let you two be.” He paused in his leaving taking a second to look back into the bedroom one more time.

Joe made his way closer to the bed and to Ellen who sat there. “I stopped by the house. Johnny was watching the kids. I thought Frank would be here.”

Ellen shook her head. “I don’t know where Frank is. I think . . . I think he’s mad at me.”

Joe sat down on the bed, Ellen’s back was facing him. “Why would

Frank be mad?"

"Because of the way I'm being about Dean. I guess I'd be the same way. I don't know."

"He's not mad at you. Worried. Not mad. Are you mad at me?" Joe asked.

With an emotional release of her breath, Ellen turned around and faced Joe. "Why . . . Why would you even think that?"

"I let you down."

"No. It didn't work, and I let myself down. I let myself believe so much . . . so much that it would work." Ellen tossed the sweatshirt she held. "What happened Joe. I thought, you know, that I'd suddenly get these memories about Dean telling me he saw you. I thought that."

"I think Dean thought he was dreaming. And I couldn't stay long. Alex was coming down the steps."

"But you warned him." Ellen said. "Right?"

"Yes. I told him that the password would be uncovered and with everything he was, get you out immediately. He nodded. He understood." Joe explained.

"He tried. He did. He begged me to go, But I refused."

"I'm sorry, Ellen." Joe laid a hand on her cheek. "I am so, so sorry I got your hopes up. I'm sorry I let you down."

"You did all you could. And I have to face it. Dean is not . . . he's not coming back." She swallowed hard and reached for the sweatshirt again. "And facing it is what I'm doing."

Around her Joe's hand reached for the box. He tilted it in and saw the emptiness.

Ellen emotionally chuckled. "O.K., I'm trying. But I can't take anything from his drawers. Just this stupid sweatshirt that I hated when he wore. When we would argue, or fight. He'd put this on just to piss me off." She smiled. "Now what I wouldn't give to see him in it."

"Do you think packing up his clothes is the way to face this and move on?"

"You would think, right. I mean, everything in this house is the same. As if I've been waiting for him to return. And the community probably needs the clothing. Everyone looks at me like I'm nuts. This grief is more than I can handle and I don't understand why that is. So I have to face it, move on. But Joe . . ." Ellen looked up at him. "I reach in the drawer. I touch his clothes. I feel so guilty."

"I know that feeling." Joe saw the curiosity in her eyes. "When Frank's mother died. It happened just like with Dean. So fast, unexpected. I never saw it coming. I wasn't ready. It was supposed to be a happy time for us. She went into have the baby and never came back out." Joe's voice dropped.

“Complications.” He cleared his emotions from his throat. “I had to walk back into that waiting room and face my four boys. They were so young and excited, waiting to hear if they finally had a baby sister. I was useless. I never thought I’d feel pain like that. I couldn’t eat, sleep, I couldn’t even breath. And packing up her things . . .” Joe shook his head. “Two years. It took me two years to take the first item from the closet. And then slowly I removed them all.”

“Two years?” Ellen asked. “But it’s different. The community needs the house and the clothes.”

“No.” Joe told her. “As your father I am telling you to take all the time you need. As the leader. We don’t need it. Not yet. Forcing yourself to face it will not make it easier. You have to find the comfort in his work, things he loved. His children’s faces. It’s there. All of that is Dean. Alive in his own way.” Joe closed one eye and dropped his voice. “You just have to wait until the pain subsides a little until you can recognize it.”

“Like the coat.” Ellen ran her hand down it. “I guess people think I’m nuts about wearing this huh?”

“I’m not gonna lie to you . . . yes.” Joe said. “But . . .” He held up a finger. “Between you and me. My God, am I envious. That article of clothing touched his body every single day almost. What I wouldn’t have given to be able to wear something of Mare’s. But if I did that . . .” A crooked smile crossed his face. “Imagine the way people would have viewed me. So you wear that coat. You wear it.”

“Joe.” Ellen whimpered slightly, her head falling forward into him. “I miss him so much.”

“I do, too, Kiddo.”

“We went through so much him and I. I hurt him at times more than I should have. I just wished when he died, that he knew how strong I felt about him.”

“He did.” Joe said.

“No, Joe. I may have told him I loved him. But he didn’t know the extent of it. I didn’t know the extent of it until he was gone.”

“No, Ellen.” Joe pulled her back and looked at her, “He knew. Because I told him.”

Ellen’s eyes grew wide. “What?”

“He may have thought he dreamt it, but I told him. I let him know how much you loved him.”

Closing her eyes, Ellen reached out and grabbed hold of Joe. “Thank you.”

“I promise you, you will get through this. I promise you.” Joe held her tighter. “It just takes time. Not changed or rippled time. But time.”

In that bedroom, on the bed, Ellen not only took comfort in Joe’s

arms, but in his father's words as well.

^^^

The heels of his combat boots dug deep into the cold hard dirt. The half empty bottle of whiskey dangled from Frank's hand as he sat before Dean's grave. He'd lift the bottle, take a drink, then rest the curve of the bottom against the ground. "Do you know how pissed off I am at you." Frank tilted his head with closed eyes. "So mad, Dean. Why? Why didn't you just fuckin pick her up, carry her out of the lab and lock the door. Why?" Frank took another drink. "You loved her. I know you did. So why did you hurt her like this?" Staring down to the bottle, Frank turned it like a drill into the dirt as he spoke. "You should see her. She's a mess. For all the fighting we did over her, do you know, you won. I lost her. Everyone's lost her. Including the kids. I want . . . I want to help her, you know." Frank lifted the bottle and took another drink. "But I don't know how, or what to do." Frank's voice dropped to a passionate whisper. "You knew her, Dean . . . you knew her. Tell me what to do. Give me a sign, something. Tell me what to do."

Silence, nothing. A complete emptiness engulfed Frank. He waited with bated breath. Anxious as if Dean would actually give him the answer from beyond. And Frank waited a long time. But nothing. There were no ghostly apparitions, no voices from beyond or little angels delivering the answer he needed. Only quiet and once again the cold reality that Dean Hayes was really, truly gone.

HENRY'S JOURNAL

*November 16*

*I thought tonight, when I sat down to write, that I would be writing about the success in bringing Dean back. The whole trip was finely tuned. Go back. Do as stated. Run into no one. Ripple only Dean's death. I checked the history disks, not even a period or comma was different. Nothing. Like everything, Joe did his job well, too well. He rippled nothing. And, Dean is not here. The small group of us, the ones who started this place with Dean Hayes, the ones who held out hope and faith in the stupid time machine, now have snap out of the time machine fantasy. Come back to the real world again. A world without Dean.*

CHAPTER SIX

November 17

“Not good.” Joe lit his cigarette, dropped his lighter, then leaned back in his desk chair. “Better though, a little.” He told Jason.

“I heard she dropped a box off at distribution with some things of Dean’s.” Jason said.

Joe chuckled. “One sweatshirt.” He shrugged. “I don’t know Jason. Ellen’s tough. When Taylor and Josh died, she was bad but she handled their deaths better.”

“That’s because those deaths were unavoidable. The entire surviving population was going through the same thing. Everyone lost.” Jason explained. “Everyone. Comfort in numbers. But now, she’s singled out. This is mainly her loss. It’s different.”

“So what now?” Joe asked. “Round the clock monitoring checks of the case. Of course, you and I are the only ones that know about this virus.”

“You know . . .” Jason leaned into the desk. “I’m very curious as to what led my future self to believe that it was the case. Yeah the cooling unit malfunctioned. And I realize why I wouldn’t say destroy the vials, there maybe something there we need or used. But why didn’t I just say, watch the case. I mean I went to the extreme with telling myself to stop Dean’s death.”

“Delirium.” Joe factually stated. “You were sick, dying, you were reaching for help.”

“No.” A shake of his head brought Jason’s facial disagreement. “I agree with the delirium to an extent. I just think I left things out. Because, this Jason, isn’t convinced that it’s in that case.”

“I have to disagree. You’re too smart. Which brings us back to the question. What now?”

“I see a few options.” Jason stated. “Like you say monitor the case. Though risky, I can start trying to examine the vials. We could . . .” He shrugged. “I don’t know. Go into the future and learn about the virus that . . .”

“Whoa,” Joe held up a halting hand. “I thought you said we can’t go into the future.”

“Well, I . . .” Jason stuttered. “Well, Joe, we got a letter from the future, obviously it come from somewhere. If it came from there, we can go there. Learn and investigate that way or . . . use the power supply left and go back . . .”

“Another time trip.” Joe rubbed his eyes.

“Yes. Go back to investigate who possibly did it to us.”

“You mean hit us with the new plague?” Joe asked with a chuckle.

“Jason, again, you’re going back to the fact that it’s not in the case.”

“We should look at that as a possibility. All angles.”

“Who?” Joe asked.

“The Society.”

Joe laughed. “Jason, George is dead.”

“True, but he had a plan. We know he has people left to keep it going.”

“But will they?” Joe held a tone of disbelief. “Really? He was the leader.”

“But he was only one man. And trust me the society is bigger than just George Hadly.”

With Jason’s words and a new seriousness, Joe slipped into thought.

^^^

The noisy vacuum cleaner that vibrated a painful irritation to Frank’s wrist, silenced at the same time the fragile little hand tugged on his leg.

“Hey, Alex.” Frank whipped the chord from the wall and started to wind it up. “What do you need?”

“Who are these people?” Alexandra’s little hand extended up a small stack of photographs to Frank.

With such awe, and a slight chuckle, Frank looked down. “Oh, my God.” he shook his head and snickered. “This kid here.” Frank crouched down to be at Alexandra’s level. “This is Uncle Robbie. Remember him? He had to be about twelve here. So small. Like you.” Frank poked her nose. “And this kid.” Frank pointed to another picture. “This kid with the long girl like hair. My brother Hal. He was the trouble maker. Man . . .” He smiled again. “Pap-Pap used to throw us all in a car and drive us somewhere, Mommy too. A family trip. This is a picture from one of those.”

“You look like you’re having fun.” Alexandra commented. “I bet you wish Uncle Robbie liked it here so he would have stayed, huh? Do you think he’ll come back?”

Frank jolted a quick look to Alexandra. So easily the children of Beginnings were sheltered from painful truths. Too bad not from all. “Um, no. Uncle Robbie’s not coming back.”

“Like my Dad?”

A slightly open mouth brought no words. Frank cleared his throat. “Alex, where did you get these from? I haven’t seen these in years.”

“Mommy’s box in the basement.”

“Mommy’s memorabilia box?” Frank asked. “Alex, Mommy’s not been in the best mood lately. She’s really fussy about the box. I haven’t been allowed to see it at all. She’s gonna get mad if she knows you were in there.”

Alexandra’s finger went to her mouth in a nervous manner.

“Tell you what.” Frank stood up. “I’ll put these back and won’t mention it.” He winked then bent down and kissed her. “I’ll be back.”

Though they shouldn’t have been out of that box, Frank was glad Alexandra pulled them. He kept staring at them all the way down to the basement. When he reached the bottom of the steps he saw Ellen’s box in front of the shelf by the washing machine. Frank shook his head with a chuckle, walked to the box and tossed the pictures in. He looked to the top shelf where Ellen kept it. “Man, Alex. How did you get this down?” Frank bent down to retrieve the box. Just as his hands grabbed it to put it away, he felt the not-too hard whap to his head then heard the thump to the floor. Wondering what and how something fell down and hit him, Frank turned his glance. A shoe box on its side, lid off laid there. Pieces of paper from Beginnings scratch pads scattered out. And there had to be a hundred of those four inch slips of paper. “Swell.” Frank spoke to himself, grabbed the shoe box and began to collect the papers. “Just what I need, a ghost in this . . .” Frank’s eyes widened when he inadvertently read the words on one of the notes. “Oh, my God.” His eyes lit up. “Oh, my God.” his hands shuffled through the notes. Some of the dates the same. All of them Ellen’s handwriting. And all of them . . . to Dean. Frank immediately found the one that first caught his eyes. Dated not three days before hand. The simple two sentences that read, *‘And I promised myself I wouldn’t get annoyed with Josephine because she’s old. It’s a good thing, Dean, that I’m the only one I listen to, or else we would have fought.’* Those two sentence immediately snapped a thought to Frank’s mind and he stood up. “Thank you, Dean.” Frank clenched that note tight in his grip. Though delayed, a response to a question was given. Racing from that basement, note in hand, Frank ran all the way to the second floor.

He didn’t wait for permission, Frank knocked once on the bedroom door and walked in. “El.”

Sitting on the bed reading, Ellen looked up. “Frank?” She set the book down. “Are you all right?”

“No. Yes. El.” Frank walked to her. “Last night, I asked . . . I asked for answers.”

“About?”

“Dean.” Frank said.

“Who did you ask?”

“Dean.”

“Frank.” Ellen closed her eyes and shook her head. She reached for the book, but Frank stopped her. He stuck the note in front of her. Anger immediately engulfed her. “Where did you get this.”

“Dean.”

“Frank, what . . .”

“Doesn’t matter. El.” He grabbed her hand. There was a certain

amount of excitement to him. "Babe, I was wrong."

"Yeah, you were. Going through my things when . . ."

"No." Frank laid his hand over her mouth. "Wrong. Everything I said to comfort you last night. I was wrong. I said fate caused Dean not to come back. No, we screwed up. We screwed up big time. We didn't send the best person to change time. Because the best person to bring back Dean is sitting right here waiting . . . you. It should have worked. It will work." Frank grabbed her hand and pulled her. "Come on."

"Frank wait." Ellen tugged her hand back. "Where are we going?"

"Josh will be fine with the kids until Johnny gets here." Frank pulled her toward the door.

"Where are we going?"

Frank only smiled.

^^^

"I can't believe you have me doing this." Henry griped in an irritating manner. A flashlight was under his arm, shining down to the notebook he flipped through in the quantum lab. "I can't believe you dragged me here in the dark."

"Shut up, Henry." Frank blasted in a loud whisper. Ellen stood quietly behind him.

"Who's gonna hear me Frank?" Henry snapped. "Huh? Who? Way up here. In the dark lab. Did I mention dark?" Henry turned to looking at the notebook, "I'm breaking rules Frank. First breaking into history to make copies of the disks, then breaking in here."

"No." Frank corrected. "I used my security keys."

"Oh, that makes it better." Henry flipped a page, then quickly looked at Frank following a tap sound. "And will you quit biting your nails. That is foul Frank. So foul."

"I can't help it. I'm nervous. And quit bitching."

"I will bitch. And you ought to be nervous. I'm doing this in the dark, Frank. The dark. I have to set up the program, which I don't know if I'm gonna do right. It's dark."

"Henry, shut up." Frank told him again.

"No. You could zap me and Ellen into 1882. Right smack dab in the cowboy and Indian time frame. It's dark . . ." Henry looked up to the light that went on. "Thank you."

"For what?" Frank asked.

"For the light."

"I didn't turn it on." Frank looked at Ellen. "Thanks El."

"For what?" She asked.

“The light.” Frank responded.

“I didn’t turn it on.” Ellen said.

A clearing of the throat made all three of them turn around.

Jason walked across the lab. “I guess you guys forgot I live up here most of the time.”

Henry smacked Frank with the notebook. “Way to go Frank, you asshole.”

“What?” Frank lifted his hands.

Jason stepped closer. “I would ask right now for an explanation. But, I think Joe deserves to hear it as well. So to save myself further irritation. I’ll just get him up here.”

Like little children in big trouble, all three of them just looked at each other.

^^^

Joe would have sworn that a tiny little bug flew into his inner ear, that was how badly the buzz annoyed him. Frank, Ellen and Henry spewed out words he didn’t comprehend completely, because he couldn’t understand them. “Stop.” Joe called out from beneath his hand. He stood up. “No.”

“But Dad.” Frank sprang to his feet. “It will work.”

“No.” Joe repeated. “We tried once. No.”

“We did it all wrong. We sent the wrong person. Ellen should go.” Frank argued.

“And what?” Joe laughed. “Warn Dean?”

“No.” Frank said. “Warn herself. Tell her own self to get the hell out of the lab.”

This caught Jason’s attention. “This holds possibilities.”

“Are you being pulled in?” Joe asked. “They tried to break into your lab. Run the machine. Change time.”

“Dad.” Frank tried again. “Ellen can cut herself off coming back from holding. Believe me, she is the only person she’ll listen to. With the right warning, she’ll get out of that lab and Dean will be saved. That’s why it didn’t work the first time. That and the fact that we’re not meant to rob Ellen of this.”

“What?” Joe asked in disbelief. “Rob Ellen?”

“Not intentionally.” Frank explained. “But that’s what we were doing.”

“How were we robbing her?” Joe questioned.

“Because I’ll never know.” Ellen stood, bringing her fist to her chest in a passionate argument. “If someone else goes back and saves him. I’ll never know. I have mourned my friend so deeply that I can’t sleep. If he comes back, let me know he has come back. Don’t take the feeling of seeing his face

again, touching him. Don't take that moment away from me. I deserve that. Please don't take that away from me. Let me go, Joe. Give the O.K., we can do this."

Joe looked at Jason for answers.

Jason lifted his hand. "Ellen, you would have to talk to no one but yourself."

Ellen nodded.

"And you only warn yourself. Tell yourself uncover the password, get the hell out and get help. That's it."

"I understand. That's all I'll do." Folding her arms Ellen looked at Jason then Joe. "Then I can go?"

Joe nodded. "You can go. We'll try it again."

"Yes!" Ellen shrieked and jumped. "When?"

"Contrary to what you three believed." Jason answered. "The time machine is a lot more complicated than just pushing the button. The whole process is. I have to reprogram, re-power. Joe has history disks to get ready."

"Not too mention briefing." Joe added. "You and Henry will have to go through a briefing. What you will do, say and so forth."

"O.K., O.K." Ellen nodded rapidly, being boggled down with details bored her. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning." Jason said. "Early."

"Got it." Ellen hurried and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you." She moved to Joe and embraced him tight. "Thank you. I'd better go." She ran her hands through her hair. "I want to get rest tonight. I don't want to be tired looking tomorrow. Come on, Frank." She grabbed his hand.

Frank slowed down in his stride out. He was smiling. "Dad. Jason. Thanks."

They both gave Frank a nod as he and Ellen left.

"Wait." Henry called out jumping from his seat. "I need a ride." He flew out the door.

After the door closed, Jason looked at Joe. "We're doing this again. What do you think?"

"It may work." Joe pulled a cigarette from his pocket. "It just may work."

"Yeah." Jason stared at the door. "But . . . can you believe those three tried to steal my time machine."

"What can I say?" Joe lit up, took a hit, and blew out the smoke.

"Morons."

^^^

Because it was the sensible thing to do, Joe and Jason stopped by the social hall for 'just one more' before heading home.

“Thanks, Sam.” Joe told the mannequin bartender and pushed the bottle forward. “What a night.”

“What a night.” Jason sipped his drink. “Well, bright and early we try this again.”

“You know I thought of something. We brought it up before but now . . . you mentioned that you got to the lab at your usual time that morning.”

“I did.”

“So . . . If Ellen is meeting . . .” Joe paused to cringe and swallow about the scary thought. “If Ellen is meeting Ellen between ten til and seven O’clock, then aren’t you going be a bit surprised when you come into the lab and Henry is standing here?”

“Uh huh.” Jason nodded.

“More so.” Joe continued. “Dean’s alive, no plague. No plague, no message to yourself. What happens tomorrow in the ‘Dean’s alive Beginnings’ when you are working diligently in your lab and Henry and Ellen come sailing through?”

“A scenario we didn’t discuss fully.”

“Exactly. Any ideas?”

“In fact I do. Henry is carrying the letter to Dean, right? Might as well work on a little note for myself. I’ll believe that, you know.”

Joe smiled. “I’m sure you will. What exactly will you put in that little message to yourself?”

“I can’t give too much away.” Jason took a moment to think. “I know . . . I’ll write down the date and time I figured it out and I’ll tell myself to use the formula on that day . . .”

“Will you?”

“Of course. I’m a scientist. I’ll know if I don’t, it could ripple things. And I’ll tell myself to plan a little time machine test for the exact moment we send Henry and Ellen back. I’ll tell myself to use Henry and Ellen.”

“So that Henry and Ellen will have an excuse for walking through the time machine when they return on November eighteenth?”

“Exactly.” Jason lifted his drink. “Looks like we’re all set.”

“That we are.” Joe agreed. “And good thing we came to the social hall, or else I don’t think we would have discussed such important matters.”

“It’s the alcohol.” Finishing off his drink, Jason gasped. “Breeds deep thought.”

“And bad mornings that make you think of nights you want to forget.” With a laugh, Joe grabbed the bottle and poured himself and Jason ‘just one more.’

^^^

It was only after Ellen took one more look at Alexandra that she released the light lock her fingers had on her brown hair. One more look, Ellen thought, to the face that always carried a halo of hurt. A sadness that Ellen hoped and prayed that with the trip back in time, she could erase from her tiny daughter's face.

She pulled the covers up over the sleeping girl's shoulder and backed out of the bedroom. She could hear Frank shuffling about in their own room, making a little more noise than needed in the quiet hours of their home.

"Frank?" She whispered out as she stepped in.

"Hey." He looked up from the dresser, closing the drawer with his thigh. "Everyone all right?"

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Laundry." Frank shrugged. "All these kids, it gets . . . it gets ahead of you."

"I would say 'tell me about it'. However . . ." Ellen smiled a sneaky smile. "I don't do laundry."

"Tell me about it." Frank gave a quick laugh, then lost his smile.

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked. She walked over and sat on the bed. "Your mood. You came down."

"So did you."

"Reality will do that to you."

"So will fear." Frank walked over to the bed and sat next to her.

"Fear? You?"

"Yeah." Frank replied. "Most of all for you. What happens . . . what happens if again it doesn't work."

"I can face it." Ellen said with certainty. "I can. I'll know everything was done to try to stop it."

"And that's another thing that bothers me." Frank stood up. "Why? Why are we trying so hard to stop Dean's death. No." He closed his eyes and held up his hand. "Aside from the emotional aspect. Why, El?" Frank added concern to his voice. "What's in that letter that my Dad has. What do my Dad and Jason know?"

Ellen shook her head. "I haven't a clue."

"It has to be bad. If this doesn't work, we are facing something bad."

"What do you think it is?" Ellen asked. "Does someone die that only Dean can save?"

"That was my first thought." Frank held out his hand. "Someone dies. No, actually my first thought was you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. I thought. My God, Ellen loses it and kills herself."

Ellen looked up to him with wide eyes. "Me?"

"Yes. But then after thinking that you wouldn't. I thought even if you

did, what did it matter.”

“What!” Ellen jumped up.

“No. Not like that. I mean, not that you aren’t important and all. You are.”

“Gee, thanks Frank.” Ellen dropped back down to the bed.

“You know what I mean. I mean. You are. But this community has lost, *we* have lost people that we truly loved. Denny. Miguel. Rob . . . Robbie.” Frank cleared his throat. “But we’re bringing Dean back. Dean’s the brains for this place. What do they need him for. What happens in the future that we need him for? It’s bad, El. Whatever it is, is bad.”

“I guess we’ll know when Dean opens that letter.”

“Yet another scary thought.” Frank took a deep breath and sat down next to her. “If we change time, Dean comes back. He’ll never had died.” Frank stopped when he heard Ellen groan. “What?”

“You’re not going into one of those confusing Frank time theories again are you?”

“No, how about a realistic time theory. Dean never died. No emotional impact or urgency to the letter.” Frank raised his eyes slowly. “How seriously will it be taken.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

November 18

Ellen could hear the nervous breath emanate from Frank despite the fact that he tried to hide it. He stood before her, by the jeep outside of the quantum lab. Frank leaned down to her, staring as if for one last moment. Breathing heavily through his slightly parted lips. Ellen could see his breath, smell the coffee and she swore if she didn't know better, Frank had been smoking. But through her nervousness herself, everything was weird and magnified. Her heart thumped, and a part of her brain seemed as if it left her. Dazed, foggy, seemingly like she never awoke from the mere two hours of sleep she had.

"Well." Frank took another breath as he grasped the edges of the jean jacket. "It's time."

"I know."

"What I wouldn't give, El. What I wouldn't give to see your face when you step back through and see that Dean's alive."

"And I hope to God if it works, I'm in control of myself enough to enjoy it." Ellen chuckled. "You know. You said you want to see my face. Well, I can't wait to see yours."

"Mine?" Frank snickered. "You won't see a happy look on this face, hon. When you get back I'll probably be . . ."

"Annoyed." Ellen nodded. "And I can't wait until that happens. I miss the way you were. I can't wait until that arrogant, not-so serious, Frank is fighting with Dean again. Calling him little man. Yelling at me."

"Since Dean died I have mellowed a little. I guess I just don't feel like fooling around."

"None of us do."

With a 'whew' Frank shook his head. "Think about it, El. It's gonna be a different Beginnings."

"The old Beginnings." Ellen smiled.

"You're lucky." Frank kissed her quickly. "We'd better go. They're waiting." He grabbed Ellen's hand.

"Frank." Ellen stopped him. "One more thing."

"What's that?"

"I know you didn't bring this up, but I know you're thinking about it. You and me, we . . ."

"El." Frank tried to interrupt her.

"No, listen. You and me, when Dean died, we were building the friendship thing again. We had some really tough times that were swept aside."

“I know.” Frank looked down.

“O.K., knowing that, and knowing what I know now. I want you to understand something.” Ellen said softly. “If we aren’t together when I step back through. I promise you, no matter what, I will work things out with you. If this works, that means your snooping in my Dean letters ended up giving me a second chance with my friend. So I’m gonna make sure I give our marriage the second chance we’re giving it now.”

“El.” Frank’s voice cracked some and he kissed her softly. “That . . . that is a great thing to say to me.” He closed his eyes briefly and took a breath. “But.” He grabbed her hand again to walk and his voice perked up. “You and I both know, you go back, you change time, you see Dean. I’m history. Or at least the promise is for a while.”

“You think?”

“Fuck yeah. You’re gonna be overwhelmed. And for at least a week it’ll be ‘Frank who’ while your basking in Dean . . .” Frank paused to snicker. “Dean, little man la-la land.”

Ellen smiled with a shrug. “You’re probably right. You know me so well.”

“True.” Frank reached for the quantum door.

“It was a nice thought on my part, don’t you think?” Ellen asked.

“Absolutely.” With a smile, Frank opened the door and they walked in.

^^^

“Why now?” Joe asked with annoyance as he bounced from heel to toe in the quantum lab.

Frank shrugged. “She’s female.”

Joe shook his head. “Might as well do the check list and all. Henry?”

So pale, Henry jolted his views from the doorway to Joe. “Huh?”

“Are you all right?” Joe asked.

“We’re playing with odds here Joe. Two out of three. Third times a charm.”

“You mean about bringing Dean back?”

“No, about me getting fried.”

“Henry.” Joe quipped. “Check list. Ready? History disk.”

Henry held up the pouch.

“Jason’s letter to himself.”

Henry patted his backside.

“Pendant?”

Henry lifted it from around his neck.

“You know the code. Right?” Joe waited for a nodding response. “Now, most importantly.” Crisp, white, sealed was the envelope Joe handed

Henry. "This goes to Dean. For his eyes only. Tell him when you give it to him, after you show him the history, that he has to figure out what needs to be done."

"Got it." Henry stuck the envelope in his back pocket.

Joe held up a finger. "Don't confuse that and give it to Jason."

"Joe." Henry gasped. "That isn't very nice. I wouldn't do that. Oh, and Joe, I brought my journal copies."

"Who cares." Joe stepped back. "All right, now all we need is Tina Time and we're . . ."

"Here I am." Ellen stepped forward.

"Feel better?" Joe asked her.

"Yes. Much. I could just see me getting excited and wiggling because I had to go to the bathroom. So . . . I'm ready." She stepped to Frank and kissed him. "Wish me luck."

Frank mouthed the words, 'good luck' to her.

"Positions." Jason called out. "We're ready."

"Wait." Frank spoke up.

"What, Frank?" Joe questioned with a snap.

"This." Frank stepped to Ellen. "Give me the coat."

Pale. Ellen's face went pale. "No."

"El." Frank grabbed the edges. "Give me the coat. When you bring Dean back, the last thing we need is for two of these tattered old things in Beginnings." He began to slide the jacket off of her.

Not only cold but Ellen felt empty when the jean jacket left her body.

Frank clenched it in his hand as he stepped away. "You won't need this." He winked.

Jason typed a few strokes on his keyboard. "To us they won't be gone long at all. Trust me. Henry and Ellen?" He waited until he knew he had their attention. "I'm putting you back at six-thirty-five in the morning on November first. That should give you time Ellen to catch yourself in the tunnel and not run into anyone else. Understand. Don't waste time. And tell yourself nothing else but to get out of the lab when the password is uncovered."

"I understand." Ellen answered.

"I mean it." Jason said stern. "Nothing else."

Ellen nodded and looked to Henry. "I'm a little scared."

Henry leaned to Ellen whispering. "So am I." He showed her his hand, Ellen took it, holding it tight, very tight.

Watching Jason type, Ellen peeked to Frank wiggling her fingers in a goodbye wave. Trying to smile she heard the noise. The machine was running, before her, the illuminated archway. "Henry?"

"We can do this El." He gripped her. "Now."

Taking a deep breath and clinging to Henry with her eyes closed, Ellen and he stepped through. Stepped through to an empty, dark lab.

Feeling her hands about, Ellen shivered. "Oh, that felt good." She looked more around. "Are we dead?"

"I don't think." Henry checked out the lab, he saw the clock on the wall. "We're on time. You'd better hurry."

"Wish me luck."

"Good luck." Henry kissed her on the cheek. "And remember, only tell yourself to leave after the password is typed in. That's all."

"I know." Ellen walked to the door. "Look at my hands, they're shaking."

"I see that. I'll be here."

"Henry?" Ellen opened the door. "We're gonna do this, right?"

"We're gonna do this." Henry smiled.

Taking a nervous breath Ellen left the lab.

She ran. She ran with everything she had. Ellen knew she didn't have much time. And she didn't know how long it would take her to reach the long distance destination to where she figured she could cut herself off. The worrying that her calculations were off and that she perhaps would be too late, stayed on her mind. It help her to ignore any tiredness that happened upon her.

Ellen was grateful in the tunnel and hoped that no one would see or hear her. Finding her spot, the bend at the 'Y' where her past-self would walk down, Ellen waited against the wall, keeping her fingers crossed that she hadn't taken too long. She used the moment to catch her breathing. It burned when she did. The excitement, the adrenaline, the fright--not too mention the running--caused it.

And then she heard it. Her own voice, humming some song from the eighties. Leaning against the wall listening, Ellen rolled her eyes. She heard with open ears how really bad she sounded.

The humming grew closer. What would she do? Should she jump out and scare herself. Knowing herself as well as she did she ran the risk of answering the question; 'can two of the same masses occupy the same space', when the past Ellen hit her. Deep in thought she never dreamt she'd get so nervous about seeing her own body. And Ellen did. When she saw her past-self walk right by her, Ellen knew it was time. "Ellen." She stepped out calling.

Past-Ellen stopped, pulled her ear and walked some more.

"Ellen."

Past-Ellen stopped again, slowly she turned around shrieking loudly when she saw herself. "You-you, look like-like me."

"And you sound like Os-Oscar. I am you."

“Am I dead?” Past-Ellen asked. “I died didn’t I? Oh my God.”

“Shut up and listen to me.” Ellen grew annoyed with her past-self, how pitiful she looked when she was scared. “You have to listen and listen to every word I say. O.K.?” She waited for a frightened nod. “Jason’s time machine works. It really works. I’m from your future.”

Gasping, Past-Ellen grabbed her chest. “That explains it. How far from the future.” She peered closer.

“Not too close. We don’t know if two of the same masses can occupy the same space.”

“I understand.” Past-Ellen waved. “Is it very far in the future? Because I’m aging well.”

“Two weeks.”

“Why two weeks.”

“Stop with the questions and just listen. Please, it is so important.” Ellen told Past-Ellen nearly begging. “You do it today. You unlock the password.”

“Yes.” Past-Ellen clenched her fist. “Is this why? Are you here to tell me what it is?”

“No. You’re there, you’re right there.”

“What is it. Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on tell me.” Past-Ellen beckoned.

“All right.” Ellen paused before saying anything to her past-self. “Murder.”

“Oh, I’m close.” Past-Ellen smiled. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. But listen. You cannot tell anyone, not Frank, not Dean, not Joe. That you saw your future self. Anyone. Swear on our kids you will not tell a soul.”

Past-Ellen raised her hand. “I swear. This is serious isn’t it? Frank dies doesn’t he?”

“No. Dean does.” Ellen watched her past-self look horrified. “That password you unlock, opens the file to the vial information. It also names Georges as the main person. But . . . it is connected to a destruct program that goes off in three minutes. A second explosion happens after two hours. Frank gets out of holding and makes it in enough time to save you. Dean dies. By the time you give Joe the antidote that brings him out . . .”

“Give Joe an antidote?” Past-Ellen asked.

“Yes. God.” Ellen cringed. She had already said more than she should have. But thinking, the more information she gave, the more chance she had of making it work, Ellen began to spew to her past-self. “George has been giving him something called Salicain. Joe didn’t have a stroke. He was drugged. The antidote is in the vials. Frank pulls you out, you run and help

Joe, by the time you get back . . .”

“Dean’s gone.” Past-Ellen lowered her head. “What can I do to stop it. Don’t type in the password? I have to stop it. Dean can’t die.”

“I know that. Believe you me, and you do. I know that. Type in the password, hit print and get the hell out of there. Leave.”

“Leave Dean?” Past-Ellen questioned.

“Leave. Then go get help. He’ll get caught in the first explosion. He’ll have the information. But someone will be able to help him.”

“Hold on.” Past-Ellen held up her hands. “If Joe is being drugged by George, does Joe know?”

“Yes Joe knows.”

“Then why don’t you tell me which vial contains the antidote. I’ll go get it, give it to Joe and then there won’t be an explosion.” Past-Ellen nodded with a ‘so-there’.

“No!” Ellen held up her hand. “Just type in the password and let history happen. We can’t change it that much.”

“But the cryo-lab gets destroyed, all the work we did. And it is still taking a chance that Dean can die. Tell me the vial.”

“No.”

“Come on. I won’t tell. Tell me the vial. I’ll still type in the password.” Past-Ellen said so convincingly to herself.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“O.K. Vial seventeen. But don’t use it, you have to at least let the explosion happen.”

“I will.” Past-Ellen gave a thumbs up.

“And you’d better go. You’re already late.” Ellen told herself.

“I’m going.” Past-Ellen backed up.

Final shot. Reassurance, whatever, Ellen called to her past-self. “Please don’t screw this up. Please. The pain you go through is unbearable.”

“Trust me.” Past-Ellen paused in her leaving. “I won’t let anything, anything happen to Dean.”

Confident, Ellen watched her past-self pick up speed and move down the tunnels. After taking a moment to think and enjoy the tingle of hope that ran through her, Ellen headed back to Jason’s lab.

What was taking Ellen so long? Henry wondered as he kept peering at his watch. Did she run into trouble? He started getting antsy noticing the time had surpassed seven-ten. Hearing the laboratory door open, Henry looked up.

“Henry?” Jason walked in, a look of surprise on his face. “What are

you doing here?"

"Uh . . . waiting." Henry nervously answered.

"Waiting?" Jason stepped in.

"Uh . . . yeah. Oh, Jason I have something for you."

"What is it?"

Henry reached in his back pocket, made sure it was the correct envelope and handed it to Jason. "For you."

"What is it?" Jason looked at it.

"A letter from you. But you can't open it yet."

"A letter from me?"

"Yeah." Henry said. "But don't open it until I'm gone."

Jason scratched his head with the hand that held the envelope. "When are you leaving?"

"After I'm done waiting."

"What are you waiting for?" Jason asked.

"Um . . ." The laboratory door opened and Henry smiled when he saw Ellen. "Her."

Jason turned around. "Ellen what are you doing here?"

"Meeting Henry." She walked over to him and grabbed his hand. "Ready."

Henry nodded. "All go well?"

"I hope." Ellen held up crossed fingers.

Jason's head spun in bewilderment. "What are you . . ." He saw them walk to the other side of the archway. "Where are you . . ."

Henry lifted the transfer. "Bye Jason." Punching in his birthday he restarted the machine, took tightly hold of Ellen's hand and stepped through.

Ellen knew, Henry noticed it as soon as they returned. How could he not. Slowly she looked at him stunned. No longer was just Joe, Jason and Frank there. But Andrea, John, Jenny, Johnny and not to mention six or seven other people as well. "Henry?" She whispered as they all applauded the two. Ellen released Henry's hand and looked. Where was he? If everyone was there, where was Dean?

"El." Frank approached her. "Is everything all right?"

Ellen said nothing. She looked one more time at Henry and brushed past Frank. "Excuse me." As fast as she could she bolted out the door and jumped in Henry's jeep.

Frank threw his hands in the air and looked at Henry who still had the same expression. "Henry, what did you do to me wife?"

Just as dazed, Henry kept his focus forward. "Excuse me Frank." Ignoring his welcome from the crowded room, Henry chased after Ellen.

Joyfully or painfully, either way, the big question on whether the trip back in time worked, would soon be answered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How long did five miles take to drive? Ellen pounded the steering wheel as she pushed the vehicle to its top speed, beckoning it in her mind to hurry. It wasn't going fast enough. Something went wrong. She sensed it. But Ellen didn't know if it was her gut telling her that or her fear.

Though it only took a short amount of time, it seemed like an eternity for the center of town to come into view. With her heart racing, she sped forth, screeching the jeep to a stop at the clinic.

She tripped as she jumped from the jeep, her knees skinning against the concrete as she did. The burning, the blood that started to happen was nothing compared to what she had to find out. Leaping up the steps to the clinic, she nearly tripped again. Catching her balance, she flung open the double doors with such force, she banged them as if she were Frank.

*Please, please, let him be here. Please.* She prayed in her head as she slowed in her run down the hall. The blood rushed to her ears, burning them and her heart pounded even more. She knew if anyone was close enough to her, the strong beating would have been seen through her chest.

Afraid, she approached the lab door. It was open. She closed her eyes and stood silent before turning the bend and going in. *Please dear God. Please. Don't let me have failed.* Opening her eyes, and readying herself, Ellen charged full speed into the lab. Her feet slid to a stop when she faced the back wall and she didn't see him. *No.* She looked to her left, and to her right. Her heart, her beating heart, broke right there and then as it sunk to the depths of her soul and crumbled. Ellen's arms and head dropped at the same time. Heavily her shoulders began to bounce as her eyes welled up. The first tear, huge, formed and fell so fast, she could have sworn she heard its landing when it smacked against the linoleum.

"Back from the big time test already?"

The voice. Like the shocking feeling of someone shouting 'boo' it ricocheted through her body. Ellen slowly lifted her head. It went through her stomach first, creeping up with such intensity it formed a lump in her throat. Swaying her head in a slow apprehension, the corner of her eye caught him first then her body spun around as if he were a magnet.

"Are you all right?" He asked.

She had to catch her breath. Her head filled with blood and the room started to spin. The tears that fell, fell even faster.

"Ellen?"

Throwing out her arms, she clenched her fist and threw her head back. "Oh God! Dean!" Raising her head forward, from her heart and her soul, she screamed the loudest and most emotional shriek ever to come from her small

body. Her tearful cry out carried with her as she charged forth at him, leaping up unexpectedly and wrapping not only her arms around his neck, but her legs around his waist as well. "Dean!"

"El." Dean started to laugh, having to catch his balance on the counter behind him.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God." She spoke rapidly, her words never stopping her lips from kissing him. "Oh my God. Oh, Dean." She ran her fingers through his blonde hair, messing it up over and over. "Hold me. Just hold me."

"I'm holding you. I take it you're not mad about our argument this morning?"

"What argument?"

"Thanks, El." He chuckled as she pecked kisses to his cheek like a chicken. "El? What is going on?"

"Oh, God." She gasped out her hands feeling his face, his arms, his back, and reaching down to feel his legs. "Don't let me go." She spoke quickly, taking his face in her hands. "Dean, listen to me. I'm sorry. I am so sorry for anytime that I have ever hurt you."

"El . . ." Dean really tried to free himself from the crushing grip her hands held on his face.

"No listen. I will never again, ever, take you for granted."

"So you say now. And what's with the happy attitude?" Dean tried not to laugh.

"Don't let me go, hold me."

"El. I could release my arms and you'd still be on me. Did something scare you. Did something go wrong with the test?"

"No, Dean. Everything went great." She started in her kisses again, then pulled back. "Did I tell you I was sorry?"

"Yes Ellen."

"I missed you. I missed you so much. My life, my life was nothing. I never realized how important you are to me. Dean." Words breathless and with enthusiasm, she squeezed his cheeks so tight as she forced him to face her, his lips puckered. "You are so important to me."

"Thanks, El. Now . . . not that I'm not enjoying this happy, and uh, weird moment." He turned his head and reached back. "But I have . . ."

"Dean." She made him face her again. "I love you."

"What?" He laughed.

"I love you."

Dean turned serious, his arms loosening in their hold. "Come on El, cut it out."

"No Dean listen to me. I do. I really, truly, from the depths of my being . . . love you."

Upon her words, as if instinct, Dean's hands returned to her back. Holding her tightly, he spun her around, reached out to the right and shut the door. Bringing his hands up to her face, he set Ellen on the counter, pulled her even closer to him and began to kiss her. With his fingers feeling her face, his lips separating hers, he felt Ellen respond like she had never done before. She clung to him. With every part of her body she could, she clung to him.

Just as Dean's hand reached down to make counter space--he definitely was taking full advantage of the moment--the door next to him opened.

Ellen separated her lips from Dean's turning only her face to the person that entered. That person couldn't stop staring at Dean. "Henry. Henry look."

Dean let go of Ellen. Embarrassed and a little upset at Henry's bad timing, he stepped back some running his hand through his hair. "Henry, why are you staring?"

Ellen slid off the counter. "Look, Henry, it's Dean. It's Dean." She spoke with a huge smile then embracing Henry. "We did it. We did it, Henry."

Henry couldn't take his eyes off of Dean. Slowly his hand reached out.

Ellen excited, grabbed Dean again. "Touch him, he's real." Her hand ran up and down his chest.

Henry's fingertips touched Dean's face and he let out a loud gasp.

Dean stepped back. "This is some trick you two are playing isn't it? You knew you were going through that time machine and you said, let's play a trick on Dean. O.K. what's the deal here? Get it over with I have work."

Nodding her head to Henry, almost as if they were speaking to each other through their minds, Ellen clung to Dean. "Say something Henry, you're in shock."

Henry's mouth dropped open, he touched Dean's face again. "I . . . I . . ."

"What's going on?" Frank stomped into the lab. "You two come through that test, act all . . ." Seeing a dazed Henry, Frank snapped his finger in front of him. "Hey!" After shrugging at a blank response, Frank returned to looking at Ellen. "El, what happened in that test? You got all weirded out. Taking Henry's jeep, Henry takes mine . . ."

"Frank." Ellen smiled. "Look, it's Dean. It's Dean."

"Yeah I know, El. Answer my question."

"But it's really Dean." She spoke so excitedly.

"El!" Frank calmed himself. "I see him."

"Touch him, Frank." Ellen spoke with excitement. "He's real. He's really real. Touch him"

"I'm not fuckin touching Dean. What is going on?"

"It's Dean!"

“I know!” Frank shouted, his words not as enthusiastic as Ellen’s.

“Oh!” Ellen nearly shrieked. “You yelled. Henry, Frank yelled. Oh, Frank. Pick on Dean. Come on. Call him . . .”

“El!” Frank shuddered the irritation off. “What is wrong with you? I have you rambling, Henry a zombie . . .” Frank grunted and moved to the door. “Dean, watch them. I’m getting Jason. Something happened to these two when they went through that thing of his.”

Dean watched Frank storm out. He turned to see the bright grin of Ellen so close it was almost frightening. “Pick on Dean?” He asked. “Gee, El, thanks.”

Ellen giggled. “I missed it.” She started to follow Dean across the lab, stopped in front of Henry and pulled his hair.

Henry snapped out of it. “Wow.”

Ellen folded her arms and looked across the lab. “It’s Dean.”

“Dean.” The name slipped in awe from Henry.

Dean slid to a stop and turned around. “All right.” He nodded, resting his one hand on the counter. “Games up. Quit it. Nice little time trick. Ha, ha, ha. I laughed. Now I have work.”

“Dean?” Ellen stepped closer. “This isn’t a trick.”

“Then a payback.” Dean said. “This has something to do with our argument this morning about you going through doesn’t it?”

“What argument?” Ellen asked.

Dean grunted and turned to Henry. “This is your idea, this joke. What did you say to me yesterday?”

“What?” Henry asked. “I wasn’t here yesterday. I was, but wasn’t. Did I say something?”

“Yes!” Dean snapped. “To me about what I heard you say to Ellen. You know, about playing a . . .” Another grunt came from Dean. “Forget it. I guess now you have memory loss?”

Henry looked quickly to Ellen. “I don’t think I do.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “It’s just because we did it. Dean.” She grinned again at him. “We did it.”

Dean threw his hands in the air in surrender. “Did what?”

Henry reached behind him and shut the door. “We have to tell you, Dean. Strict instructions from the other Joe.” Henry pulled up a stool and motioned to Dean to sit. Standing side by side with Ellen, he took a moment to stare.

Dean looked up to the two who seemingly gloated over him. “What!”

Ellen faced Henry. “Go on Henry. You have all the proof anyhow.” She said.

“All right.” Henry breathed deeply and smiled. “Dean . . . the time machine test was a success.”

“Good.” Dean started to get up. “Now can I go back to my work?”

Henry, laying his hands on Dean’s shoulders, pushed him back down. “But it wasn’t the test you think.” He hunched down. “I know you aren’t going to believe us, but I have proof. I do. Dean . . . Ellen and I went through the time machine this afternoon. It wasn’t just a test. When we went through, Beginnings was different.” He watched Dean laugh. “No, hear me out. Dean, you had died in an accident, November first. Ellen and I went back to stop that accident. And guess what?” He stood up straight. “We did.”

If it was anyone else besides Henry telling him, Dean would have lost it in laughter. “I didn’t die, Henry.” He saw Ellen smiling and nodding her head. “Ellen?”

“Dean.” She kissed him on the cheek. “You did. We changed time.”

“Right.” Dean shook his head. “No way. You say you have proof?”

Henry nodded. “We do. What I bring through the machine with me, doesn’t change. So what I’m going to show you should prove it to you. Hopefully.”

Spinning in confusion, Dean stood up. “I died?” Looking to Ellen he knew the reason she acted like that. “A part of me believes and a part of me doesn’t. Why . . . why if I died, did you change time?”

Henry shrugged. “There’s a reason. We don’t know what it is. It’s in the letter I have to you from Joe. Well, the Joe that knew you died. The Joe that doesn’t know you died, doesn’t know about the letter.”

Dean shook his head with a twitch. “You’re confusing me. Just stop.” Dean paced a couple steps. “How can you prove this?”

“Aside from the letter?” Henry asked. “Dean, how hard is it to change the history insertions?”

“It’s impossible.” Dean replied.

Henry held up the black pouch. “Copied yesterday. Disks of Beginnings History. I carried them through the time machine.”

Dean zoomed his focus to the black pouch, and with out saying a word reached out, snatched it from Henry’s hand and took off from the lab.

CHAPTER NINE

It was the building sandwiched between the bakery and library. History. A building that very few people entered. If they did, it usually was only to drop off events that needed to be logged in history. Births, deaths, accidents, marriages and so forth. Henry led the way ahead of Ellen inside the small, quiet structure. The ding-a-ling of the bell made Trish, or the warden of history, as Joe called her, perk up from behind her desk.

“Afternoon!” Trish smiled brightly.

“Hey, Trish.” Henry spoke. “Did Dean dart in here?”

Trish exhaled a loud breath of disgust. “Yes.” Her hands slammed to the large appointment book before her. “And, he isn’t schedule to be here. He just said, ‘oh who cares’ and ran right in the back.”

“How rude.” Henry commented. “I’ll speak to him.”

“Please.” Trish stated. “Or I’ll have to file a formal complaint to Joe. I have rules you know. I can’t have people just running amuck in here.”

“Of course.” Henry smiled. “Can we?” He pointed to the back room.

“Just a second . . .” Trish held up her finger and flipped open her book. “Yes, you and Ellen are scheduled to review the disks. Go on.”

Henry peered in toward the desk to the white page with only his and Ellen’s named penciled. “Busy day huh?”

“Gets that way.” Trish responded.

“O.K.” Taking hold of Ellen’s arm, Henry led her to the back.

Ellen leaned into Henry whispering. “Joe really needs to let her out of here.”

With more than an agreeing look, Henry reached for the back room door.

Many of times Dean had done it. Filled out those history forms. Took it to Trish. Stated his password--which changed weekly per Trish--and left. Changing history or the entries already made, was impossible. Trish or Joe were the only ones permitted to log in. And if someone ever wanted to read the history, Trish made sure they got the ‘read only’ version. No chances were taken. Dean was certain if the history disks Henry gave him stated he died, he pretty much died. And he would find that out if he could ever move forward from the early years.

“Damn it.” Dean cursed out loud.

“Dean. Dean. Dean.” Henry said as he walked in. “Not only are you rude to our Trish, but vulgar as well.”

“Help me, Henry.” Dean kept his eyes peered on the screen. “I’m

stuck back three years ago.”

Henry leaned over his shoulder and hit a key a few times. “There. Scroll down.”

“Thanks.” Dean said.

Henry walked over to Ellen. “Any second.” He whispered.

“What do you think his reaction will be?” Ellen asked.

“Even though Dean’s a scientist. His gonna lose it.”

“Please.” Dean scoffed. “If any of this is . . . Oh my God!” Dean stood up, knocking over his chair. “Oh my God!”

Widening her eyes, Ellen turned to Henry. “You were right.”

“This . . . this . . .” Dean pointed at the screen. “This is a . . . I died?”

“Dean?” Ellen moved to him. “And you really should print this. Appointments are hard to get here.” Ellen reached to the computer and hit ‘print’

Gloating in his prediction of Dean’s reaction, Henry walked over, peered at the paper coming out of the printer, then he himself . . . screamed. “Oh my God! This . . . this . . .”

Ellen hurried to Henry. “You aren’t going to say *you* died are you?”

“No!” Henry grabbed his hair. “There was never an explosion in the cryo-lab.”

Ellen waved her hand at Henry. “Oh big deal. I thought something else happened.”

“El!” Henry grasped the paper. “You were suppose to tell yourself to get out of the lab after you hit the password. Obviously you never hit the password because there wasn’t an explosion.”

“So what, Henry.”

“So what? You weren’t suppose to change history that much.”

“I didn’t, the other Ellen did.” She walked over to Dean. “Are you all right?”

“I died?” Dean let out a small moan. “This says . . . oh God they buried me.” With a look of horror on his face he turned to Ellen. “I really did die?”

Ellen nodded. “It was horrible. Would you like to hear about it?”

“Yeah. But not now.” He placed his hands on her shoulder and walked by her. “Henry, you said there was a reason you two had to change time. What is it?”

Henry looked up from the printing sheets of history. “Dean? If the explosion never happened how did you guys ever . . .”

“Henry.” Ellen snatched the sheets from his hand. “Forget about the explosion. It doesn’t have that big of effect on history anyhow. Give Dean the letter.”

“Fine.” After a grunt, Henry reached into his back pocket and pulled

out the envelope. "Here." He gave a quick glare to Ellen.

Dean read the outside of the envelope. "You can tell they know you two well. Look." He showed them. "Joe put, *If opened, Henry and Ellen peeked.*" He began to rip open the letter. "There has to be a reason for them to have changed time." Reaching backwards for a chair, blocking out the annoying printer sound, Dean read the first letter from Joe. *Dean, I only pray to God that your eyes are actually reading this letter'. Joe's words were written. 'If you are, then we have succeeded in diverting the tragedy that took you from us. Dean, the reason we changed time, took fate into our own hands, will be evident when you read the following letter that Jason sent back from the future to himself. Look at the date on the letter Dean. I am leaving the information to your discretion. Do with it what you must do. And Dean, good to have you back!'*

Swallowing, Dean moved that sheet of paper to the one placed behind it. His eyes shifted across the page as he bit his fingernail on his index finger, his leg tapping in a nervous rhythm. Then, almost as if instinct, his eyes widened and he jumped from his seat. Horrified he looked at an unsuspecting Ellen and Henry, and ran with speed out of the history building.

Ellen was puzzled. "Must be bad." She ejected the history disks from the computer and ripped the paper from the printer. "I told you we should have read it first."

"Johnny!" Dean cried out sliding forth as he charged into the clinic lab. "Don't touch that case!"

"Dr. Dean?" Johnny Slagel lifted his hands quickly from the silver cooling unit. "But you told me to pull out a vial and work on it for you."

"Don't!" Dean walked to him, holding his right hand up, his left hand holding back his long bangs. "Don't." Dean moved closer.

"Are you all right?" Johnny looked oddly at him. "You tell me one thing and then you . . ."

"Johnny." Dean laid his hand on the case and looked behind it to the plug. "Um . . . you know what? I really don't have anything for you to do right now, why don't you take the rest of the day off."

"Are you sure. What about meds."

"I'll do them. Go." Dean held onto the case as if it were a buried treasure.

"I'll go." Looking back curiously one more time at Dean, Johnny moved to the door. "Hey El, Henry." He slipped by them.

"Look, Henry." Ellen moved into whisper. "What is he doing?"

"I don't know. But he moves pretty fast for a dead guy. Dean?"

"Huh?" Dean looked quickly up at them. "El is that the old history?" He stepped closer to her.

“The Dean is dead history, yes.”

“Thanks. I’m going to see Joe.” Like he was dazed, Dean snatched it from her hand and walked to the door. He stopped, backed up, kissed Ellen quickly and ran out of the lab.

^^^

Frank’s fingers traced over the already drawn circle on that map that lay on Joe’s desk. “Canvas the entire region incase they spread out.”

“Or left.” Joe looked into the map. “What’s left to get ready?”

“I have my team picked. Two trucks. Just need to pack up the supplies.”

“You sure you want to do this?” Joe asked.

“Yeah. I have to.” Frank said.

“What about Ellen?”

“It helps us. Chapter five in Rev. Bob’s book. Absence works. The only thing is, she was a little odd after the test.” Frank shrugged. “I’m still waiting for Jason to talk to me about that.”

“He will. He’s busy. All right . . .” Joe let out a breath. “Security.”

“John Matoose should be fine running things. Three days we’ll be gone. It’s just a recognizance. Aside from the camera, I need to see for my own eyes what they have or had down in New Mexico. And which way to head next.”

“You think there’s more?”

“Cryo-labs?” Frank scoffed a laugh. “Without a doubt. The society is probably bigger than we think. I have to review my calculations. But . . . they have a plan and destinations. I want to find out what and where they are.”

With the bursting open of the office door, the filling of the room with cold air, Dean ran in. “Joe!” His panicked voice carried in. “Joe . . . I died!”

“What?” Joe laughed.

“I died, Joe. I died.” Dean held up the wrinkling history papers.

“Well.” Frank cleared his throat. “Thanks for the happy thought Dean. However I’m not in the mood for a tease. I’m out of here.”

Dean ignored him and moved to Joe’s desk. “The time test, Joe.” He laid the history in front of him. “It wasn’t a test. Those history disks you gave Henry to take through with him, just to check. Read.” Dean pointed at the sheets. “Those are a print up of the past two weeks. Ellen and Henry didn’t test the machine, they went through for a purpose. To save me. I died.”

Frank, who was headed to the door, stopped. “First of all Dean, why would they save you? Second, why would I let my wife go through and ruin my happiness, I wouldn’t. You flatter yourself.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open as he spun back to Frank. “And I’m not

even speaking to you.” He turned back to Joe. “Do you see?”

Running his hand down his face as he read, Joe peered through his finger tips and sat down. “If I didn’t know the measures we took to prohibit changes, I wouldn’t believe this.”

“Dad?” Frank shut the door. “The history was changed?”

Joe nodded. “I can’t believe this.”

Frank moved in more. “Why would we mess with time so bad? Mostly, why would we bring him back?”

Dean pulled the letters from his back pocket. “Henry brought these through the machine. This is the reason.” He moved his hand from Frank who tried to take them. “One is from you Joe, explaining the second letter.” He stopped handing them to Joe when Frank laughed. “What?”

“I can’t believe we had a reason to bring you back.” Frank said.

“If you must know Frank.” He gave the sheets to Joe to read. “The first letter is from Joe, and the second letter is from . . . is from . . . is from you.”

“Me?” Frank asked.

“You Frank. Yep, seems you begged Jason to change time back because of Ellen. She couldn’t live without me, Frank.”

“Get the fuck out of here. Dad, can you please explain . . .”

“Frank.” Joe looked up, a terrified look on his face. “Go get the scouting things ready. It is vital now. Please.”

“Is he telling the truth?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, Frank.” Joe nodded.

“I wrote the second letter?”

“Christ, no Frank. Go. I’ll explain it to you later.”

“All right.” Frank reached for the door. “Tell me this, please tell me we had a good reason to bring him back.”

Without verbally answering, Joe nodded with a closed mouth.

“Thanks.” Frank opened the door.

After getting the relief feeling of an office without Frank, Dean sat down across from Joe. “What do you think?”

Joe laid the papers down and peered up. “I think move that case and monitor it constantly is foremost. But I also think . . .” He took another second to check out all the information given to him. “I think we have a couple of time travelers to question.”

^^^

Ellen thought she had be somewhere other than the greenhouses. How she ended up there, she wasn’t quite sure. But she was glad Hector bought the excuse that she was checking on the progress of tomatoes when he questioned her aimless walking. Grateful that the greenhouse weren’t too far

from the clinic--at least she thought--Ellen headed back, foregoing the thing she was trying to remember that she had to do.

Holding the ripe tomato in her hand and contemplating taking a bite, she glanced up in her walk and saw John Matoose. She smiled. "Hi, John. How's Caroline?"

John skid to a stop and looked cross at her. "What is this?" He ridiculed. "Some sort of new Ellen tactic."

"Um, no. I don't think. Is it?" Ellen asked.

John laughed. "Now, we're playing innocent. I'm not buying it."

Ellen shifted her eyes in confusion. Was John being unusually mean to her. With all the help Jenny gave after Dean's death, she thought John and her had put the bickering aside. Then it hit Ellen. No Dean's death. "Um, John?" Ellen held up the tomato while question laced her face. "Did I uh, I don't know, offend you at all in let's say the last sixteen days?"

"Unbelievable." John shook his head. "So now you don't think constantly accusing me of working for George is offending?"

"I did that?"

John grunted. "Ellen." He huffed. "Blow it out your ass."

Ellen's mouth dropped open as John stormed away. "Blow it out my ass?" Wondering if Frank knew the way he spoke to her, Ellen shrugged it off and started to walk.

^^^

"Dean?" Ellen tried to call his attention. "Are you listening?"

Mumbling a 'uh-huh' Dean kept his focus on the bright red tomato that sat on the lab counter.

"So." Ellen continued. "Mid way back here it hit me. Right? How brilliantly keen my non-grief stricken other self was. I forgot about it. Dean?"

"El." Confused, Dean pointed to the tomato. "Why exactly do you have this?"

"Dean." She huffed his name. "None of this matters to you?"

"El. I'm tired of hearing your John Matoose is involved with George theory."

"I never said it. Well, not me, the other me."

Dean closed his eyes.

"And how easily everyone dismissed John just because he was the one who arrested George."

Dean quickly looked up. "What are you talking about?"

Just as Ellen was about to answer, Joe strutted into the lab with Henry. "I found him. And I uh, see you found Ellen." Joe nodded.

"Yes." Dean stood straight. "She was at the greenhouse."

“So I heard.” Joe raised his eyebrow.

“Look Joe.” Dean lifted the tomato. “Ellen brought us a tomato. Where did you find Henry?”

With a pacifying tone, Joe spoke. “Looking for his Phillips Head screwdriver.”

Dean shifted his views from Henry to Joe. “He carries that in his back pocket. Always.”

Joe tossed his hands up. “I told him that.”

“Joe.” Dean stepped to him. “Maybe this isn’t a good time to have that time traveler talk.”

“I heard that.” Henry said. “And that isn’t nice. El and I are fine. It’s the ripple thing that has us.”

“Yeah.” Ellen agreed. “None of this time machine memory loss boloney Jason is saying. So what’s with the meeting?”

Dean moved to the pair. “Henry, this letter you gave me? The reason for you two bringing me back? This goes no further than this room. Is that understood? Ellen?”

Ellen nodded, moving closer to Henry and reading the note. “Oh Dean.” Her happy face turned somber. “Oh, Dean.”

Henry gulped and handed it back to Dean. “What do we do?”

Dean took the letter. “I’m telling you two because one, Ellen, you have to work with me on this. You saw the date on that letter, it’s fourteen months away. And Henry, you have to help me with that case. We have to have it checked on constantly.”

“Dean?” Henry questioned. “It said in that letter the antidote is in the vials. If that’s true, then everything is all right, right? I mean, you have the antidote in there somewhere, copy it.”

Dean exhaled. “I wished it were that simple, Henry. The antidote will most likely be synthetic, and if that’s the case, I don’t have the resources to copy it. What we have to do is first identify the vial with the virus in it, then we will be able to easily see which vial has the antidote. But finding the virus will be tricky.”

Ellen snapped her finger and breathed out in a revelation manner. “Half the problem solved. Dean, you’re smart. You can eliminate a lot of those vials by just reading the list and identifying which vials are not a virus.”

“Uh yeah, Ellen.” Dean scratched his head. “Unfortunately, a list like that doesn’t exist.”

“Sure it does.” Ellen stood up and walked over to the file cabinet. “I keep it locked right in here.” She proceeded to open the drawer. “Hey that’s funny. It’s not here. I wonder what I did with it.”

Henry, nearly tripping as he went over to her in a haste, shut the file cabinet. “Ellen. There is no list.”

“Henry there is. You’ve seen it.”

“Yeah, I have El.”

“I wonder where it could be?” She brought her finger to her lip and looked around.

“El.” He grabbed her shoulders turning her. “There is no list. Wanna know why? The only way there was to get a list was to unlock the password. Unlocking the password meant explosion. And since there was no explosion, there was no unlocking of the password. No unlocking of the password. No list!”

Ellen closed her one ear to Henry’s yelling. “Don’t take that tone with me.”

“I’m taking that tone with you because you screwed up.”

“I did not screw up. I couldn’t have screwed up.”

“El, you did.” Henry snapped. “Screwed up. See, see, you said the explosion didn’t matter. It did.”

Joe’s neck started to hurt from watching a round of Ellen and Henry bickering. Loudly he whistled, halting the two who seemed to forget anyone else was in the room. “Hey! What is going on?”

Henry turned from Ellen. “Joe.” Almost sounding like a tattler he moved to him. “She was suppose to just tell herself to run after she typed in the password. Obviously she didn’t. There’s no list.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “I told myself that. And there has to be a list. How else did they get Joe out of the Salicain like the history said?”

“You must have told yourself which vial contained the antidote.” Henry said.

“Yeah.” Ellen nodded. “But I promised myself I wouldn’t use it, so there.”

Screaming loudly, Henry stormed away from her. “I can’t believe you. How stupid can you be? You believed yourself? You know how manipulative you are.”

“That’s it.” Ellen waved her hands about. “I’m out of here. Pick my brain later.” She stormed to the door. “I refuse to stand here and take anymore verbal abuse. I’m going to containment.” Folding her arms, and throwing her head back, Ellen turned right as she made the dramatic, overacted exit from the lab.

Joe calmly watched the door. He heard the stomping footsteps stop. Then a few seconds later he saw Ellen walk by.

She paused with an embarrassed snicker. “Containment is uh, that way.” She pointed and headed in the correct direction.

After a whistle, Joe turned to face Dean. “Now, I’m curious. I just thought you tested, how exactly did you find the antidote?”

Dean pointed to the door Ellen walked out. “She told me.”

“She told you?” Joe questioned. “About being warned.”

“No.” Dean snickered. “She told me which vial had the antidote. And I tested it, she was right. We gave it to you.”

“What made you believe she was right?” Joe asked.

“She said it came to her in a psychic dream.” Dean saw Joe’s mouth open. “No, Joe. Stranger things had happened. I myself had a dream that you were standing in my livingroom warning me to get her out of the lab.” Dean looked at a laughing Henry. “What?”

“That wasn’t a dream.” Henry explained. “Joe was there.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Joe said.

“Yeah. From the future.” Henry stated. “You went to warn Dean. But it didn’t work. So Ellen went. Her warning was two hours later so it didn’t change your warning, it only erased your knowledge of it.”

“Christ.” Joe rubbed his eyes. “I’m confused.”

“Imagine how me and El feel.” Henry nodded then sat down.

“No.” Joe interjected. “Imagine how we all feel. Now . . . back to business. The vials.”

“Move on them ASAP.” Dean said. “I was thinking. I have to go through the unidentified ones and test them. Look for virus structures. But . . . I don’t have the safe resources here.”

“Here meaning you have an idea.” Joe said.

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “And that’s just half the problem. I was hoping, with your O.K., Joe, you could allow me and Ellen to go to my old lab in Nebraska. I have the equipment. Take Henry with us to help get the second power source up and running. There aren’t that many vials. Two days tops.”

Slowly Joe bobbed his head, agreement on his face. “Henry?”

“I’m up for it.” Henry lifted his hands. “Whenever you want.”

“Dean?” Joe questioned.

“As soon as possible.” Dean stated. “I would even like it to be tomorrow if we can get it together. Eliminate the vials or find the virus in there.”

“I’ll speak to Frank.” Joe paced some. “He’s supposed to go on the surveillance. I’ll need him to stay back with the kids. Besides, I think he should. He did just get back from that long search for George. And I . . .” The rattle, bang and thump, made Joe spin to where the noise came from. Henry was on the floor. “Henry.”

Henry stumbled to a stand. “Please. Please don’t tell me George is still alive.”

After looking at Dean, Joe looked at Henry. “Yeah, he is.”

Henry whined a little then growled. “How. How is he alive. How did he get away? Never mind.” Henry tossed out his hand. “No explosion. No cockiness. No hanging around. George booked.”

“Yes.” Joe said then let out a breath. “O.K. back to what we were talking about.”

“Joe.” Henry seemed so offended. “Aren’t you mad. Ellen made George be alive again.”

“What do you want me to do. Go back in the time machine and yell? No.” Joe returned to Dean. “Now, you mentioned another problem. You said identifying it is half.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “If we find it. If we identify it. I have to work on a cure. I need an isolated area far from everyone.”

Joe rubbed his chin. “Let me work on that. Let’s get it out of the case first.”

“If . . .” Dean’s voice went soft. “If it’s in the case. Joe, I really think we should approach this problem at all angles. Let’s not put all our eggs in the basket with the vials.”

Joe was a bit lost. “But the letter said the vials. And about the antidote.”

“Oh I truly believe that antidote is in the case. The chances that Johnny, Ellen and Henry being naturally immune are too slim.” Dean spoke with seriousness. “Finding the virus in the vials would be a godsend. However, we have to remember, there are other ways to hit us with it. We have a pretty big enemy out there.” He took a deep breath. “We cannot . . . can not, rule them out.”

CHAPTER TEN

Frank knew he had that same dopey expression on his face that he used to get when he was seventeen and listened to Mr. Wetzel instruct on the confusing parts of basic math. He felt it, the opening of his mouth. The wide eyed puppy dog look. But he couldn't help it. Just like Mr. Wetzel, Jason Godrichson confused him.

Jason blinked a few times after his explanation as he stood next to Frank at the social hall. "I lost you."

"No." Frank shook his head as he leaned against the bar.

"Then you understand?" Jason asked.

"No." Frank shook his head again.

Joe grunted then slammed his hands. "Forget it, Jason." Joe just wanted to sit there and enjoy his drink.

"No." Frank held up his hand. "Just tell me, was that in laymen terms?"

"Frank!" Joe snapped. "The man said they would experience temporary subconscious memory loss from time traveling. How much more laymen do you want it?"

"More than that." Frank said turning his body from his father. "O.K., clarify. Memory loss, meaning?"

Slowly and calm Jason explained. "They won't remember."

"Subconscious meaning?"

After a nostril breath, Jason took a small drink, then answered. "They may not remember things they take for granted."

"Like going to the bathroom?" Frank asked slowly. "Should we be prepared for . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled.

"Dad!" Frank snapped back. "I'm trying to understand why my wife and best friend are acting so weird."

"Well it isn't from the time machine." Quipped Joe. "They're always weird."

"Your father has a small point." Jason interjected. "The time machine wouldn't make them act weird."

Frank huffed. "But you just said it would make them not remember."

"Yes." Jason nodded. "Memory loss. Not act weird. Then again the memory loss could make them act weird, I doubt it. They were acting weird right away. Time machine memory loss take a few hours. Or at least it did with the rabbits."

"Oh, now, see." Frank rubbed his eyes and stood up straight. "Now

you're confusing me. Rabbits act weird, people lose their memory?"

"Frank." Joe blasted. "Stop. Go home. I'll meet you there."

"But I'm confused." Frank defended.

"You're always confused. Go!" Joe pointed. "Let me have my drink."

"Fine." Frank moved to the door mumbling. "Town drunks."

"Oh, Frank?" Jason called out. "One more thing. You may want to be aware of initiating any sexual behavior for the next two weeks. It may cause schizophrenic violent behavior."

Frank nodded slowly. "Thanks." He shrugged. "But I should be fine. I'm in control, just confused."

Jason watched him leave then swayed his head to a snickering Joe. "I thought it would work."

"It was worth a shot."

"Speaking of shots." Jason lifted a bottle. "You may need one more before your meeting tonight with him."

"Absolutely." Joe pushed his glass forward.

^^^

Three hours wasn't really all that long to be walking around the living section. Ellen did enjoy the peaceful feeling without sadness. The fresh air revitalized her even though it was cold, and she knew it wouldn't be long before she made it home.

Turning the bend from the third row of houses in the living section, Ellen stopped. Henry turned the other bend as well.

"Hey, El." He lifted his hand then returned it to his pocket. "Still mad?"

Ellen let out a breath. "Nope. The uh, walk and air removes it from you."

"Sure does."

"Walking too?" Ellen asked with seemingly fake pleasantries.

"Oh, yes." Henry sighed out. "Love to. Did Dean tell you about Nebraska?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded. "I hate leaving the walls. But it has to be done. When do we go?"

"Tomorrow or the next day. We'll have fun. We'll drive Dean nuts." Henry grinned. "It will feel good to do that after crying about him for so long."

"Yeah." Ellen released a peaceful smile then a breath. "Well, I have to go."

"Me too."

Ellen turned, took a step, then spun back around. "Henry." She said

with worry. "I can't go home, because I don't know where my house is."

Henry exhaled his relief. "You either? I've been wandering around for hours."

"Oh, me too." Ellen grabbed her chest. "I thought I found Frank's house. I went in, and it was Hector's."

"I remember where Frank lives." Henry smiled.

"Oh, Henry. I remember where you live. Second row, second house."

"Thanks El. You and Frank live last row, third house."

"Thanks, Henry." Ellen grinned then kissed him on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow." She darted back a couple steps, then turned and walked fast in the correct direction.

Henry stood there a second watching Ellen leave. He was grateful he was given direction. The absent mindedness was driving him insane. He'd say he wasn't as bad the last trip but he couldn't remember. Vowing right there and then never to step through the Quantum Regressionator again, Henry did what he had been trying to do for two hours, he headed home.

^^^

"So you're all right with this?" Joe asked Frank.

"Without a doubt." Frank sat next to his father on the sofa. "I'll put Cole or Dan in charge. They'll have to be my eyes. I'll work with what they get."

"Good." Joe nodded. "This is too big. I need Dean and Ellen on this case of vials."

"And keep them on the virus part. I'll work on the other part. Tactical. Just in case it's not in the case and they hit us with it."

Joe exhaled. "And there's a lot of ways to do that."

"Air drop. Sabotage. Infected survivors." Frank listed. "I'll use the time while the surveillance crew is out and Dean and Ellen are with that case. Start working on ways to divert any invasion with the virus."

"Hopefully, it will be in the case."

"Hopefully." Frank said. "But should we still rule out the possibility that we're hit with it?" He raised his eyebrow. "After all. The case belonged to the society. If we have the virus, chances are, so do they."

Joe whistled. "Valid point."

The door opened bringing in a loud sigh along with Ellen. "Sorry I'm late." She shut the door and took off her coat. "I was taking a walk. Got caught up in thoughts." she walked over to the sofa, kissed Frank on the cheek and sat down. "Am I interrupting?"

"Yes." Joe answered.

"El?" Frank looked curiously at her. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here."

Frank shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

“I don’t? Oh . . .no, I don’t.” She smacked herself on the forehead with an awkward laugh and sat there.

Joe tossed the pencil he held. “If you don’t live here, why are you still here.”

“Visiting?” Ellen asked. “Frank and I get together every night of the . . .” She saw Frank shake his head. “We don’t? Since when?”

“Since we seriously started Rev. Bob’s twelve step plan.”

“Oh, that’s dumb.” Ellen flung out her hand. “We aren’t doing that.”

Frank nodded.

“We are? Oh, yeah. We are. O.K., Can I visit? I’m here any . . .” She watched both men shake their heads. “You guys are busy. I see the maps.” She stood, backed up, grabbed her coat and moved to the door. “I’ll uh, just head on home. Night.” She opened the door and stepped out. “Wherever that is.”

Joe saw his son still staring at the closed door. “Not much longer. Jason assured me.”

Frank shook his head with a loud breath. “In the meantime, I’m going nuts.”

“You and me both. Henry was just as bad.”

“I know. He was supposed to redo the hinges on my office door. He put them on backwards. I hit myself when I left this evening.” Frank reached down and grabbed his coffee. “At least I don’t feel guilty now, I thought I would.”

“Frank? What are you talking about?” Joe asked.

“My plan. A little insightful payback.” Frank winked. “Just let me know when it’s ten thirty. I don’t want to miss it.”

Joe looked down at his watch. His curiosity was piqued. It had to be good. And if Frank was using the word ‘insightful’ then Frank had a momentary lapse of literary intelligence, or he incorporated the help of someone that knew how to label the payback plan.

^^^

Usually around ten o’clock at night, Dean was ready for his bedtime ritual. Kids tucked away, Dean would grab his work or a good book, and relax in bed until he crashed. But instead of doing that, Dean worked on his fourth cup of coffee while pacing his livingroom trying to make the caffeine kick in. He was tired, but he also had to wait up. The caffeine must have worked on his cardiovascular system more than he realized, he jumped a foot in the air when his front door opened.

“Hey.” Ellen walked in. “Tell me, Dean. Please tell me I live here.”

“Why would you think . . .” Dean smiled. “Why would you think you didn’t. Of course you live here.”

With a loud ‘whew’, Ellen closed the door. “O.K. I’ll admit, not remembering where Frank’s house was had to do with the time machine. But . . . thinking I lived there had to do with the ripple. When you died I moved back with him.”

Dean’s mouth opened. “My grave couldn’t have even been cold yet.”

“Dean, please.” Ellen took off her coat and let it drop. “I couldn’t even walk in this . . .” She looked around and grinned. “Oh, I really feel it. I’m home. I’m really home. The comfortableness is just swimming around me.” She walked over and plopped on the sofa. “Dean, why are you drinking coffee?”

“Um waiting uh, up for you to get back from your class at containment.”

“I had a class at containment?”

“Didn’t you go?” Dean asked. “Where were you. Were you home?”

“Why, weren’t you?”

“Huh?” Dean asked confused.

“Dean. If I live here and you asked if I was here, then you weren’t.”

“I wasn’t.” Dean fibbed.

“Neither was I. I was walking.” Ellen looked up to the knock on the door. “Are we expecting company?”

Dean quickly looked at his watch. “Not yet, I mean. Stay here.” He got up and hurried to the door. When he opened it, Greg from security stood there. “Greg?”

“Dean.” He sounded frazzled. “I can’t find her. She never showed for the . . . Ellen?” He peeked in the livingroom. “Has she been here?”

“No. Walking.” Dean whispered.

“Did she go . . .”

“No.” Dean spoke through clenched jaws. “Thanks.” He picked his voice up. “We’re good.” He closed the door and headed back to the livingroom. “Boy, El. You had everyone concerned.”

“Myself as well.” She patted the cushion on the couch. “At least I’m home.” She waited for Dean to sit next to her. “So . . . we still live together?”

Dean’s sneaky grin precluded his answer. “Oh, yeah.”

“Wow.” Ellen shook her head. “That’s odd. Especially since Frank and I are working on the twelve step thing.”

“He told you that?” Dean asked. “Oh, he’s lying. You two are not.”

“Really?” Ellen said shocked. “Be honest Dean, remember things are different.”

“Honest. He’s lying. You two are over with. Completely.” He nodded at Ellen’s shocked gasp. “In fact, I’m a little hurt.” He lowered his head.

“You and I we uh . . . we reconciled. Dedicated our love out in the undeveloped section.”

“We did?” Ellen asked. “That’s so unlike us.”

“Yep.” Dean stood up. “We are changed people. Too bad you missed it.” He picked up his cup. “Coffee?”

A little dazed, Ellen nodded. She was grateful to be home and the shocking day of changes and surprises was nearly over.

^^^

After getting the home directions from Ellen, Henry should have gone right there. But he didn’t. Since he knew for certain where he was suppose to live, he went to the social hall for a quick drink and game of darts. Anything that would take his frazzled mind off of the day he had. He had to wonder if it was the alcohol or the time machine memory loss, but Henry couldn’t recall ever having that decorative flower arrangement on his coffee table before. Shrugging it off as a bad after effect of Jason’s stupid machine, Henry went to the kitchen for some food before settling into his journal. His mind raced and he feared he’d fill pages of it. He was just glad they only rippled two weeks. Any longer than that and Henry would be suicidal over the confusion.

Opening his refrigerator Henry wondered if he was on a diet. He had so much food. Wasn’t he eating in the new time frame? Really not feeling hungry yet, he closed the door and saw the note. He smiled at his organized life when he read the reminder about the load of laundry in the washer. Hating that sour smell, Henry hurried to the basement to toss the load in the dryer.

Reaching in and pulling out three articles, Henry paused when his hand touched upon the silkiness of it. The whistling he did stopped and from the washer he lifted a blue pair of underwear. They weren’t his and they definitely weren’t male.

Henry panicked. He looked through the load and saw more female articles of clothing. There were three reasons for them. One, he was in the wrong house. Two he lived with someone, or three he forgot he was a cross dresser. Seeing how Henry knew his house and couldn’t ever recall liking the feel of women’s undergarments, he bolted up the steps calling out as he did. “Hello? Does someone live here? Hello!”

Hitting the livingroom he heard the creak of the floorboards above his head. He paused by the steps wondering who he suddenly got involved with. A little frightened, but excited because it could actually end up being a time ripple gift, Henry hurried up stairs. His stride didn’t stop until he raced into the bedroom and stopped cold with a shriek.

On top of his bed, in a very sexy night gown was eighty-eight year old

Josephine.

After a hiccup from her night of boozing, Josephine winked. "I've been waiting for you."

With another scream, Henry raced from the room.

^^^

The laughter that bellowed from Frank, Dean and Joe was not only loud but painfully annoying to Henry.

"Funny, really funny. That wasn't very nice you know." Henry kept shaking his head.

Frank wiped a laughter tear from his eye. "We're sorry. We couldn't resist. When Jason said you two would experience memory loss. We figured . . ." He held out his hand to Dean.

Dean finished. "We figured it was payback for all the annoying things you guys did to us. But, El, you played into our hands. Greg was supposed to keep you from going home."

"Yeah, El." Henry opened up his journal to a speechless Ellen. "See. Good thing I doubted my sexual involvement with Josephine and checked my journal right away. I live with someone, but that someone is you. After I got shot, you moved in to help. My journal said Rev. Bob suggested you stay because it's a neutral territory. It's away from Dean while you work it out with . . ." Like a child, Henry gave a grin to Dean. "Frank. Ha."

Ellen just raised her eyes to Dean. "You lied to me." She gasped in offence. "And I mourned you."

"They aren't nice. And they think they're funny." Henry shut his journal and grabbed Ellen's hand. "Little do they know it works out perfectly for us. Let's go home, El." Snippy and tossing his head back with a fling of his long hair, Henry walked to the door with Ellen. Moments after he stormed out with her, he opened the door and stuck his head back in. "And just so you three know. In mine and Ellen's time frame. We're . . . we're lovers. So there." he pulled the door shut.

Ellen silently clapped with a smile. "Good one. You think they'll buy it."

"Oh, yeah." Henry nodded and walked with her. "And they deserve it. Frank and Dean right now are probably burning with jealousy."

There was silence in Dean's livingroom after Henry's exit speech. After a quick glance at the door, then a shuddering look to each other, Frank and Dean broke into laughter again.

HENRY'S JOURNAL

*November 18*

*I am so grateful that I left behind the original journals of mine. My thoughts and rambling tell me more than any history print up could. A lot has changed in a mere sixteen days to the negative. Frank is back to being an asshole. The cryo-lab wasn't destroyed. We have no vial information. A plague is coming. But, the bright side, even though he thinks he's funny, is that we have Dean back. Dean's alive again. However, with the light, comes the dark. Just like Dean had never died, neither did George. And that leaves me to wonder, what he has been up to since his escape from Beginnings over two weeks ago. And knowing the power of George . . . it can't be good.*

PREPARATIONS AND STEPS

CHAPTER ELEVEN

November 20

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

The heavy rumbling of the four military trucks packed with people, followed by the squealing of breaks was loud in the pre-dawn morning. George Hadly watched as a brigade of armed Society soldiers encircled the truck that stopped center of the small town set up.

“President Hadly.” Steward Lange jogged his approached. “Morning, sir. Didn’t expect to see you waiting.”

“Still on the vampire schedule I got on making my way here.” George stated. “I haven’t been to sleep yet. So . . .” George motioned his head to the trucks. “Any stats?”

“Yes, sir.” Steward looked down to the clipboard. “Eastern Ohio, Northern Tennessee sweep. Four hundred eighty-two.”

“How many willing?” George asked.

Steward gave a flick raise of his eyebrow. “Impressively high this time, sir. Three-ninety.”

“Well, the enhancement team will be glad to hear that. They already have more lobotomized and waiting, than chips to implant. How about women? I know their scarce in this world. I see a few.”

“Twenty-one. Three are over sixty years old.”

George gave a twitch of his head in disappointment. “Have to do. Move them up and out ASAP. We have to keep them separate until our new team is ready or we get back what is ours from Beginnings. Speaking of Beginnings . . .”

“Nothing yet.” Steward interrupted. “I’ll let you know. And, I have to head back. I think we have a dozen or so in this new batch we can ship out to help with agriculture. I just want to screen them.”

“Good. Good.” George gave a swat to Steward’s arm. “Get back to me.” After watching Steward dart away toward the trucks, George turned around. He smiled as the clean up crews had already begun their day. It wouldn’t be long, George thought, until Quantico looked good again. And even though it wasn’t where he wanted to run his operation, his operation was still running . . . and strong.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beginnings, Montana

A tall thin Rambo with a tool box was how Henry looked. Frank gave him the visual once over before the open chopper door. "And you watch her, Henry."

"You got it, Frank. She'll never leave my side."

"Perfect." Frank shook his hand then peeked in the chopper to Johnny who sat in the pilot's seat. "John!" Frank gave a thumbs up. "Check in with me as soon as you get back."

Johnny smiled and returned the thumbs up.

Frank let out a breath, then looked over to Ellen who stood not far away. "O.K., Henry, I'm gonna say goodbye to El. Have a safe trip."

"We're not leaving yet, Frank, we're still shy one person."

With an arrogant roll of his eyes, Frank walked over to Ellen. "Hey."

"Hey." She smiled. "Nebraska awaits, huh?"

"You be careful." By her jacket Frank pulled her closer. "And you have the Rev. Bob book?"

"In my bag."

"Good. Cause we're close." Frank held his fingers an inch apart. "Close to moving to the next step."

Ellen chuckled. "You are so serious about this."

"Hey, it works. Look how many times Rev. Bob was married."

"True." Ellen tip toed up close to Frank. "I know we aren't really allowed any open mouth kissing . . ."

"Not until step six."

"Can we make an exception?"

Frank closed one eye. "El, this is a religious thing, I could burn in hell." After a smile, he lowered his head. Lips just about touching, Frank felt the whap against his leg and his body jolted. He looked up. "Dean."

"Sorry." Dean snickered as he lifted the large duffle bag. "It got away from me."

"Yeah, right." Frank watched Dean move to the chopper door. "Hey, Dean? Do you need help getting in? I can lift you up."

After shoving his duffle in the helicopter, cordially, and with a smile, Dean flipped Frank off.

Frank's eyes lifted to the sound of starting engines. "It's time. You'd better go."

"See you day after tomorrow." Ellen leaned up and kissed him. "Wish me luck." She stepped back.

“Good luck.” Frank called out over the noise as Ellen ran to the chopper. “And bring back that virus!” He charged. Then after spewing out the words, and watching Ellen get in, he tilted his head and scratched it. “Wait.” He spoke to himself. “Was that the right thing to say?”

^^^

“Here, El.” Henry reached into his bag and handed her a rice cake. “It’s plain. It should settle your stomach if you start to get ill.”

“Thank you, Henry.” Ellen smiled. “That’s sweet that you know I get airsick.”

Dean spoke up from his seat on the floor with them on the helicopter. “Put the rice cake away. I mixed you something.” He handed her a bottle. “I don’t want a repeat of the last time I flew with you. I remember when we left Ashtonville.”

“I used the airsickness bag.” Ellen took the medication.

“Yeah El, I know. But I also remember how bad Frank laughed on the flight. And for some reason I don’t want a repeat of that with Henry.”

“I won’t laugh at her, Dean.” Henry said serious. “I’ll just throw up right along with her.” He saw Ellen take the medication and watch as Dean leaned back and closed his eyes. “Are you going to sleep, Dean?”

Dean opened one eye. “I’m going to try. Why?”

“I wouldn’t do that. Not the way Johnny flies. Your body will just relax and he’ll make one of those Johnny turns and you’ll just roll all over the place.” He started to laugh and so did Ellen.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Henry.” Dean closed his eyes again.

“O.K.” Henry pulled out his journal and flipped it open. “Now El, that we’re completely out of the ‘Dean is dead’ fog. I made some notes on what was different. For example. I tried to speak to Jenny about you and she just went off.”

“What got into those two since Dean isn’t dead?” Ellen stated. “And here I was so forgiving of any and all things. But you know, the first time I saw John, he told me, get this, to blow it out my ass.”

Henry gasped. “How rude.”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded. “And I’m glad I’m accusing him, or the other me was.”

“Will you continue to do what the other you did?” Henry asked.

“Absolutely.” Ellen took time to yawn. “In fact we can discuss that in detail after we talk about the differences. I mean we have a long flight to talk. And we can talk the entire way.” Ellen looked up when she heard Dean snicker. “Was that funny?”

Dean opened his eyes, looked at his watch then nodded. “As a matter

of fact. Yes.”

“He’s odd.” Ellen pointed to Dean. “He thinks me talking is funny.”

“Maybe he thinks you’re a funny person.” Henry suggested. “Do you Dean? Do you think Ellen is funny?”

Dean grunted.

“Anyway getting back to the . . .” Henry stopped talking when he saw Ellen yawn widely. “What’s the matter El? You tired?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her eyes. “All of the sudden it just hit me like . . .” She tried to snap, but her fingers were too tired. “Henry, it really just hit . . .” Slowly she turned her head to Dean. He leaned against the wall of the helicopter laughing. “Dean? Why are you laughing?”

Dean smiled. “Night, El.”

“Dean why do you look like you know something?” She asked.

“I do.” He opened his eyes. “Ellen, did you honestly think I wanted to deal with this old lady type chattering you two do the whole flight down?”

“Dean!” Ellen exclaimed and yawned. She grabbed her head. “Whoa, I’m getting woozy. What did you put in that medication?”

“Night, El.” Dean closed his eyes again.

“You drugged me? Henry he drugged me.”

“Dean.” Henry scolded. “That wasn’t . . .”

“Very nice. I know. Night.” Dean adjusted himself more comfortable.

Henry watched Ellen’s eyes start to get heavy. Her head swayed. “El? Maybe you should lay . . .” Before he finished his sentence Ellen had plopped sideways on a duffle bag. “El?”

Dean peeked through one eye as Ellen groggily made herself comfortable. She snuggled to the duffle bag, like their daughter, Alexandra, to her pillow. And Dean knew Ellen was out the moment her head went down. Relaxing, he closed his eyes and breathed easier. There was silence. Though it may not have been all that ethical to do that to Ellen, to Dean it was sort of funny, and at least it was finally quiet.

^^^^

There was a twinkle in Joe’s eye when he peered up to Andrea. A burning desire took over him to take her in his arms and really go at it right there and then in her office. A desire brought on not by his need for affection, but by her brilliant thinking. But he had to put aside his physical wants. He didn’t think John Matoose—who was present—would appreciate the show.

“Andrea.” Joe stood up from behind her desk. “This is excellent thinking.” He looked at the sheet. “And the details.”

“You asked.” Andrea stated. “And when you said isolated yet practical,

the first thing I thought was erect another structure like Jason's lab. But then it hit me, why not roll one in."

John interjected. "And when Andrea mentioned if I had seen one of those Center's for Disease control mobile labs. I laughed. Hell, I see them all the time. Any major city."

"What about power and water?" Joe asked.

"Easy." John responded. "That whole area where Jason is set up is built for growth. Just like Miguel hooked up power and water there, we'll place the mobile lab in a position where we can link to the lines underground."

Joe looked to Andrea. "Are these things big enough to accommodate living space if needed?"

"No." Andrea shook her head. "But, speaking to John. There's no reason, since there's room out there, that we can't attach one of those small trailers to it."

Joe's views went back to John. "Will there be any problem bringing a CDC lab in, let's say ASAP."

"Frank probably won't authorize any of his men to go, especially with the surveillance group out." John answered. "But we can go as soon as they're back. The only problem I see is finding one viable. Those mobile labs are near the major cities. And we pretty much know what the savages have done to the major cities."

"Unfortunately." Joe said. "All right. Good work. Let's get working on this."

John nodded, stepped to the door and stopped. "Joe, can I ask what we need the isolation lab for. Does it have anything to do with Dean and Ellen's mystery trip to Nebraska."

"As a matter of fact it does." Joe answered. "But it's under wraps from community knowledge what they're doing. But, I'll let you know John. It's this new experimental weapon they're creating."

"For the society?" Joe questioned.

"Yeah. But uh, keep it quiet." Joe told him.

"Got it." With another nod, John left.

After John's exit, Andrea let out a breath. "I thought for sure you were telling him."

Joe chuckled. "No. The ones that are supposed to know, know. That's it. I want the virus information kept as secret as possible until we don't have a choice but to let the knowledge out. The last thing we need is a fourteen month panic spree." he walked slowly around the desk, pausing to kiss Andrea softly before leaving.

Andrea smiled and touched her lips. "My, goodness Joe Slagel. Affection? If I didn't know better I'd swear that little spontaneous peck was

you pining for some romance.”

Joe smiled and raised his eyebrows.

Andrea giggled like a school girl. “Feel like taking a break to relief some of that stress?”

“If that’s an offer, can I have a rain check?” Joe asked.

“Not in the mood?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely, but I have a meeting with Frank in a couple hours and I’d really rather wait until I get that stressful event over with.” With a wink, an ornery grin and a quick smack to Andrea’s backside, Joe left the office.

^^^

Ellen was like a limp sack of potatoes lumped over Henry’s shoulder as he carried her in the small building no bigger than eight by ten. His one arm held tight to her legs, the other hand braced her backside. “Where should I put her, Dean?”

Using the light from the open door, and a flashlight, Dean looked around. “Just put her on the floor.”

“She is really out.” Henry commented.

“It was a measure that had to be taken.” Dean said, and saw Johnny walking in with some gear. “Johnny, before you head out, lay a bag down for Ellen. I’m sure she’s getting heavy for Henry.”

“Sure, Dean. Is she heavy Henry?” Johnny asked.

“No. But I’m sure she’s gonna have a headache if the blood keeps rushing to her head like this.” Henry balanced Ellen as he waited on Johnny to prepare a spot.

Johnny laughed at that and untied a sleeping bag. “Why did you have to knock her out for so long, Dean?”

“Because I know Ellen. Besides the flight down with Henry, she’d complain the entire time Henry was getting the power up and running and you were checking out the place.” Dean set down the small metal case that contained the forty-four unidentified vials. A small case that was never far from his body.

Henry laid Ellen down. “But that still wasn’t very nice. You put my friend to sleep. I had no one to talk to.”

Dean gave a fake whine. “Too bad. Henry, this is the elevator control.” He shined the flashlight on it. “Let’s go back outside and I’ll show you where you can get the secondary power source going.”

Henry picked up his tool bag. “Lead the way.”

Johnny followed them out, checking his rifle. “I’m gonna go canvass the area to make sure it’s secure. I didn’t see any movement from above.”

Then again this place is like a jungle now. Thank God my dad did the coordinates or we would have been flying lost for a while, this place is hid.”

Henry adjusted his rifle over his arm as he walked. “Isn’t that funny that Frank was stationed here the first month Dean arrived. They didn’t see each other. Dean you could have known Frank years ago.”

“See. I always knew there was a reason my life felt so empty.” Dean said sarcastically as he led Henry to the power hatch. “Here you go Henry.”

Johnny peered in. “Need help before I take off.”

“No, but thanks.” Henry became engrossed in the hatch. “Oh and Johnny. Check out that clearing we saw one more time.”

“Will do. I’ll hover for a while. But I think it’s fine. If so, I’ll lift off. But keep in mind . . .” Johnny explained. “. . . even with an all clear now, that doesn’t mean you’re safe. The chopper can be a calling for people to find you. So secure up.” He instructed as he started to walk. He stopped with a snap of his finger. “Almost forgot. Pap says if you find anyone normal, bring them back. If they’re not . . . shoot them.” Johnny lifted his hand in a wave as he walked off.

Dean took a long blink. “Shot them? Do we in Beginnings value life or what?”

“Of course we do, Dean.” Henry replied as he checked out his power source mission. “Or why else are we hear?”

^^^

Slow, drawn out and articulate were how Josh spoke his words. “Diane . . . teacher.”

With a proud swat to Josh’s back, Frank grinned and nodded to Diane. “See? He’s doing good.”

A pleased smile crossed the face of the fifty-some year old woman. Small and petite, looking like the teacher she was in the old world. “Excellent Josh.” She looked to Frank. “At least he isn’t calling me ‘her’.”

“Yep.” Frank nodded. “We worked for a good half hour during rounds.”

“You keep doing that.” Diane said. “Together, we’ll get him back to normal speech patters.”

“Good . . . O.K. Josh.” Frank nudged the fifteen year old boy. “You go with her. I mean . . . Diane. She’s gonna work on your talking some more.”

Josh nodded and stepped to Diane.

“I’ll walk him home.” Diane said as she took the arm of the boy as if they were taking a leisurely stroll.

Frank waited until they moved on some and then he headed to one of his remaining task for the day. Containment. His father was pulling a later day

shift there, and by default it ended up being the meeting place of choice.

It was like the buzzing and the opening of the door was an alarm to that new survivor they picked up nearly three weeks earlier. As Frank took his first step into the hall, he not only saw Joe, but the new guy as well. Frank barely caught glimpse as the shaved head, very skinny man scurried away. “Dad?” Frank pointed back with his thumb. “Was it my imagination or was the new guy Mike on his hands and knees?”

“Not your imagination, he does that, you know, sniffs around. Come in.” Joe motioned to him. “And shut the door, or he’ll come in here again. Pesters me.” Joe looked over some paper work.

“He sniffs around?” Frank asked.

“Yeah. He thinks he’s a dog.”

“Dad, that’s not normal.”

“No shit, Frank.”

Frank lowered himself into the chair. “Why is he still here if he thinks he’s a dog?”

“Ellen says he’s harmless. He hasn’t bitten anyone yet.” Joe shifted his papers. “According to Ellen, it’s like having a pet.”

“Still.” Frank shook his head. “Don’t you think it’s time to get rid of him? I mean, the whole premise is you have to pull your weight around here. How can a man who thinks he’s a dog pull his weight?”

“Ellen says he’s useful and he doesn’t eat much.” Joe rubbed his aching head. “And enough of the questions.”

“Dad . . . I’m security. Don’t you think I have the right to know why a man who thinks he’s a dog is still in the community?”

“All right.” Joe shook his head in disgust. “Ellen says that he barks when ever trouble starts with the survivors. Like a watch dog. And she thinks she can bring him around, we’re giving her a few more weeks. And she has made progress training him, at least now he’s no longer lifting his leg to take a leak everywhere.”

Frank scoffed. “Have we established what kind of dog he thinks he is?”

Joe raised his eyes up to Frank.

“I mean, what if he thinks he’s a Pitbull? They’re real nice at first but then they can snap and before . . .”

“Frank! Enough about Mike thinking he’s a dog. We have other things to discuss.”

“You’re right. But I can’t. Josh is having speech lessons and Hap says I’d better pick up the kids, he’s not watching them. So . . .” Frank stood partially and pulled out sheets from his back pocket. He handed them to his father. “My reports and some thoughts. Stop by later and we can talk about them.”

“Sounds good.” Joe wasn’t really in the mood for a Frank style meeting. He supposed reading his thoughts would be less stroke provoking. He took the papers from Frank and shook his head at the crinkled mess. “Frank, could these be anymore wrinkled?”

“Yes.” Frank stepped back. “Talk to you later.”

“Whoa!” Joe called out causing Frank to halt in his reach for the door. “Perimeter seven. Again? What’s going on up there. Did you learn anything?”

“I narrowed it as happening between the three a.m. rounds and when I do my seven. So the animal or whatever is hitting it, is doing it then.”

“Raccoon?” Joe asked. “They’re smart. They may be playing with the beam. Any bodies?”

“None.” Frank shook his head. “I want to put a watch on, just an extra shift, hiding out and watching.”

“Why?” Joe asked. “To catch the racoon?”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “If I didn’t know about that beam being knocked off track three times a week, I’d been fried by now. I want to watch to see if it’s possible that’s someone is doing it.”

“In the community?”

“I’d say more outside. Perhaps we have another band of survivors thinking that they’re real smart. Perimeter seven is off a mile from the back gate. It’s possible they’re moving in the deep woods without being seen. You know, being brave about trying to break in. Remember Moses had that band of men together. So nothing is impossible.”

“You think they’re smart enough to move that beam?”

“Anyone is.” Frank said. “All they have to do is watch for a while, reach in from the outside with a stick and shove it. And when one of us walks by . . . Zap!. I have my men toss something that way before they go near it just in case. But, I still want to canvas the area.”

“Good idea. This started when?” Joe reviewed. “Two weeks ago. It was after the SUT raid. Any chance it could be them?”

“Nah, they’re too stupid. At least the ones with the microchips are. They’re trained for one thing only.”

“How about the savages?”

“Possible. If they’re aware of the beam, they can do it.”

“All right, how about we do a watch of the area first. Then, if nothing turns up, when Cole and the men get back. We pull a search of the area.”

“Sounds good to me.” Frank stepped to the door again. “And let me know what you think about my Society thoughts.”

After hiding the slight roll of his eyes, Joe nodded.

“Then I’ll see . . .” Frank turned his head to the door. “What is that scratching?”

“Oh that’d be Mike. Could you let him in the men’s quarters for me on

your way out?”

“Let him in?” Frank asked in surprise. “Why? The door’s unlocked.”

“He can’t reach the knob and he has to go. Now, hurry before he has an accident..”

“Dad!” Frank snapped in shock. “You’re joking right?”

“No Frank I’m not.”

“This is ridiculous.” Loud, deep and grumpily, Frank grunted as he opened the door. “My wife and father think a scrawny man is a fuckin dog, and people talk about me.” He pulled the door closed shouting as he did. “Hey! Get off of me.”

Joe shook his head at the loud Mike yelp, the prepared himself for a mental endurance test. Reading Frank’s thoughts on paper.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A four hour nap on a cold hard floor was not something Ellen wanted or planned on. She was upset with Dean at first, but ended up being a bit grateful because she slept through all the tedious waiting for them to get the power supply up. She was also spared the frightful first trip of the elevator. Not that she doubted Henry's mechanical ability, but Ellen knew had she been conscious she would have annoyingly expressed her fear before and during the entire ten story decent.

A sealed tomb the research facility was. Shut off from the world mid-plague. So air tight that the bodies of the diligent working infection fighters looked more dehydrated than decomposed. They spewed forth across the halls and in the labs where they worked. Most likely dropping to their deaths from the cessation of oxygen rather than from the plague they were fighting to beat.

Dean's work zone was the most impressive to Ellen. Upon entrance there was small reception area where Ellen envisioned a cute little secretary once screened Dean's visitors. Then the lab itself. A huge glass wall separated the highly contagious working area from the general working space. Computers and lab equipment was set up neatly everywhere. And even after years of nonattendance, Dean's lab was more dust and clutter free than Ellen's bedroom dresser would ever be.

It was like the anxiety of waiting for launching space mission. Watching Dean get ready to run a test of his equipment. Ellen moved to behind a desk, sitting down and taking the break that she knew she would never get once they started on the vials.

"Computer's on." Dean announced. "Just let me check for the programs."

"Then I think I'll eat." Ellen said. "Hungry?" She asked as she opened her knapsack and pulled out a smaller sack. "I brought jam sandwiches. Henry?"

"Sure." Henry held out his hand as Ellen handed him half. "Dean, you want some?"

"No. Thank you. Maybe later." Dean looked up as he sat down at the computer. He took a nervous breath then began.

"O.K." Ellen shrugged and took a bite of her sandwich. She blew on the slightly dusty desk. "Dean? Was this your desk?"

Dean peered up. "No, Molly's."

Ellen snickered. "Molly's? Was she some twenty-year old?"

"No, Molly was in her fifties. She was my lab assistant."

“Was she a good lab assistant?” Ellen asked. “How long did she work with you?”

“Um . . .” Dean thought. “Three years. And yes she was a very good lab assistant.”

“Better than me?” Ellen probed. “Did she know your work better than me?”

Dean hesitated while he worked, then glanced at Ellen with smiling eyes. “No, Ellen. No one knows my work better than you.”

Henry let out a sigh of relief. “Good thing he said that or I’d be mad. Especially after you had to pull it together after he died.”

Ellen returned the smile--jam laced--to Dean. “Thanks, Dean. That means a lot.” She reached to a photograph and held it up. “This Molly person had a nice looking family. Were these her children, Dean?”

“Yes.” Dean answered without looking.

“Nice.” Ellen smiled and put it back. “She had three sons. I had three brothers. Henry? Did you talk to any of your family when the plague hit?”

Henry grabbed a chair and sat down. “My parents and my brother. I was fortunate enough to speak to them right before the phones went down. But I was pretty busy at the med station. Somehow, some doctor.” He looked at Dean. “Recruited me into helping.”

“You were healthy.” Dean tapped away. “Good, the program is here.” He mumbled. “In case either of you care.”

“We do . . . Anyway.” Henry continued on. “That was the last I heard of them. You?”

“I spoke to my mom, I think it was Sunday. She was sick. But my brothers. No. I got so wrapped up in Taylor and Josh. And then people just stumbled onto my property. I never got around to calling. I feel bad now.” Ellen lifted up from the desk a chain of paper clips, it hung four feet long. She snickered. “Dean must have kept Molly very busy.”

“What about your husband?” Henry turned his head to Dean’s laughing. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought you knew Henry, Ellen hated Pete.” Dean said.

“I know that.” Henry said. “Everyone knows that. But she never mentioned him. Or his family.”

“I never thought to call Pete’s family.” Ellen said as she began to rummage through the desk drawers. “But Pete was one of the first to get sick and die in Ashtonville. Not really Ashtonville, on the way to the med-station where Dean was found.” Ellen grabbed a handful of pencils and stuck them in her knapsack. “Henry, did I tell you Joe shot Pete?”

“Joe shot Pete?” Henry was shocked.

“Joe shot Pete?” Dean’s attention was grabbed. “El, you never told me that.”

"I just found out a little bit ago." Ellen stuck the last of the office supplies she was stealing into her knapsack. She spoke very nonchalantly. "Yeah, Joe shot him. Shot him in the head." She closed the last drawer. "Very boring stuff in here." She moved her chair over to the next desk. "And then Joe just rolled him over into the grass. And left him." She noticed before opening the top drawer of the desk, Henry and Dean just stared in silence at her. "What's the matter?"

Dean shuddered his head quickly. "This doesn't bother you?"

"No. Why would it? I mean, Joe wouldn't just shoot him in the head for no reason. He said Pete was suffering." Ellen shrugged. "Hey Dean, is this your desk?"

"Uh, yeah." Remembering that he had just listened to Ellen, Dean forewent waiting to hear remorse, and returned to his work.

"Henry, come here, this is Dean's desk." She waited until Henry rolled over to her. "Ready?" Ellen opened the top drawer. "Oh, look, Dean. You forgot to mail your bills."

Henry took the envelopes. "It's going to effect your credit, Dean."

"Let's open them, Henry. Dean, can we open them and see what your bills were?" Taking Dean's ignoring of her as a 'yes', Ellen handed Henry an envelope. "You first."

"Thanks." Henry ripped it open. "Check out his phone bill, Ellen. Only twenty-two dollars."

"Oh, that's disgusting. I never had a phone bill under a hundred." Ellen lifted the next envelope. "You know with all my calling of the Slagel clan." She opened the bill. "It's a car payment? Dean, I didn't know you had a car."

"How did you think I got around Ellen?" Dean asked.

"Didn't think about it. Where's your car now, Dean?"

"Ellen." Dean huffed. "It's . . . it's at the airport. Now can I just finish . . ."

"Mine's still in my driveway. How about yours Henry?"

"At the hospital parking lot. Wow, the things we just didn't think about. Parked cars." Henry smiled. "All right, next one." He took pleasure in the envelope. "Now see, now this surprises me about Dean. Look El, a cable bill. Basic cable. Dean, Dean, Dean."

"What?" Dean gazed up from the second computer to Henry shaking his head. "What is wrong now?"

"Basic cable." Henry said disappointed. "What a waste of money."

"I never watched television. Except occasionally for the news." Dean said.

"Then why have cable?" Henry tossed the bill in the trash. "Last one El. You do the honors."

“His VISA bill.” Excitedly she held it up then tore into it and then she shrieked. “Oh, this is horrible. Look at this balance. Seventy-three dollars and twenty-two cents. Dean why was your balance that low? And look Henry a check for the entire amount.”

Rolling his eyes again—a habit he was getting used to around them—Dean looked from his work. “I never used it except when I visited my Dad once a month.”

“Oh this is obscene Henry, this is really obscene. One credit card, no balance.” Ellen was just shocked by that. “Me, personally, I was such the shopping queen. I don’t think I would even know what a zero balance was. One time my husband got me this credit card, a platinum one. The credit limit was forty-five thousand dollars.”

Henry whistled. “Forty-five thousand? Your husband must have been rich. Why did you work?”

“I liked to work. And yeah, Pete made the bucks. That’s probably why I never got together with Frank. The shopper in me knew he couldn’t afford my habits. Dean, you probably could have afforded my habits.”

“Unfortunately.” Dean worked on.

“Anyhow . . .” Ellen tossed the bill aside. “Guess what my balance was when the world died? Twenty-eight thousand dollars. Talk about one hell of a way to get out of paying your debts.” She snapped to attention at Dean who had clicked so loudly on a key.

“How in the world did you charge that much?” Dean asked.

“Don’t know.” Ellen shrugged. “It was an addiction. Most of it was gifts. A large chunk was the motorcycle I bought Robbie.”

“What?” Dean chuckled in disbelief as he stood up. “Why would you buy Robbie Slagel a bike?”

“Yeah. Why?” Henry asked in a complaining manner. “Robbie was a dog. Nasty. I hated him.”

“Now, see.” Ellen kicked back. “You two didn’t know the Robbie I did. He was funny. He just always had this way of making you feel good. I would have done anything for him. Because Robbie would have done anything for anyone.” In a remembrance awe, she picked at her sandwich. Then looked up to their scoffing. “I’m serious. The Robbie that walked through our gates a year ago, was a product of the world gone bad.”

Dean shook his head. “You believe what you want. I know people. Robbie was just a bad seed. He played you and you bought it. No, wait, you bought him what ever he wanted.”

Ellen ignored him.

“Now.” Dean continued. “I hate to break up this little old world celebration of memories, but it’s time to start doing what we came here for. Let’s find that virus.”

Henry stood from his seat and started to follow Dean. "Speaking of memories, do you remember how to use all this stuff?"

Dean only paused in his head to do a reaction he had done repeatedly all day--roll his eyes and shake his head.

^^^

For as many times as Joe shuddered and wanted to pretend Frank wasn't really his son, times like the one he was having overshadowed those moments. Frank's thoughts. Written down in that straight, no slant handwriting of Frank's. Always squared off and neat. Joe dreaded the thought of reading what Frank wrote. But after he did, Joe was genuinely impressed.

Fact was fact. There were some things that Frank was just not meant to be good at. Basic math. Reading books without skipping the parts that had no dialogue or pictures. Or fitting into small places. That was some of them. But when it came to war and the military strategy, Frank turned into some sort of Einstein. Blunt, precise and every angle viewed. And Frank was viewing into the Society at full force. With the information pulled from the cryo-lab computers, Frank deducted how many Society soldiers remained and how many more may have been made. Frank's number was frighteningly high and depicted a budding army. An army, that Beginnings was powerless against as far as manpower went. He even went as far as to list areas of the country that George and the society could be using as a base set up. All Frank wanted to do was somehow try to come up with a way to be prepared.

And even though he drove Joe all but crazy with the numerous times he misspelled the name 'Dean'. Frank made up for it with his letter's final observation and question.

*--If the society are the ones that cause the virus of our future, then it's even more clear. They don't want destruction. They just want Beginnings. But why? Why do they want us? Food, land, industry? No. There's a whole country out there to be planted and run again. Why want something that is no more than a speck of dust on a map? Because there is something here so valuable they can not replace. And that something is our answer. If we can determine what it is and find it, then we, as small as we are, will have the means to defeat the Society. Because we will have the upper hand.--*

To Joe it was a very good point taken. And Frank's thoughts on paper started the wheels in Joe's mind turning, just a little bit stronger.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The wax from the candle rolled down the side and over Ellen's finger tips. She played with it as she stared into the flickering flame. Remnants of a jar brought dinner were spread out on the table set up in the reception area of Dean's old lab.

"Many." Ellen said softly, leaning into the table where the three of them sat. "Pete was really good about being romantic. I had to give it to him on that. But not as romantic as Dean." Ellen shifted her eyes to him. "Even if it was only sitting together on a couch, doing something, it was special."

Dean smiled a thank you to her.

"Not Frank?" Henry asked.

Ellen snickered. "Frank? I guess he could be. He never wants to be. And you have to remember, Frank and I never really were an honest couple until we got married here. So its hard to compare him. What about you Henry? Romantic?"

"I wanted to be." Henry ran his fork across his empty plate, playing with the remaining food particles. "I thought I was with my fiancé."

Dean immediately sat up. "I didn't know you were engaged?"

"Oh, yeah. For three years." Henry said.

So sad, Ellen peered at him. "She died in the plague, huh?"

Henry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. She probably did." Henry's speech slowed down. "Her . . . her husband, probably kids."

Ellen sat straight up. "She married someone else?"

"Oh, yeah. I think it was . . ." Henry looked up to the ceiling in thought. "Three weeks after we broke up." He noticed the surprised looks he got. "I hate talking about it. She left me at the altar. Literally."

Dean cringed. "She never showed for the wedding?"

"Oh, no Dean. She showed. Weren't you listening," Henry asked. "She left me at the altar. Left. Middle of the vows, Amy gets this awkward look like this . . ." Henry crinkled his face. "I thought it was gas. And then she says, 'you know what, I changed my mind'. Off she went."

Dean's gasp met Ellen. "Oh, my God." He was so shocked. "Now I don't feel so bad for not having anyone in the old world. Of course . . ." Dean chuckled. "No one really wanted me. I was a little high and mighty. Arrogant."

"No." Henry said sounding so convincing.

"Yeah." Dean nodded. "I didn't mean to but I tended to put people . . ." He closed his eyes. "I still am, huh?"

Henry shook his head. "Nah. You're a pretty nice guy when you want to be."

"Correction." Ellen held up a finger. "Dean's a nice guy to people he wants to be. But if he doesn't like you." Ellen whistled. "Dean's a dick." She laughed. "I remember how your dad used to just humble you so much."

Henry laughed too. "William was a funny guy. He had such a big heart. Do you . . . do you take after your mother, Dean?"

Dean rolled his eyes. Just when he was about to say something, he heard the buzzer sound from the lab. "First batch is done."

"Yeah." Ellen stood up when Dean did. "I guess it's time to get back to work. Henry?"

"You know what." Henry stretched. "I'm gonna catch some sleep instead of annoying Dean. Do you mind? I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours."

Dean closed his eyes in gratefulness. "You rest Henry." He headed to the lab.

"See you later." Ellen said following Dean. She looked back to Henry who gathered the plates into a pile, then Henry plopped on the couch.

"We'll just read this batch of results." Dean said as he walked to his computer.

"Hopefully we'll . . ." Ellen slowed down when she passed Dean's desk. They weren't there before. "Dean?" She lifted up the set of keys. "Did you pull these out?"

Almost embarrassed, Dean lowered his head. "Um, yeah. My house keys. I found them in my desk. I just, I just pulled them out."

"Any particular reason?" Ellen asked.

"No. Reminiscing." Dean sat before the computer. "Let's work."

"Work." Ellen set down the keys and joined him.

^^^

Frank's whistle was short and sharp. Not loud, but loud enough to be the call-in as he stood outside of the east entrance tunnel. He listened for the tromping boots of his three men as they made it back.

John Matoose was the first to approach. "Nothing. Clear."

"Me either." Steve, another of Frank's security guys, said.

Frank looked about the blackened and wooded area. "I didn't see anything either. Not even footprints."

"Frank." Greg spoke up. "I'm not nuts. When I came down on my rounds I heard movement."

"I'm sure you did." Frank nodded. "SUT, savage, even an animal. I'm not gonna take any chances. John, let's set a man back a little inside the

entrance in this tunnel tonight. Added security.”

“Leo?” John asked.

“That’ll work.” Frank said. “Even if we have wildlife out there, if it sets off the motions we’ll be running amuck though these tunnels trying to see what broke in.”

“Sounds good.” John agreed.

“Keep me posted if he’s sees anything. I’m heading home. Greg, good job.” After getting a nod from Greg, Frank started to leave. The east entrance was hidden in a brush, Frank likened it to the Batcave. Though nature protected it and motion detectors watched it, it lacked something every other entrance into Beginnings had. Perimeter beams. It couldn’t. If ever for a reason Beginnings was locked down and under siege, the east tunnel was a quick escape. But just like it was an easy out, it was also an easy in. And because of that, if movement was even suspected in that area, Frank took no chances.

^^^

The beams from the two flashlights barely made a illuminating dent in the dense overgrown brush of the housing plan on the base. Dean led the way, using memory and looking up counting the houses he could barely see.

Ellen adjusted her knapsack, tapping Dean on the shoulder. “Are you sure Henry is not going to be mad at us?”

“Positive El. You heard him, he had been up over twenty-four hours. He’ll still be sleeping when we get back. I just . . . I just need to come here. Especially after striking out with that first batch of tests. Also, you know, when I left, I never dreamt I wouldn’t be back.” After letting out a discovery breath, Dean grabbed Ellen’s hand. “Through here.” He slipped through the brush with her. A door lay three feet a head. The concrete porch was what stopped the trees from growing any further. “This is it.”

Ellen peeked at the door. “Oh look, Dean, you have mail. Can I?”

“Be my guest.” He dangled keys, holding his flashlight under his arm and aiming it on the knob.

“Good thing you kept those keys in you desk.” Ellen pulled the three pieces from his mail box. “This looks like a wedding invitation. Bet you missed the blessed event.”

“You think?” Dean smiled, turned the door knob and shoved on the door some. “We’re in.” Coughing at the dust, Dean stepped in first, shining his flashlight around. A twitching feeling hit his stomach, almost eerie when he stepped into his cob web spewed living room. Dust had built up everywhere, a moss had started to form on the far wall, creeping across as if a new green design. Clearing his throat Dean looked back to Ellen who

stepped inside. A part of Dean felt bad, really bad. It was his home and a painful reminder of his world that had gone. "This is it. Sorry about the condition."

"Oh, Dean." Ellen stepped in shining the flashlight around. "I envy you. I really envy you."

"Sarcasm Ellen?" Dean asked.

"No. Sincerity." She peered all around stepping further in. "I wish I could be close enough to go home. I really do."

"Ellen." Dean handed her an empty sack. "Could you hold this? I know I have candles around here."

"Were you the big romantic guy?" Ellen tossed the sack over her shoulder with hers.

"No, the power outage conscious guy." Dean stood center living room trying to think where he had him. "End table." Speaking his candle thought out loud, Dean walked to the sofa bending down at the end table. "Yes. A bunch here."

"Oh, Dean." Ellen spoke softly. "Look."

Dean stood up holding the candles. "What?"

Ellen held on to a photograph. A barely seen picture in a wooden frame. She blew on it, coughed, then wiped her hand across it, shining the flashlight on it. "It's your mom and Dad."

Dean shuffled over to her. "Yeah." He ran his hands through his hair in nervousness.

"Were they dancing when they posed?"

"Yeah they were."

"This is a great picture. I liked William. Your Dad would have been proud of our children Dean."

"Thanks Ellen. He would have. Actually . . ." His thin finger ran across the picture. "This was taken at their fiftieth wedding anniversary."

Ellen tilted her head to Dean with a odd look. "How can that be? William was only sixty-five when he died, wasn't he?"

"True. This was taken about six months before my mom died. She knew she was dying and she always wanted to say she celebrated a fiftieth anniversary with my Dad, so me and my Dad had a party."

"A mock golden anniversary. That was sweet. Dean, this . . ." She held up the picture. "This alone was reason enough to come here." She opened up her knapsack, not his, and placed it in. "Our children deserve to see that picture and hear that story and I'll make sure they do."

"El . . ." He gave a soft smile. "Thanks." Reaching, candles still in his hand he embraced her. "O.K. Now, let's see." he gave her a candle to hold, then he lifted the box of matches. "Will they work or not?" A strike, an ignition of flame and Dean lit the candle. "We have light. Let's hit the

bedroom. That's where my stuff is at." He took the candle back.

Ellen snickered. "Candles, the bedroom." She followed him. "Do you know what you're getting, or are you just gonna peek around and grab?"

"No." Dean walked into the small back bedroom of the single floor house. He set the candle on the dresser. "Just like you have your memorabilia box. I have mine."

Ellen watched him move to the closet. "Dean, this bedroom. It's so . . . boring."

"El?" He smiled as he reached to the top shelf. "It's me." He pulled the box down and started to close the closet.

"True," Ellen sat on the bed. She immediately began rummaging through his nightstand. Books, paper. Her hand paused and she snickered when she saw the condom pouch. She lifted it. "I thought you weren't the Casanova guy?"

Dean snickered as he carried the box over to the bed. "Trust me El, the effectiveness of that condom probably expired long before the world ended. It's been in there a while."

"Oh!" Ellen said excitedly. "Your VISA. Dean, you should leave this just laying around. Can I have it?"

"Sure." Dean began to go through the box. More checking than for reminiscing.

After placing the credit card in her knapsack, Ellen scooted closer to the box to peek. "Harvard." She lifted the yearbook. "Oh, and pictures. Look at all the pictures." Her hand guided through. "The kids will love these."

"I hope."

"This was such a good idea. It really was."

"Yeah." Dean closed the flaps on the box. "For me and . . . for us." He saw her looking oddly at him. "I needed some alone time with you. You've, you've been different with me since that little time trip. Not too mention you've been hiding."

"I'm sorry. I've been trying. Really trying to act the way this time frame dictates. I guess I'm failing at that." Ellen's head lowered. "Am I making you feel uncomfortable?"

"A little. No. Wait. No." Dean shook his head. "I'm O.K. with it. Really. I honestly understand that in your mind set, the time frame you were in, I died. And you got back with Frank. That's where your heart is and . . ."

"Wait." Ellen stood up. "Are we on the same wave length here? Why do I get the feeling that you aren't going to tell me to back off?"

"Back off?" Dean laughed. "El, if you back away anymore, I won't see you."

"But I thought that's the way this time-Ellen was supposed to act. I come through, I find out I'm working it out with Frank."

“And you two have a long way to go. You and I. We’ve been . . .” Dean closed one eye and gave a simple nod. “We’ve been close.”

A gasp came from Ellen and she stepped to him. “Oh, Dean. I have been trying so hard to suppress what I was feeling about the whole trip.” She spoke with emotional enthusiasm. “Henry and I discussed it. We thought if I showed my gratefulness and my feedings it would be too obvious. But I missed you.” The words seeped out. “I missed you so much.” She clenched her fist. “I have done nothing but want to spend every second of the day with you since we changed time. Dean . . .” She softened her voice. “When you died on me, my life ended. I never thought I’d feel that much pain again. You were all I thought about.”

A slight snicker of sarcasm came from Dean. “I bet Frank loved that.”

“You wouldn’t have believed Frank. No, Dean. He was really good with the way I was. Because he mourned you too. Your death changed him completely.”

“Frank mourned me?”

“Oh, yeah. More than you would believe. The whole community lost. There were no more smiles. Our children, Dean. Our little girl. The sadness on her face was heartbreaking.”

A lump crept up into Dean’s throat and he closed his eyes. “God, this feels so real.”

“It was real. To me.” Ellen stepped closer. “I’ll never forget how bad I hurt especially when I realized how much I loved you.”

Dean opened his eyes and looked up. “Was it just the loss or do you still feel that even though I’m back?”

“I still feel that.”

“Then why, El? Why are you working it out with Frank? Huh?” Dean asked passionately. “Can’t you see, some things are meant to be, some aren’t. Even in my time frame you and I . . .” He stopped. “Forget it. I’m harping again. I promised you I wouldn’t bother you about you two working thought this.”

“Dean? What’s been happening between us?”

“I told you. We’ve been close.”

“How close?” Ellen asked. “Have we’ve been together since the clinic?”

Dean hesitated. “Yeah. Once.” He saw the expression drop on Ellen’s face. “Please don’t get upset. It was the day Joe came out of the Salicain. There was a party, you and I had a few drinks. And one thing led to another after the kids went to sleep. And I have to tell you El, It was great. Not the sex, but that week. Frank was off on his George goose chase. And I thought, my God, we’re working things out. Then he came back. Rev. Bob made his suggestion and you moved out.”

“Did I regret it?” Ellen asked. “Be honest.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “At least you didn’t tell me. It wasn’t like in the clinic. We weren’t kicking ourselves. But don’t kick yourself now, because it never really happened for you.”

“Yeah it did.” Ellen said. “I guess you’re right. Some things are meant to be. You and I Dean, we made love right before you died. And I had no regrets then either. Well . . .” The corner of Ellen’s mouth raised. “Maybe I regretted that we weren’t in a bed. Tell me we made love in a bed in this time frame.”

Dean eyes shifted about. He didn’t answer.

“Damn it.” Ellen faked an anger out burst. “Can we not have our moments when a bed is accessible.”

“Well.” With a slight chuckle, Dean, hands in pockets, tilted to the side and pointed his head to the bed behind Ellen.

Ellen looked.

“I’m kidding.” Dean reached for the box on the bed. But stopped when Ellen’s hand laid over his and she stepped into him. “El.”

“Let’s have a moment, Dean. Right now.” Ellen moved her lips closer. “Away from it all. Away from beginnings, let’s be together.”

The was zero hesitation after Dean’s shoulders lifted with his heavy breath. Eyes locked, his chest met Ellen’s as his hand first laid on her cheek then swept into her hair with a passionate firmness. Clenching, he pulled Ellen into him. Only in a moment’s hover were Dean’s lips before he touched then joined them with Ellen’s.

Every inch of Ellen’s face ached with the emotions of that kiss. She could feel herself breathing in the moment as well as flashing back to their last time together. So similar, both so full of feelings. But for as fast as the moment swept into them that was how fast they separated when the ‘bang’ of the opening front door startled them.

“Dean?”

Dean stepped away, reaching to the back waist of his pants for the revolver he brought. “Stay here.” He approached the door.

“Dean.” Ellen grabbed his arm. “Do go out there.”

“Well, where do you expect me to go.” Dean pulled away. “Stay here.” He ordered as he walked out of the bedroom. Gun raised, chamber shifted, Dean moved down the small hallway. Ready, and able to hear the footsteps, along with hoping it wasn’t Henry fooling around, Dean turned the corner aiming out.

A pumping of a chamber not only brought Dean face to face with the barrel of a M-16, but tp the lower chest of the huge brawny black man who stood before him.

In an Army unfirm the man kept his eyes on Dean. “Put down that

Weapon!” he blasted loud and deep. “You are trespassing on my base!”

Dean wanted to keep aim, but after a shift up of his views to the man, Dean lowered his gun. “Sgt. Baily. Sgt. Luther Baily?” Dean asked then smiled. “Oh, my God. It’s me . . .”

“Lt. Hayes, sir!” After snapping to attention, Sgt. Baily, swung around his m-16, then extended his hand to Dean. “Sir, I didn’t recognize you with the longer hair.”

“Apocalypse will do that to you.” Dean shook hands with enthusiasm. “This is wild!” Dean peered over his shoulder. “El! Come on out. It’s all right.”

“Lt. Hayes? Is the government rebuilding?”

“Not that I know of.” Dean said.

“Then are you moving back on base? Coming home?” Sgt. Baily asked.

“No.” Dean shook his head with a chuckle. “I’m doing some important work in my old lab for my community. Actually we have a home in this community, complete with kids.”

“You have children now?”

“Three.” Dean answered then saw where Sgt. Baily was staring, Dean looked. “El.” He reached out his hand. “This is Sgt. Baily, well, we called him Sarge. He used to be in charge of the men who would guard the entrance to the labs.”

Ellen stepped closer and peered up. Sgt. Luther Baily was the tallest, biggest man, she had ever seen.

Cordially Sarge extended his hand to Ellen, staring in awe. “Pardon me, Lt. Hayes. But you have a woman? In this world?”

Ellen snickered. “That’s because Dean had the keen foresight to snatch me up before everyone realized women were extinct.”

“Mrs. Hayes. It’s a pleasure.”

“Likewise.” Ellen saw the amazed look on Dean’s face from seeing someone he obviously knew well. A smile accompanied it. Ellen smiled as well. But for a different reason than Dean. Looking at Sarge, Ellen knew, of all the souvenirs she was packing to bring home, the giant man before her would be the best one. Frank was going to love him.

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

George was wide awake as he faced Steward who looked like he was ready to pass out. “Is that it?” George asked.

“Yes.” Steward answered. “Its the best we can do until communications lines are working here.” He extended a sheet of aper to

George.

“Did Sgt. Doyle decipher the morse code.”

“Yes. Why?”

“Then you read it. I can’t interpret his handwriting.” George sat back on the couch.

“Not much here.” Steward shrugged. “I’m sure more details will be given when information is easier to pass. All right . . .” He began to read. “Scouting party to New Mexico. No return yet.”

George nodded. “I suspected they would hit that. I didn’t think they’d wait so long.”

“Well, they did look for you. And they had a lot of clean up in Miles City. Plus, what we’ve sent to keep them busy.”

“True. O.K., no response for that one. We know what they’ll find in New Mexico. Go on.”

Steward continued to read. “Um, Dr. Hayes, Ellen and Henry are in Nebraska.”

“Nebraska?” George asked. “What for?”

“It says, ‘Details not released. Suspected new weapon.’”

George whistled. “Could be bad. Nebraska is where Dean’s main bio lab was. Send a response to keep us posted on their return.”

“We could pack up a brigade and send them out.”

“No.” George shook his head. “I know Beginnings. Those three won’t be beyond the wall for long. We’ll worry about them when we worry about Beginnings as a whole. Right now, we need all our men for the sweeps. Anything else.”

“One more thing.” Steward chuckled. “This is funny and I’m questioning Sgt. Doyle’s decipher.”

Annoyed, George rolled his eyes. “Are you going to share the quaint little passage or keep it all to yourself.”

“Seems like a waste. But . . .” Steward read. “Time machine works?”

George sprang up. “Holy shit. It works?”

“Sir, they said ‘Time Machine’. A time machine. Really, now.” Steward saw the seriousness on George’s face. “You believe this.”

“I’ve seen it.” George started to pace. “I never thought it could work. Get to our person and make sure they are positive it’s not a fluke. That whacked out Godrichson isn’t blowing smoke up everyone’s ass. If it’s true. We need to know what they plan on using it for.”

“Do you think they will.”

George fluttered his lips in sarcasm. “If you had a working time machine. Wouldn’t you?”

“No.” Steward shook his head. “Well, yeah. But sir, couldn’t this be bad for us.”

“Absolutely. If they use it against us, chances are we won’t know. So why worry. But . . .” George held up a finger with a smile. “This could be even better for us. As if what’s already in Beginnings isn’t important enough to us . . . that time machine . . .” George nodded arrogantly. “Just raised the property value.”

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Women. If Henry dreamt, Henry dreamt of women. Lots of them, swarming around him, begging him to have an understanding with them. Never a serious relationship. Henry was a ‘play the field’ type of guy in his dream. But that was in his dreams. In the real world, what Henry wouldn’t give to have just the companionship of a woman one day a week. But women were few and the men who shared their women, never shared with Henry. Frank told him it was because he was such a whiney anal asshole. But Henry chalked it up to the fact that men were too afraid that he was such the nice guy, they could lose their woman to him.

Perhaps it was the visit to Nebraska that brought about old world thoughts. Dreams of being in Miami. Laying on the beach. Pestered by women even if it was the GOLDEN GIRLS. But what Henry couldn’t figure out in the dream was why they all spoke so deep and rough. Nudging him harsh, poking him. The Henry realized that barreling voice wasn’t coming from Betty White, it was coming from outside his dream. Henry opens his eyes.

“What is your problem, boy!” Sarge blasted to Henry his rifle aimed on him.

Henry froze. He couldn’t move. Laying on that couch, staring up to a man who was probably mutated somehow. He had to have been zapped with something, Henry had never seen a man so big.

“Did you not hear me?” In a drill sergeant mode, Sarge bellowed out. “I have asked you a question. What is your problem? Are you sleeping on the job. You boy, were given a directive. What was that prime directive.”

It was a nightmare. Henry thought as he still stared, dazed. Yes. It wasn’t happening. He knew he had to still be dreaming when he heard the distant giggling. *Those damn Golden Girls.*

“You were given orders to protect this lab and the working occupants. Have you not! You have failed in that task! You were asleep on the job! General Slagel will not be pleased. I am moving for immediate court martial. Do you hear me boy!”

The giggle grew closer, then Ellen’s face peered around the blustering body of Sarge. “Hey, Henry.” Hands holding two cups, she gave a nudge to Sarge’s back. “You’ve done well. I don’t think he’ll do it again.”

“Are you sure Mrs. Hayes, ma’am?” Sarge kept his aim on Henry.

“Positive. Go back to post. Gen. Slagel will handle it when we return.”

“Yes Ma’am.” After another glare to Henry, Sarge, backed up, pivoted and left the reception area.

Still somewhat shaken, Henry sat up. “Who . . . who?”

“I’ll give all the details of our find later. But . . . Check this out Henry, that’s one of Dean’s old friends from this base. Imagine that. Dean had a friend. Go back to sleep. Sarge is on detail. No one’s getting in here that’s for sure.” She nodded. “Dean and I are in the thick of things.” She started to walk to the hall.

“El?” Henry stood up. “What’s with Mrs. Hayes? General Slagel?”

“Oh.” Ellen giggled. “That’s what I told him. He’s delusional, you know. Had to play along with it and build on it in order for him to agree to go.”

“El, wait.” Henry called out as she tried to slip away. “Go where?”

“Beginnings. Isn’t Frank gonna love him?” With one more smile, Ellen headed toward the lab.

“Paperclips, staplers, notebooks. I understand.” Henry spoke to himself as he plopped on the couch, “But I wanna see her shove *him* into that damn knapsack.”

Disappointment, loss, anger, were not the expressions on Dean’s face, rather contemplation of what his next step would be. Before the one computer he sat. Reading the results of the initial vial testing.

“Tea.” Ellen said as she walked in the lab. “Henry was so funny with Sarge yelling at him, you should have seen his face.” She set down the mugs by Dean.

“Tea?” Dean questioned and looked. “Hey, it’s brown, not green like the stuff Henry makes.”

“I found a box.” Ellen said and lifted the mug and sipped. “Oh, Dean wait until you taste this.”

“Did you put the box of tea bags in that Ellen-sack?”

“Without a doubt.” Ellen smiled then noticed Dean’s demeanor. “What’s happened.” She looked at the screen. “Are they all finished.”

“Yep.” Dean took a deep breath. “Out of the forty-four unidentified vials. We identified seventeen.”

“Oh, that’s excellent. Anything deadly?” Ellen asked.

“Small pox.” Dean stated. “But we still have twenty-seven left. Of course, that’s less than we had before. And, actually, anything created I shouldn’t have expected the programs to recognize.”

“What now?”

“Now? Now, we run them again. Only this time we do breakdowns. I’ll have to see if I can recognize by the ingredients or by looking at them what they could be.”

“Do we have the time?” Ellen asked.

“Sure. Even if we don’t finish reviewing the breakdowns here, we can take the readouts home.”

“What are your feelings about this?”

“Honestly?” Dean’s head bobbed slowly from side to side as his hand played with the warm mug of tea. “I’m encouraged. But we have to remember, even if we find a virus. We can’t be certain that the case is the culprit for its release or . . .” He held up a finger and nodded.

“It’s even our virus.” Ellen finished the sentiments. “Hopefully the antidote is in there. That would be a step.”

“Yeah, it would be. Actually El. Having the virus of our future in our possession would be a favorable step.” He saw the questioning look in her eyes. “Having it means, having a chance to get a jump on it. Fourteen months isn’t that long, but it’s fourteen months longer than we had last plague. And if I get that virus in my hands, I’m gonna beat it.” Dean paused. He softened his voice and gazed at Ellen with determination. “If it’s the last thing I do, I won’t fail again.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

November 21

In a way it was what Frank expected. An early return of his scouting party. Deep inside of him he wished they were gone the projected three days. Being gone that long meant surveillance time they spent. The early return spelled either trouble on the road, or Frank's fears . . . there was nothing to look at.

The New Mexico site was mentioned in the Caceres Society reports. Frank knew they would have to take the validity of that information at face value. Information that could have been misrepresented or fed to mislead them. Not that he would have dismissed the possibility, but Frank wouldn't have put much stock into the New Mexico site had George not slipped up about it in his numerous taunts to Joe when Joe was under the Salicain. But if George spoke of it, its existence was real. And on that, more than anything else, Frank sent his scouting party.

They had returned.

Frank was working on what he was beginning to call 'mystery reports'. Reports from his men from their rounds that listed sounds, sites, and other strange occurrences at perimeters and entrances that couldn't be explained. Usually one guard saw them, and when a team went out to check the alleged sightings or sounds out, nothing was there. Frank he had good men, they weren't imagining things. There was an explanation. Frank's gut told him it wasn't one that was good, despite the dismal attitude Joe gave, or the 'poltergeist in Beginnings' theory Henry kept going back to.

But for as puzzling and strange as the phenomenon reports were, Frank had to get to the front gate. Tower spotted the scouting party truck making its approach and Frank wanted to be the greeter.

And he was. First one there. Frank didn't have to hear the words, he saw the look on Cole's face when the truck stopped.

Frank leaned into the window. "Confirm or deny. Society site?"

"Confirmed." Cole said with little enthusiasm.

"Give it to me."

After a blink and a slight hesitation, Cole shifted his eyes to Frank. "Empty."

Frank swallowed, nodded, then tapped the door to the truck. "See ya in my office." He stepped back to allow for Cole and the party to move on. He didn't need to hear the report right then and there. He got the main answer he needed.

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The unusual slamming of Dean's hand, wrinkling of the papers he took from the printer, and the violent tossing of them into the trash, caused the 'bang-crash-rattle' that made Ellen jump from her skin and release the clipboard she held. A once silent lab, filled with frustrational noises. "Dean?" She turned to him.

He leaned elbow forward on the counter, his hands holding up his hair. "Not now, El." He took a long deep breath through his nostrils. "Not now." He stared down at a sheet of paper, reading as if he was hoping it would be something different.

"Dean." She pulled at him to stand up. "Take a break. There aren't that many vials left to do."

"I know. But by the time I test them, then re-test them . . ."

"And retest them and retest them? Come on Dean. You don't make mistakes. Do your programs here make mistakes? No."

"No." He answered solemn then stood up, hip against the counter facing Ellen. "But I have to be sure."

"And you are. Dean . . ." She lifted his chin with her finger. "We still have twelve vials left. Twelve. It still can be in there."

"But El, we've come across only five vials that were of unknown origin. One of them was an antagonist, our Salicain. The others were synthetic, no threatening agents. Where is it?"

"It's in there. And staring at these." She lifted the sheets of results. "Are not helping you any, are they? Take a break."

"And do what? No matter what I do, my mind will be seeing the formulas. Going over the breakdowns. I won't be able to step mentally away, so why step physically?"

"Well can you let me try?" Ellen leaned into him. "I have an idea. It's something Henry and me were talking about."

Shifting his eyes, Dean looked at her. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Don't be." She stepped back and showed him her hand. "Take a walk with me." She waited. "Dean? Hold my hand." She wiggled her fingers.

"All right."

With a smile, Ellen felt his hand meet hers. She slipped her fingers in between his and began to lead him from the lab.

"El, where are you taking me?"

"To take your mind off this work." She moved fast. "We're gonna have some fun."

Dean stopped walking, a smile finally hit him.

"Keep moving, Dr. Hayes." She tugged at him. "And get your mind out of the gutter."

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Hate to lose you.” George said in a semi-pleasant manner to Steward. Steward, wearing a leather jacket slowed down as they approached a truck. “Douglass is ill. It’s only a few days.”

“You’re heading north, correct?” George said. “Scouts estimate that least hostile.”

“My territory. Reading Pennsylvania. Small town, at the very least they have a spectacular greenhouse set up. That’s what the scouts reported.”

George laughed. “They used the word spectacular.”

Corner of his mouth raising, Steward shook his head. “No, my added touch.”

“Well, good luck on this one.”

“I’m optimistic.” Steward nodded. “Ambassador Lyons is expected back. He can handle any link to our person in Beginnings.”

“Excellent.” George watched Steward reach for the truck door. “Oh, one more thing. Briefly. What happened last night? I heard we lost a few.”

“First mutiny. Have to say, we didn’t see it coming.” Steward answered. “Short. Sweet., and went down quietly.”

“Who was it?” George asked.

“Disappointingly, it was a group of men we picked up last week. Twenty-four of them. They were together for awhile before we gathered them. Willing joiners.” Steward shrugged. “Actually some of them were quite promising. Strong military backgrounds. Pre-screening showed possibilities of advancement within the society without cyborg enhancement.”

“Did they willingly join to infiltrate and get information?” George asked.

“Highly unlikely. Remember, I’ve been part of the sweeps. I know survivor reaction. I know what’s going on in this country. Or what’s left of it. No, these men were good. They were just beginning training and now . . . gone.” Steward raised and lifted his hands. “No one heard them planning. No one expected them to book. They took nothing with them but the clothes they brought, and well the life of one of our guards when they left. But we expect defectors. And . . .” Steward opened his door. “I must be heading off if I want to make Reading for a strong afternoon entrance.”

“Good luck.” George moved back from the truck. It dejected George some because he was still ignorant to the goings on in the ‘gathering and building’ phase of the plan. That phase had begun while he was tucked away

in Beginnings. He felt isolated, removed a bit as well. George hated the fact that he had to ask questions. But he supposed before long, he would be giving the answers. And like Steward, he too would carry a nonchalant attitude about defectors instead of the worrisome feeling he carried about the group that had left them the night before.

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“Empty.” Frank dropped a folder before Joe then sat down in a chair opposite his father’s desk.

Joe opened the folder. “So they were there.”

“Absolutely.” Frank nodded. “Long enough to defrost more of their buddies and move on. Like I had said before, body count in Colorado was too low. Some of our batch probably went to the New Mexico site right away.”

Joe sifted through the papers. He whistled and leaned back.

“Looking at counts?” Frank asked. “My reaction was fuck.”

“Well I’m a bit more reserved.” Joe shook his head, still reading. “Big facility. Five hundred?”

“That’s what the evidence points to and . . . you know they had to recreate Dean’s antiserum. Him and El didn’t make enough for that many. What concerns me is, if we believe those Society reports. They state twenty-five hundred soldiers cryogenically frozen to help implement the rebuilding phase.”

“So with these five hundred and the three from Colorado that’s eight down.” Joe saw Frank shake his head. “Five plus three equals eight.”

“Yeah. I know that. I am the basic math king. But . . . are they all soldiers?” Frank stated his question of the situation. “We don’t know that. How many are scientist, workers and stuff. And trust me there are more than eight now. My opinion, hit each site, did their work, branched off and moved on. They’ve had months. They’re done. Cryogenics phase is over with. We’re behind the game.”

“They’ve moved on with the plan.” Joe said.

“And I’d say they’re on the thick of their building phase now.”

“Why do you say that?”

“No hits.” Frank tossed up his hand. “They’re too busy to bother with us now. But they’ll be back. George worked too hard to keep control of this place for there not to be something of value here.”

“Have we any idea what that is.”

“Nope or where.” Frank tossed his hands up.

“O.K. Assuming that your theory is right, and they’re coming back . . .” Joe leaned back in the chair. “And knowing the virus date on that letter,

our time is minimal. We have to hit it both ways. Eliminate the threat of the virus and the threat of the Society.”

“Correct. Me and my men work on a search and hunt for the society camps . . .” Frank nodded. “Dean and Ellen on the virus angle. Virus in the vials or not, I believe them two can beat it. I’m confident in that half of the battle. However, my job, finding and taking the society out is going to be more difficult. Because, we have to find them first. And looking for their camps without any technology, in a country this big will be . . .”

“ . . . Like searching for a needle in a haystack.” Joe finished Frank’s thoughts.

With an outward breath of thought, both Slagel men became silent.

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With the clicking of her tongue, Ellen imitated the sound of a clock. “Come on Dean, time is running out.”

“El, I’m thinking. Shh.” He held his hand over his eyebrows in thought, looking down. “How am I doing?”

“You’re five for seven, better than me and Henry thought you’d do.” She smiled at him. “You’re stalling.”

“No I’m not.” He looked at her. “Thanks. You know in a demented way this is sort of fun, and it is taking my mind off of things.”

“Sure, I knew it would. It’s the big Dean test of memory. And it can’t be easy for you, especially with the way they look. Now come on, guess.”

“Um . . .” Dean snapped his finger after looking down once more. “Thomas Morrow.”

Ellen bent down and looked at the name tag on the decomposed body. She made a loud buzzing sound. “Wrong. Daniel Thomas. You had one of the names right.”

Dean peered at the man who laid on his side in the hall. A man who would have been a mere skeleton if not for the elements of the outside world being kept locked away. “I remember him now.”

“Next one.” Ellen pulled on his hand. “Oh, hint. I think, no I know, this is a female.”

“Not that she looks like herself, but by guessing where she is laying, I’m saying Caroline Smith.”

Ellen looked at her name tag. “My goodness Dean, you are right.”

“I went out with her once.” Dean pointed.

Ellen giggled. “And you’re admitting to this. She isn’t very attractive. Did you date her long?” Ellen asked.

“Once.”

“Once as in you dated for a while? Or once as in one date?”

“One date.” Dean answered.

“Did you sleep with her?”

“No Ellen, it was one date. One very bad date. And what’s with the twenty-questions?” Dean stopped walking. “No. I was the one who was the bad date. Not that I really think she liked me all that much, but back then, my mind was continuously on my work.”

“Really?” Ellen spoke sarcastically. “I can’t believe that.”

“It’s true. I really did think about . . .” Dean saw her smile. “You’re being facetious. But I’ll let that go because you took my mind off of things. However . . .”

“I know, back to work.” Ellen said and they began to walk again.

“El.” Dean stopped moving. “Before we head back. We didn’t talk or bring up what happened last night. What . . . what happened, El?”

Ellen took a breath. “What happened was the beginning of the realization that Frank and I really have to talk.”

Nodding calmly and hiding any gloating, hopeful smile that crossed his face, Dean kissed Ellen on the cheek and headed back to the lab to work.

^^^

“Joe?” Jason had knocked only once on Joe’s office door before stepping in. “I was wondering if I could talk to you.”

“Sure. Come on in.” Joe pointed to the stock visitor chair.. “What’s on your mind.”

“Frank.”

“Heavy subject.” Joe smiled.

Jason sort of chuckled. “He’s a big individual, but it’s not Frank in general. John Matoose was fixing that window on my lab and I overheard Frank telling him about what happened with the scouting party.”

“We were gonna have a community meeting about that when Dean and Ellen get back. But if you’re concerned . . .”

“I am.” Jason held up his hand. “But not in the way you think. I’m concerned that we aren’t using our most valuable weapon.”

“The hidden asset Frank has been talking about?”

“No, the one that isn’t hidden. That one that clued us in already about our pending virus, and as history disks proved, diverting Dr. Hayes’ death.”

Joe leaned back far. “I’m listening.”

“What about Joe . . . what about using it now. Right now with the society.” Jason asked.

“It can’t help us now, Jason. We can’t take out the scientist by going back in time. Eliminating them too early could change would cause one of those ripple things.”

“No Joe, listen to me. You still have to eliminate them now in this time.”

“We have to find them first.” Joe said.

“And that’s what I’m talking about.” Jason stated. “You were in the CIA, right? Well when you were looking for someone, how did you do it?”

“Collect evidence.”

“Exactly.” Jason smiled. “Collect your evidence now. Obviously the information we have isn’t enough to locate them. For this to have been such the central location, the information needed to help you has to be here.”

“I agree.” Joe nodded. “But where? Frank’s theory. Or if it’s in those hidden files, we can’t access them. They’re explosively protected.”

“They weren’t always and I’m willing to bet those files weren’t always hidden either.”

Joe’s eyebrows raised, he sat up straight. “But we don’t know when they were here. None of the information regarding when the Caceres Society first started in Beginnings is documented. We know when they were frozen. That’s it.”

“And there has to be a point . . . in time . . . when all that information is vulnerable to us.”

“But when?” Joe asked in a thinking manner. “When was that? This is a lot of years we’re talking. Too early and we risk not getting it, too late, the same risk.”

“Now I don’t know the time frame either. We can guess all we want. But Joe, if you were back in the CIA, where would you start?”

“Easy. Square one.”

“Which is?” Jason asked.

“Get to know them, find out about them, who they are, where they come from. Look for someone that knows something.”

“And someone knows something.” Jason said. “A set up like they had, isn’t planned in a year, or two for that matter.”

“I know where you’re going with this.” Joe tapped his fingers on his desk, taking a few seconds to think. “Go back far enough that we don’t land smack dab in the middle of something here. But close enough that they started making a trail.”

“Exactly. And if we’re only collecting information. We shouldn’t ripple any time sequences.”

Joe sprang up from his chair, a happy look smearing across his face. “Let me review what we have. I’ll work on it today and tonight. Meet me here first thing in the morning, I’ll let you know what I come up with.”

“Sounds good.” Jason stood up extending his hand to Joe. “My machine was built for the good of man Joe. We can use it for the good of man.”

“And hopefully tomorrow, you and I can come up with a plan that will help fill in some of the missing pieces to this screwed up puzzle.” Joe gripped Jason’s hand firmly and with a confident smile. Immediately it was replaced with a lost look.

“Something wrong.”

“This whole conversation had it. But Christ, am I overwhelmed with that annoying de-ja-vue feeling. Like we had this talk before.”

“We probably did.” Jason said.

“No, we didn’t.”

“Probably did.” Jason reiterated. “In the ‘Dean is dead’ time frame. We probably discussed alternate ways incase we couldn’t bring Dean back to life. Which, gives merit to my Ripple Bits theory. You’re not having de-ja-vue, you have ripple bits.”

“Ripple bits?” Joe asked.

“Yes. The time frame that occurred actually *did* happen, but most people aren’t strong minded enough to remember. But the ‘tough at mind’ will. And when they think they’re having de-ja-vue they’re actually having memory remnants from a time period that was rippled. Ripple bits.”

“Is that possible?” Joe asked.

“Joe.” Jason snickered with site. “Ask Henry. In theory . . . *everything* is possible.”

^^^^

Ellen couldn’t find Dean. He wasn’t taking a nap like she and Henry were. She peeked out into the halls to see if perhaps Dean was searching out a tea bag. He wasn’t seen. Ellen thought he could have gone topside to sit and talk to sarge about old Army days. No matter where he was, one thing was for sure, Dean wasn’t in the lab.

Ellen had sat on the safe following her middle of the night nap. She waited for Dean to come back into the reception area, but she couldn’t wait any longer. Things had to be prepared to go, whether Dean had finished his final reviews of the breakdowns or not. And Ellen thought she’d give a look-over one more time for Dean incase he found a more comfortable spot in the lab to sleep.

“Dean?” Ellen called out his name walking in the lab. She could see through the pane of glass that he wasn’t in the special lab either. All the equipment was off and the soft buzzing of mechanics in that lab was no longer heard. Looking under each desk, Ellen gave up and tossed her arms up. “Where is . . .” As she turned she saw the light seeping out from under the crease of the door where the bio-suits were. Walking over to it, she opened it. Her heart sank. Dean sat on the floor, his knees bent up, his arms

draped over them. “Dean?” She walked in and closed the door. “Dean, what is it?” She slid down next to him, laying her hand on his arched back.

“I finished the breakdown reviews. For the . . . for the tenth time.” Dean lifted his head, his face was drawn with sadness. “Hoping I missed an ingredient. A structure. It’s not there.” He lightly banged his head against the wall as he leaned back against it. “It’s just not there. All those vials and not a single deadly virus unknown in there. I looked and looked, but it’s just not there.”

“What about the antidote. Anything that might resemble that?”

“Several vials contain possible viral antidotes. But a lot of good it’s going to do us without the virus.”

“Dean, you tried.” Moving closer, Ellen reached her arm further around him.

“How am I suppose to beat something I don’t even have or know what it is.”

“You will. I have faith in you. You will.” She place her face assuredly close to his.

“I’m scared El.” His eyes said it all. “I am so scared. What if . . .” His hand lifted and fell on hers, grabbing it. “What if by the time we have the virus in our possession, it ends up being a repeat of history all over again.”

“It won’t be.”

“It could be. I’m afraid when it hits us, it will move so fast, there just won’t be enough time.”

Lacking any words she could give to comfort him at that moment, Ellen laid her head against Dean’s shoulder pulling him closer. But in Dean’s moment of drowning and worrying about enough time, he failed to see his one worry was the key to their answer . . . time. Perhaps it was the heaviness of not finding the future’s demise, but little did he see they had all the time in the world waiting on them back in Beginnings.

^^^

How long had Joe sat and thought about the plan? The wee hours of the morning were creeping up and in not too long Joe would have to be out and about in the community. But all the time since his brief meeting with Jason, all the hours were not wasted. Joe used that time wisely. During his work at containment, any idea jogging in his mind immediately went as a scribble in his notebook. By the time he had gotten through the shift in containment, walked around Beginnings and made it home after dinner with Frank, Joe had his notebook twenty pages filled. All with single line ideas.

Planning was always something Joe did well. And planing for the future was something Joe had to do. But for the first time ever, Joe had to use the

past in order to look ahead. Using his scribbled one line ideas, and the printed data from the cryo-lab, Joe worked diligently for hours on what he thought would be the first step in the whole evidence collecting process. Scratching off the bad ideas and using the good ones, Joe closed his notebook for the night. He had a plan in motion. And just like Joe, he looked at every angle in his head before completing that plan. He felt strongly as he removed his glasses and stretched out his cramping fingers that he had begun to pave the road that would lead them to the knowledge they needed. A different road than he had ever taken. The next day would begin the preparations. And after that, it would be time. Time to face the yesterday that would be the key to saving Beginnings's tomorrow.

STEPPING BACK . . . AGAIN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

November 22

Letting out a loud tasting gasp of enjoyment, Joe twitched his head and looked down his coffee mug that he carried. “Good cup of coffee for once. It’s the bean lottery. I won.”

Jason chuckled at Joe’s finding so much pleasure in his cup of java. “So you think we’ve perfected it?”

“Yes. Now . . .” Joe smiled when he reached the door to the social hall. “Let’s hope everyone is here. You have them.”

Jason lifted a stack of papers. “Ready and waiting.”

“Let’s do this.” On a caffeine buzz brought on from lack of sleep, and shaking off those ripple bits he felt coming on, Joe opened the door and stepped into the social hall. “Morning.” He said.

The buzzing of conversation stopped. Andrea and Trish were outnumbered by Frank, some of his security men and a few other trusted males in Beginnings that made up the small group of fourteen waiting on Joe.

Closing the door, Joe stepped forward. “I’m sorry to pull all of you from your workday. But this is important.” Joe waited until Jason stepped closer to the table. “After careful consideration, all of you, no matter what the outcome of this first step, all of you will be involved, in someway, in the final project.” Midway Joe’s ‘prelude to continuing’ breath, he saw Frank’s hand raise. “Yes, Frank?”

“What’s the final project?”

Joe winced. “I’m getting to that now.” After seeing Frank’s ‘got it’ thumbs up. Joe continued. “Now. What is said here today goes no further than these walls. The society as you know is a threat. However, it is a bigger threat than you realize. And with that knowledge, we have we must assume deadly. But . . . they are an enemy we do not know much about. We believe they have the means to wipe us out. And because of that, we are going to use Jason’s time machine to . . .”

“Yes!” Frank excitedly cheered out. “We’re going back to wipe them out. Yes! Are we just stopping Henry from opening the wall or are we just gonna eliminate the plague all together?”

“Christ. Frank!” Joe snapped. “We aren’t changing time. Now if you’d let me finish my goddamn speech you’ll know what we’re planning.” Joe looked at Jason, “Why did we include him?” Shaking his head Joe returned his views to the meeting. “Finalization of the plan is pending the outcome of this meeting. But, in a nutshell. We believe the means to finding the society and beating the society is buried, or hidden deep in Beginnings. Like our

scientist once were.”

Jason interjected. “But there has to be a point in time when it was open and not tucked away. We figure that vulnerable point is when they were setting it all up here. That is the point in time that we go.”

“But.” Joe continued. “We have to find that point in time. We don’t want to guess and come here too early or too late. So we go back. Back even further to start an information gathering. Use resources the old world had. Computers. Internet. Books. Magazines. Any and all information we can get . . . key society members. The population control conference. Cryogenics. We’re going to build a time line that we hope will give us the moving-in dates of the society.” Again., Joe saw Frank’s raised hand. “Yes, Frank?”

“Can I go.”

“No.” Joe answered. “Now we . . .”

“Then why did you ask us here?”

“To tell about the plan and determine who will go.” Joe tried to explain.

“But it won’t be me.” Frank said.

“I didn’t say that.” Joe shook his head.

“Yes, you did. You said . . .”

“Frank!” Joe lost it, ignored Jason’s snicker, and calmed himself down. “One of you people will go.” Joe explained. “It’s just a hard . . .” Eyes rolling slightly, knowing he’d kick himself for doing it, Joe called upon Frank who had his hand raised like a school boy. “What!”

“Let me go.” Frank beckoned. “I’d do real good.”

“I’m sure.” Joe said sarcastically. “But . . . like everyone else, you have to fill out Jason’s form. Sort of like a time traveler application. The form will be filled out, placing your name on the back. Jason will review your answers and determine who goes by what you wrote down. Then when he makes the decision, he will see who’s name is on the back.”

“What if he cheats?” Frank asked so serious.

Almost wanting to cry and sounding like it, Joe dropped his head. “Why . . . why would you ask that. Why would he cheat Frank?”

“Because he has favorites.”

“And you certainly aren’t one of them that’s for sure.” Joe snapped back.

“See.” Frank pointed.

The final grunt came from Joe. “Frank, just fill out the goddamn form like everyone else and shut up.”

“Fine.” Frank slouched.

“Jason.” Joe gave a motioned of his head.

Jason began to pas out the forms. “If you don’t want to make the time trip, you don’t have to fill it out. I’ll review them all carefully and I assure you

I will be fair. I know exactly what answers I'm looking for." After finished the handing out, he stepped to Joe. "Shouldn't take them long." He whispered.

"Some." Joe watched Frank take his questionnaire and sit at the farthest table alone, hovering his paper as if someone would peek. "Look at him" Joe said with a hint of disgust. "Some people have personality conflicts. My son has an intelligent conflict going on right within his own self." He let out a breath. "Thank God we won't be sending him."

"I'll read all answers. I'll judge fairly." Jason said. "So why do you say that?"

"You just answered your own question. You'll read all answers. And since most of them are common sense questions. Think about it and need I say more." Joe pointed to his diligently working son. "It's Frank."

^^^

Quiet. All except for the helicopter noise that was so steady it was barely noticed. Solemnness accompanied the silence to Beginnings. No one said much. The enthusiasm they carried with them to Nebraska failed to make the return trip.

"About fifteen more minutes, guys." Johnny said adjusting controls. He gave a quick smile to Sarge who sat next to him.

"Impressive job of flying for such a youngster." Sarge said loud. "Did General Frank Slagel teach you the skill?"

"No." Johnny chuckled. "Former President George Hadly used to be with us. He taught me."

"Begging everyone's pardon!" Sarge spoke in his boisterous manner. "But the man was an asshole. I never voted for him."

Henry, trying to lighten the feel in the back of the chopper, raised his hand and dropped it with a slap to his leg. "There you have it. Another person who didn't vote for George. How did he become president?"

A slight smile cracked upon Dean's face. He sat next to Ellen staring at their joined hands. His head was down, hair dangling.

"Almost home." Ellen whispered. "It'll be all right. Joe . . . he's going to be fine with this. I think he expects us to come back empty. Trust me, I know him. He plans for the worst." Ellen swallowed following her words discovering perhaps a reminder of their failure at that moment wasn't a good idea.

Dean's free hand went to his face and he rubbed his eyes. "It's not Joe I worry about facing. Not even the community. It's my kids." He spoke softly. "I know they have nothing to do with this. But how can I look into their faces without feeling some kind of pain that I may fail them."

Ellen's eyes closed. She knew exactly what he meant. "It's, um, too

bad, huh, we can't just take that letter and find the virus on it."

A scary silence came from Dean. Slowly with wide eyes, he looked up at her.

"Stupid huh?" Ellen asked.

Dean grinned widely.

"Not stupid?"

"El." He grabbed her face and kissed her. "You're so brilliant. You are the most brilliant person I know." He kissed her again.

"Wow, we really can get the virus off the letter?"

"No. But . . . yes. But not in that way." Grabbing her face, he kissed her hard with a smack. "Excellent thinking. Thank you." Instead of slouching with a frown, Dean sat up with a happy look on his face.

After shifting her eyes around. Ellen looked over to Henry for answers of Dean's suddenly changed demeanor but Henry was just as confused.

^^^

Surprisingly, all fourteen people were enthused and filled out the time traveler application. Aside from needing privacy to review them, Jason needed space. Space to separate them into piles yet give him enough room to enjoy his coffee and cigarettes.

All the applications had one thing in common. Everyone wrote in plain basic printing. Jason supposed that was probably because they feared not be chosen because of who they were. No one was really sure who Jason liked or didn't. Jason didn't like or mingle much with people.

In his lab, at the far counter Jason reviewed. His eyes would gaze upon the answers while his mind dove into the meaning behind them. He was on his seventh application. Jason read answers, like he promised he was being fair he didn't even try to guess who filled it out. After reading the seventh application he set it in the 'maybe' pile. He picked up the next application and immediately grinned with a gasp of shock. "Brilliant." He spoke out loud. "Absolutely . . ." Another gasp as he went to the next answer. "My God. Brilliant." Chuckling so impressed he looked at what he thought was the hardest question. *'Who is the Godfather of Time travel and why?'* and when Jason read the answer he was pleasantly shocked.

He finished his review and placed that application not in the rejection or maybe piles, but off to the side by itself. It had too much merit to place into a measly maybe pile. Reaching for the next one, Jason paused. He had to do it. He had to read it again. It was too good. Reaching up, he looked at that fine application and basked in the brilliancy of the answers that impressed him so much.

^^^

The minute Frank got the radio call from Joe that Johnny was approaching, he made his way to the landing field. He wanted to be there waiting and watching as the helicopter touched down. The message from his father was clear, they would be there in a few minutes and Ellen had a surprise for him.

Leaving his father at the hanger, Frank stood, proudly hands on hips, his eyes smiling as he watched the chopper touch down. Waiting for the propellers to slow, Frank made his approach near to the bird. He watched the side door open and Henry stepped out waving. Frank knew as soon as he reached inside, Henry was helping out Ellen, and he was.

Ellen waved to him as she trotted quickly his way. Grinning, Frank, stepped to her. "El." He placed his hands firmly to her face and kissed her, he felt her pull away. "What . . ."

"We brought something for you, Frank."

"Oh, yeah. I love surprises. What is it?" He asked as she stepped from him, letting his hand slide from her cheek, and she grabbed it.

"A big black man." Ellen giggled and slipped her fingers from his, backing up. "Is Joe in the hanger with a jeep?"

"Seriously, El, what did you get for . . ." Frank's words slowed when from the corner of his eye he saw Sarge step with ease from the helicopter. He listened to Ellen chuckle. Sounds that formed words failed to emerge from Frank's mouth as he stared at the giant who stepped just a few feet closer.

"Hey, Frank." Henry walked by him. "We got you a new friend."

Opening his mouth to speak, a stuttering gasp came out as he ran his hand harshly with a twitching head down his goatee. He said nothing to Dean who walked by him. He just watched Sarge make his way over, slumping some and his arms swinging back and forth as he walked and stood in front of Frank. Frank looked up to the man who had him by a good five inches.

Dean's snicker was heard from behind. "Let's go El. Hey Frank? God, you look small."

Henry decided to be the polite one, and introduce them. "Sarge, this is the man I was telling you about. This is Frank Slagel."

"General Slagel Sir!" Sarge saluted and stood tall. "Sargent Luther Baily at your service sir. Mrs. Hayes told me you were in need of some men in your battle."

"Mrs Hayes?" Frank's head spun to watch Ellen and Dean walk to the hanger. "Mrs. Hayes?" Frank looked stunned to Henry. "Henry? Mrs. Hayes?"

Henry didn't know what to say. He lifted his shoulders and hands.

“Talk to Ellen. I’m heading down to the hanger.” Henry started walking.

Frank closed his mouth and faced Sarge. “So they call you Sarge.”

“Yes sir!” Sarge answered loud. “I am at your service, sir. Implement my skills as you see fit!”

Frank stepped back squinting his eyes and wondering if he sounded that loud when he barked. “O.K., well. Let’s start now.” Frank cleared his throat then shifted his eyes to Johnny who carried a box to the truck. He whistled to him. “John!” Waving his hand, he signaled Johnny over.

“What’s up Dad? I see you met Sarge.” Johnny approached.

“Yeah I did. Sarge is gonna give you a hand unloading the bird. Bring him to receiving when you’re done.”

“Got it, come on Sarge.” Johnny turned to walk away.

“Sir!” Sarge snapped to attention, gave a salute, waited for Frank’s nod, and then Sarge followed Johnny.

Releasing a silent whistle of relief, Frank looked once more to the newest addition. After twitching his head in amazement at the size of Sarge, he headed to the hanger.

^^^

“Why am I the houseboy?” Henry asked as he loaded the duffle bags in the back of the jeep.

“You’re the everything guy.” Ellen answered with a smile then looked to Dean who was huddled with Alexandra and Billy outside the jeep.

“I missed you guys.” Dean kissed the twins, not wanting to let them go. “I really missed you.” He shifted his eyes to Ellen. “El . . .” He slowly stood up. “I know you have things to do at containment. But can I get you to go home with the kids. I have to talk to Joe for a little bit.”

“Sure.” Ellen answered. “It’ll give me time to bask in my souvenir bag. Henry? Will you drive us? ”

Henry shrugged. “Why not. I might as well add chauffeur to the list.”

Joe waded through the little reunion long enough. “Dean.” He took hold of Dean’s arm and pulled him aside as Henry, Ellen and the kids loaded in the jeep. “Does this little meeting have to do about the trip?”

“Yeah.” Dean said less than enthused. “It wasn’t . . .” He dropped his voice even lower. “It wasn’t in the vials. But we’re not out of options. I have an idea.”

Joe nodded. “Head up to my office now?”

“Yeah, let me say goodbye.” Dean walked back to the jeep.

“All right!” Frank’s voice blasted as he stepped into the hanger. His focus was on Ellen and that was where he headed.

“Oh, hi Frank.” Ellen said chipper.

“Oh, hi Ellen.” Frank mocked. “No. Wait.” He added fake pleasantries. “Hi. Mrs. Hayes.”

Ellen giggled. “Wasn’t that funny. But we have to go. See you in a bit.”

“El.” Frank lifted his hand as the jeep pulled out. “You have to process my . . .” he lowered his hand. “Gift.” He grunted then turned to Joe. “That Sarge guy should be in your office by now waiting for processing.”

“Shit.” Joe cringed. “Could you take him to containment for processing instead.”

“Sure.” Frank shrugged.

“Good.” Joe gave a swat to Frank’s arm. “Dean and I will be using my office. Let me know how it goes.” With a leading hand to Dean’s back, Joe started to leave the hanger.

“But it’s not my job.” Frank called out as they left. “Fuck.” After stalling in a stewing moment, Frank in a huffing put walked from the hanger as well.

^^^

A human bark and growl came right before Frank’s loud ‘get off me!’ as he walked into Ellen’s office at containment with a slam of the door. “I hate this fuckin place.” He said to Sarge who sat in a chair. “Found her paper work.” He held up a clipboard. “Welcome to containment.” Frank walked behind the desk and plopped in the chair.

“Strange individuals.” Sarge commented. “I won’t be running into that Japanese man much will I?”

Frank hid his snicker as he rocked back and forth in his chair. “Don’t like Henry?”

“No. Whines and complains too much for my liking. Something should be done with him. He’s not fit to be in this man’s army. Especially with that long hair. Would it be much of a loss for the community if he was executed.”

“No. Not at all.” Frank said calmly. “But unfortunately we can’t do that. As much as we want to, Henry’s the only Asian population we have. The Hitler law comes into effect with him. Don’t want to wipe out a race. We’ve been trying to rebuild the Asian community. Unfortunately none of the few women we have, want to reproduce with him.”

Sarge found humor in that. “What exactly is this place.”

“Containment. A sort of holding center for new residents until we know they’re mentally sound.”

“Begging your pardon, sir. But I was told my skills would be of use. Lt. Hayes can vogue for them. We were stationed on the same base.”

“Let me let you in on a little secret.” Frank leaned into the desk. “Dean

is no longer a lieutenant. He was court martialed years ago.” With a finger to his own temple, Frank sat back again. “Whacked out he is. His word sucks around here. But . . . I can use the men, especially one of your size.”

“But sir. if you give me a place to bunk and a meal to eat, I’ll earn it. You give me your weakest perimeter and I will sit watch outside of it from sun up to sun down, or sun down to sun up. You name it. But let me do what I do best. And sitting all day in a holding center to prove myself is not helping you.”

“You have a point.” Frank’s mind began chuckling. “I think I have a perimeter in mind. Let me see if I can talk to my Dad about special arrangements for you. Were you really in the United States Army?”

“Fourteen years Sir, infantry training.”

“Did they tell you what we’re up against? Aside from the usual bad survivors and savages.”

“Militant style soldiers, heavily armed with weapons approximately three to five years pre-plague.”

“Have you seen them or is this what my people told you?”

“Took three out when they were snooping around my base looking for supplies.”

“How.” Frank quickly asked.

“Shot them.”

“How many bullets?”

“Five sir.”

“Why did you waste two shots?”

“Sir?” Sarge shuffled in nervousness in his chair. “One of them took off. I Picked him off.”

“Do you remember how to read and write?” After getting a confusing nod from Sarge, Frank handed him the clipboard and pen. “Fill this out. Oh, and by the way, we call those soldiers, SUTs.”

“I know.” Sarge began to fill out the paper. “Mrs. Hayes told me that.”

“Why do you call her that?” Frank asked with agitation.

“That’s her name.”

“No it’s not.” Frank snapped.

“But Lt. Hayes told me . . .”

“Lt. Hayes is an asshole who wants my wife. Ellen is my wife. So stop calling her Mrs. Hayes.”

“Yes.” Sarge fiddled with the pen and started to look at the questions. “One more thing.” He looked up to Frank. “Hating to sound impatient, but it’s been a while. But when should I expect my physical welcome from Jenny Matoose?”

With a grunt and a shake of his head, Frank merely mumbled under his breath. “Ellen.”



Dean couldn't take the long hard stare from Joe any longer. The silence, the heavy thinking breaths. "Come on, Joe. Look . . ." He leaned from his chair into Joe's desk. "I listened to your plan for a time trip. I agreed to go because, yes, I have the knowledge to look for the stuff. But on the same premises, give me this."

"Dean." Joe sounded at a loss. "I'm not turning you down. Aside from the risk, I don't know if it can be done. We'd have to talk to Jason . . ." Joe looked up when his office door opened. "Speak of the devil."

Excitedly, Jason walked in holding up a folder. "Found the third. And Joe, you won't believe the answers. Oh, hello Dean."

Dean waved. "Tell him Joe."

"Tell me what?" Jason asked.

"Who?" Joe questioned. "Who is the third?"

"Don't know." Jason pulled up a chair. "Thought I'd save the dramatic unveiling for us both. So . . . tell me what?"

Dean turned in his chair to face Jason. "Joe told me about he trips to the past to get information. Well I want you to squeeze in another trip. A vital one. The virus is in the future. Send me there, we have the date. Send me there to get the virus so I can beat it before it ever arrives."

Joe, with question in his eyes peered to Jason. "Can it be done?"

Jason blinked several times. "In theory no. But since the letter came from the future obviously . . ."

"Holy shit." Joe rubbed his eyes then blinked rapidly.

"Ripple bits again?" Jason asked. "I have to mark this down. Anyhow. Yes, it can be done. But Dean . . . the future I send you to will not be the same future that I sent that letter from. In that future you were dead and had been for some time. The future I send you to, you will never have died, therefore, there may not be a virus when you get there."

"Good." Dean said. "Then you'll be waiting for my arrival and you'll tell me that."

Jason continued. "On the other hand, you have to understand something. If we send you to the future. The virus can still be present. You may walk into a dead world. You, yourself may be dead. Can you prepare yourself for that?"

"I will." Dean said. "And facing that will give me the determination I need to beat it. We can work out the details of it once we get the CDC mobile. But what I'm thinking is, if the virus is in the future and I go, and I'm alive or was, I would have been working on it. I go get a sample and copy my research and take off from there. We can do this. We can beat this and this is

the only way. Now there will have to be a quarantine and I'll get a detailed plan together. But we have to do this."

Joe turned to Jason, looking for his response. "I think that we should do. This trip in time will take as much planning as the others. But I'll want the first trip to go as scheduled in three days. I may sound bleak by saying this. But if something should happen to Dean when he goes to the future, catches the virus, what have you, I want to have the other part of the plan well in motion."

Jason was in total agreement. "Plus, the future is too unpredictable to waste the energy supply on over the past that has already happened. Let's slate the future trip for three weeks. We should have the CDC Mobile up and running and ready by then. Set up your crew."

Dean clenched his fist and hit it on the desk. "Yes. Thank you." He jumped up from his seat. "I wanna tell Ellen it's a go. Of course she doesn't know." He bolted to the door. "Can I fill her in?"

"Sure." Joe said with a half wave. "Go on. But be available. I want to have that time meeting tonight. Get the three of you together."

"Got it. Thanks." With a grin, Dean left.

"O.K." Joe laid his hands on the desk. "Speaking of the time trio. Reveal. Who?"

"First, I eliminated six applications alone by the answer to the last question. If you were given permission to change time, what would you go back and do?. If they said 'nothing'. They were out."

"Because they lied to go." Joe said.

"Correct. But this application." Jason opened the folder and spoke with enthusiasm. "I can't stress enough how brilliant. The godfather of time question, this person was the only one that said me. And that's the right answer. I am the only person with a working time machine. And this applicant gave that exact reason."

"Really?" Joe said impressed. "Would have said H.G. Wells myself."

"Though he is the fiction master. No."

"What was this person's response to the change time question?"

"Wait until you hear." Jason read. "*What would you go back and do? Answer. Make myself read THE STAND. It holds apocalyptic merit.*"

"Good. So, who is this masked wonder?"

"Ready?" Jason took a deep suspenseful breath, flipped over the sheet and looked. His eyes widened.

"What?" Joe asked. "Who?"

Jason handed Joe the form.

Joe's reaction was simple. He looked at the name, looked at Jason, let out a whine and plopped his head down to the desk.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Joe just wanted to get it over with. The first meeting of the trio of time travelers. Jason suggested it could wait until the next morning, but Joe wanted to finish up not only the first meeting but all aggravation that would immediately ensue the second time travelers discovered who their cohorts in quantum barrier breaking were.

As if it were going to be a game show, Joe wanted the unveiling of partners to be timed perfectly. All parties knowing everything first, then they meet. And since Dean was the party that knew the most, Joe wanted to stop by his house and let him know what time to be at the office.

The sound of children told Joe that all was amuck and normal in the Hayes home. He heard the all too familiar sound of his screaming granddaughter. And when he opened the door, sure enough she was jumping around. Only Alexandra wiggled as she did. A irritating dance she learned from Ellen as a means of bladder control.

“Pap!” Alexandra ran to him, hugged his legs and wiggled some more.

“Hey little one.” He picked her up. “Where’s mommy?”

“With Daddy.” She kicked her legs, her sign for Joe to put her down. With a running scream she chased Andrea’s daughter, Katie.

“And take time out to go to the bathroom.” Joe ordered in vain.

“Joe?” Andrea came down the steps holding Brian. “What are you doing here?”

“I should ask you the same.”

“I’m watching them. Of course Billy is sleeping.”

“Why are you watching them?” He leaned forward and kissed Brian. “Is it me, or does he look like Dean?”

Andrea shook her head and placed her hand over Brian’s face. “Ellen and Dean had something very important they said they had to work on in the cryo-lab. Urgent they said.”

“Swell.” Joe turned back to the door. “He knows we have that meeting. I’ll find them. Thanks.” He opened the door and Melissa stood there. “Melissa?”

“Hi, Joe.” She ran her fingers through her dark red hair. “Where’s your daughter? Her and Dean came to get Marcus so he could play with the children and they aren’t home.”

Thinking the words. ‘No, they wouldn’t’ Joe hurriedly closed Andrea’s door. “They uh . . . they took Marcus for a walk with Billy. They went over to Cole’s to see Kimmy. Yeah. So I’m on my way there.” He grabbed Melissa’s arm leading her from Andrea’s house. “How about I just bring Marcus home to you?”

“Could you?” She asked. “It’s his meal time and I just don’t trust him when he gets hungry.”

“Christ.” Joe took a deep breath. “All right. I’ll bring him right home.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Melissa smiled.

Shaking his head at his thoughts, Joe went his separate way from Melissa and headed in the direction of the cryo-lab.

^^^

“O.K. Dean, I’m ready!” Ellen’s voice so far from his, echoed in the tunnel.

“I’m releasing him El. Ready?” Dean set Marcus down. “And . . .” Dean undid the leash. “Now.” He immediately pressed the stop watch.

“Got him!” Ellen yelled back giggling.

“Damn.” Dean looked at the watch. “Damn.”

“He’s so cute.” Ellen laughed as Marcus snuggled up to her grunting. “Dean?” She came closer. “How fast?”

“Wait.” Looking up, Dean did his fastest math in his head. “Shit. Fifty-nine miles per hour give or take one.”

“Wow. Fifty-nine?” Ellen struggled with the child and handed him to Dean.

“Heavy.” Dean grunted as he took Marcus in his arms. “Let’s take him back in the lab.”

“Yeah, his clothes should be dry by now.” Ellen followed them in. “It was amazing how he never even noticed he got wet or cold.” She reached out her hand running it down Marcus’ square face. “Let’s not forget to tell Melissa we fed him.”

“We didn’t have a choice.” Dean, with his free hand grabbed Marcus’ clothes. “He got into my rabbits again.”

“Let me help you get him dressed.” Ellen grabbed his clothes, and stood next to Dean who sat the three month old baby down. The baby who looked as if he were a year. “He’s so cute Dean. I want one of these.”

“I’m glad you said that, El.” Dean pulled Marcus’ arm out of the sleeve.

“Why? You aren’t thinking of sticking an embryo in me are you?”

“No.” Dean shook his head struggling to put on Marcus’ pants. “I’m going to try to grow one.”

“Can I help? It’ll be fun.”

“Will you?”

“Dean.” Ellen smiled. “He can be our child.”

“O.K.” Dean shrugged. “After this virus stuff is over with, we’ll start.”

Joe Slagel’s loud clearing throat, caught their attention. “I can not believe I am seeing what I am seeing. Give that child to me.” He snapped his

finger and held out his hand.

Ellen lifted Marcus up. "That snapping fingers is a Slagel trademark isn't it? What did we do Joe you look pissed?"

Joe grabbed Marcus into his arms. "What in the world would possess you two to lie to Melissa and bring this baby down here? That is so wrong."

Dean ran his hands through his hair in nervousness. "We didn't hurt him Joe. We just wanted to run a few tests on him."

"He has a mother." Joe scolded. "You can't do this shit."

Ellen tried to defend themselves. "Joe, really she did give her permission to grow one of our embryos in her and by doing that she . . ."

"Ellen!" Joe shut her up with a stern yell. "You don't experiment on someone's kid without them knowing! Now I'm taking him home and I hope to God I never catch you two doing this again or I swear I'll stick you two in Fabrics making socks. And Dean, be in my office in thirty minutes."

"Got it." Dean waved. "And I'm sorry."

"Me, too." Ellen tried not to snicker as she watched Joe walk out. "Joe? If Melissa asks why his clothes are damp, can you tell her he was playing in water.?"

Joe grunted.

"And Joe?" Ellen called out again. "Tell her he ate."

Afraid of yelling anymore, Joe carried the wiry big baby out.

Ellen turned to Dean. "Sp what's this late night meeting with Joe?"

"Oh check this out." Dean said leaning into Ellen. "I'm meeting the mystery time traveler tonight."

"Any guesses on who it is?"

"Haven't a clue. All I know is this person had to pass a Jason time exam. So knowing that . . ." Dean gave a flash raised of his eyebrows. "This person has to be exceptional."

^^^

"Oh, yeah." Frank grveled in voice in Joe's office. "Call me, Mr. Time."

"Oh, my God." Joe closed his eyes.

The moan from Jason and whine from Henry as they both slumped in their chairs, reflected Joe's sentiments.

"Or better, yet." Frank held up a finger. "The chosen. I am the chosen time man, or . . ."

"Frank! Enough!" Joe slammed his hand on the desk. "First off, let's get something straight. You are not, I repeat, not, the head honcho on this time trip."

"But I'm Frank."

“And you also are at times one dumb son of a bitch.” Ignoring Frank’s gasp, Joe calmed himself down. “The only reason you have any responsibility other than picking up items we need, is because you are my son and it works in our favor.”

Jason decided to explain. “See. We were trying to figure out how the third person could get through to Joe. The day we send you back is a day we know that Joe is working in the CIA office. We will want you to call him, Frank, and ask for simple background checks on some of the Society members.”

“I may question you.” Joe asked. “But you tell me it is for something top secret that you’re working on. Got it.”

“Yes.” Frank nodded. “Then what?”

“Then you’ll give me the time to do it and I’ll fax it to you.” Joe said.

“I don’t have a fax machine.” Frank replied. “Trish does. But how are you going to fax something to the future. Isn’t that . . .”

“Frank.” Joe halted him. “Yet, another aspect of your job as the time guy. Miles City is the closest major town around here. That is where you’ll go when you go back in time. There’s a library there, a big one. And a copy store. During a test run before the actual time trip, part of your job is to find the copy store and get the fax number.”

Henry raised his hand. “Joe, once again I want to state this is not a good idea sending Frank back in time. You can’t do that to old world civilization.”

“Hey.” Frank snapped. “I resent that. Did I not pass Jason’s test with flying colors. And I’m not gonna screw anything up. I know what I’m supposed to do. I’m the call guy, shopping guy, and fax guy. But I’m not the head honcho guy. Who is?”

“The person who is responsible for retrieving the library information.” Joe answered.

“Which is?” Frank asked.

The opening of the office door brought the answer. Dean walked in. “I know I’m early. But I wanted to . . .” He stopped cold when he saw Frank. “No.”

“No!” Frank stood up. “Dad.”

“Joe.” Dean looked at Joe.

Henry buried his face in his hands. “Oh, my God.”

“I am not going back in time with him.” Frank pointed at Dean. “He thinks he knows everything.”

“And he knows nothing.” Dean argued.

“Enough.” Joe yelled. “It’s settled. You will do this together. You three. Henry stays by the time machine watching the history disks and you two . . .” Joe paused to cringe. “Interact with the past.”

Frank dropped down to his chair.

“Joe. Jason.” Dean spoke argumentatively walking to Joe’s desk. “What are you thinking. You can not send this man back in time. You can’t. It’s Frank. Frank.”

“What?” Frank looked up.

“See.” Dean said pointing back to Frank.. “Joe, you can not be serious? Do you realize the trouble he can cause?”

“Oh!” Frank yelled out. “Look at you making little man remarks when you’re just jealous.”

“Of what? You?”

“Yeah.” Frank said arrogantly. “Because I’m just as much a science savvy guy as you.”

Dean tried not to laugh. “How do you figure.”

“I aced the time test and . . .” Frank nodded. “Who finally cured the plague?”

“Me.” Dean snapped.

“But was I not the one who suggested you diluted the antidote too much.”

“Yeah. Only after I told you we added too much water.” Dean’s voice began to raise. “I can not believe that you would even sit there and suggest you cured . . .”

“Dean.” Joe called out in a calm manner. “Why are you even wasting your breath. Do you realize how ridiculous the whole argument is? We all know who cured the plague. Sit down.”

Frank smirked as Dean sat. “Me. I cured the plague.”

Dean snapped a glare at Frank.

Henry whined again. “Joe, Jason. Please. Change this.”

“No.” Joe said strong. “No. The discussion is final. Sitting before me is the winning combination. I believe that. Right Jason? I have every faith in these three.”

Legs crossed in a European manner, Jason slowly shook his head. “No, you don’t.”

After taking a good long look at Frank Henry and Dean, a fake cry and grunt came from Joe as he covered his face in his hands. “Oh God. What are we doing?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

November 23

In was school-girl like the giggle that came from Andrea. In Dean's lab she tapped her hand on Dean's in a motherly manner. "Don't be silly. Frank isn't going to kill you when you go back in time."

"I'm concerned about it. He could push me you into the flow of traffic and nothing would change in time."

"But he has no reason to kill you."

"After today he may. Ellen, she's having a talk with him."

"About you and her?" Andrea asked.

"Somewhat."

Andrea let out an aggravated breath. "Lord, Dean. I know some men in this community share their women. You and Frank are not in that category. You can not share Ellen."

"I don't want to share her, Andrea. I just . . . want her."

"Well you can't have her. She's married. So drop it." Andrea's hand cut through the air. "Drop it."

Joe's long whistle sang into the lab. "Andrea Winters-Sanchez. Are we mad at Dean?"

"No." Andrea shook her head "We were just discussing medications and that . . . future trip."

"Speaking of future trips." Joe walked further into the lab. "Dean I need those specifications for that mobile lab. As soon as we get those motorcycles in shape, John's leaving to look for one. And the time trip meeting is in a couple hours."

"Shit." Dean snapped his finger. "That was today I was supposed to give that to you." He saw Joe nod. "I have it ready. It's in the computer down in the cryo-lab. Wait here?"

"I'll wait." Joe pulled up a stool and sat down.

"I'll be back." Dean darted from the lab.

After watching Dean leave, Joe looked to Andrea. "Everything all right with Dean?"

"Oh, yes." Andrea smiled. "We weren't arguing. I was just giving a mother's scold. That's all."

"Do you think it worked?"

"Absolutely not." Andrea shook her head. "He's just a little concerned about this time trip."

"I'm not worried about the time trip as much as the mock runs they have to make to Miles City. I just fear it may be a little too much Frank and Dean quality time." Joe chuckled. "And speaking of Miles City. Things have

been so busy . . .” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a picture. He set it before Andrea. “Check this out. Some of Robbie’s things were left behind there. Frank found them.”

Andrea smiled sweetly at the photograph of the four Slagel Boys. “Look at Robbie. So innocent looking.”

“He was innocent Andrea. All the way around.” Joe took the picture back when Andrea handed it to him. “One of the best kids. That’s why I totally disagree with those who say the world didn’t make him bad. The world had too. And Frank finding this picture and the other things is my reiteration.” Joe placed the picture back in his pocket.

“I agree with you.” Andrea laid her hand over Joe’s. “We have to cherish those memories of our children when that’s all we have of them. But . . . let’s not forget the ones that we still have. Katie, Frank, Ellen. They are precious gifts.”

In the midst of his solemn moment, Joe jolted at the crass calling of his name.

“Joe.” Sharp and angry, Jenny Matoose spoke as she stepped into the lab. She stopped cold, folding her arms in an intimating manner as she leaned to one side, red hair over her shoulder, tapping her foot. “You have to do something.”

“What’s wrong?” Joe asked.

“Well, John tells me the new man, Sarge is going to be in security. So I go over, do my normal greeting and the man asks when I am giving him sex as part of his welcome to Beginnings.”

“He didn’t go after you did he?” Joe asked with concern.

“Oh, no. He was very polite. But he still asked.” Jenny said with irritation.

“I’ll speak to him.” Joe said.

“No, not him. Frank and Ellen. Because *they* were the ones who told him I would.” Still hostile, Jenny spun with dramatics and stormed from the lab.

After bobbing his head in thought following Jenny’s exit, Joe turned back to Andrea. “What was that again you were saying about our children being precious gifts.”

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*Frank, we need to talk. Frank, we need to step back.’ I need some time.’* The words of how to convey what Ellen needed to speak about ,ran through her mind as she made an intentionally early arrival at Frank’s house before the meeting.

A deep breath and a sequester of fear accompanied her raised fist to

the front door. She wasn't going to back down. After all, Frank had been her best friend for over half her life. What was there to worry about. Of everyone she had to be the most honest to him.

"El." Frank said surprised as he opened the door. "You're early."

"I know and there's a reason for it." Ellen stepped in. "Where's Brian?"

"Josh is bathing him." Frank saw the panic hit Ellen. "No, no. He won't leave him alone again."

"Good." She let out a breath. "Anyhow. We need to talk."

"Really?" Frank smiled.

Just as Ellen was about to say 'yes' she saw Frank dart with some excitement across the room. "Frank?" She called out curiously. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't think, and I've been up on it."

"What are you talking about?"

Frank held up Rev. Bob's better marriage book and headed back into the livingroom. "I've been following carefully. I didn't think it was time to have spontaneous talks." Frank began to flip through the pages. "But I'll tell you El. I can't wait until we hit that step of this plan. I have tons, tons of memories I want to bring up out of the blue."

Ellen blinked slowly. "They won't be spontaneous then."

"Yeah they will." Frank shook his head. "It's not here, hon. Step six is where we're at." Frank smiled. "Starting tomorrow. Where did you read it was time?"

"I didn't. I just . . ."

"El." Frank snickered. "Do you think it's wise to insert your own marriage suggestions?"

"Frank. I'm not here to talk about this step thing." She reached her hand up and lowered the book from him. "I have to talk about something else. Let's sit down." She grabbed his arm and led him to the couch. As they sat, Ellen noticed Frank's stare still on the book. "Why are you so into this?"

Frank let out a breath. "Because I want this marriage to work. I want prove that we can be a couple instead of two friends that sleep together. Being your husband is something I always wanted. Something I have dreamed of since I was an eighteen year old kid staring at you while you brushed your hair. Truly believing everyday that I watched you walk in the door, that you would fall in love with me. This is not something I want to give up. This is something I've waited my whole life for. We have missed the ace in every hand fate has dealt us. And last year when we got married . . ." Frank gripped the book. "I felt like I had been given all four of them." With a quick breath and a shake of his head, Frank caught himself being entirely too mushy. "Sorry." He put the book down. "So . . . what *did* you wanna talk

about?”

Ellen stared at him. Like a magnet he was pulling at her. A tugging she wanted to just kill him over. “Um . . . I was thinking maybe Josh could watch all the kids over Dean’s instead of here. Billy’s been sleeping early, I’d hate to drag him out.”

“Oh.” Frank shrugged. “Sure. Is that it?”

“Yeah.” Ellen nodded slowly. “That’s it.”

Frank chuckled as he stood up. “That didn’t take long. You want some coffee while we wait.” he pointed to the kitchen.

“Yes. Thanks.” Rubbing her hands together, Ellen kept her eyes on Frank as he walked from the room. Then she shifted her views to the book on the coffee table. Cover bent, pages dirty, all evidence along with his words that he had been reading the book. Picking up the book and flipping through the pages made Ellen feel even worse. How differently they were looking at it. Frank had gone as far as to circle sections in the book, when she herself had yet to read a single sentence.

^^^

It was a peaceful quiet moment in Dean’s house, broken only by the knock at the door. He should have smiled at the twins who painting quietly on the floor instead of fighting. But in his step over them to the door, Dean grew annoyed by the wiggling Alexandra did. “Alex, please go to the bathroom.”

“I don’t have to.” She added some paint to the picture and wiggled some more “I’m just singing in my head.”

Grunting, Dean opened the door. He smiled when he immediately saw Brian in Ellen’s arms. “El? What’s going on?” He raised his eyes to see Josh. “Hey, Josh.”

“Job.” Josh said. “Watch kids.”

Ellen smiled. “I thought we’d bring the sitter and the baby here.”

The smack of the hand against the door, brought Frank. “Yeah.” He pushed the door open. “Mess up your house instead of mine.”

Surprised, Dean shifted his eyes to Frank who walked in after Ellen and Josh. “El, what’s he doing here.”

Frank answered. “Saying hi to the twins before the meeting.” He walked into the livingroom. “Hey, guys. Alex, go to the bathroom.”

Ellen giggled watching Frank kiss the kids and talk for a moment with them. She ignored Dean’s whispering of her name.

Frank stood up. “Ready?” He asked walking to Ellen.

Dean grabbed hold of Ellen’s arm as she started to follow Frank.

“Frank, could I bring her to the meeting. I have to talk to El about something real fast.”

“All right. But don’t dally.” Frank kissed Ellen. “See you there.” He moved to the door. “Josh. Do a good job.”

Josh gave a thumbs up to Frank.

Ellen waited until the door shut and looked at Dean. “What’s up?”

“I need to . . .”

“Dad!” Billy called out. “Alex is really getting bad.”

Dean looked to a frantically wiggling Alexandra. “Alex, go to the bathroom now.”

“No.” Alexandra answered hard. “I don’t have to.”

“Yes, you do.” Dean argued. “Go.”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Alex.” Dean scolded.

“Dean.” Ellen snapped. “Why are you yelling at her. She said she doesn’t have to go.”

“Yes, she does El.” He pointed. “Why else is she dancing around for no reason.”

“Maybe she has Tarantism.”

“She doesn’t have Tarantism.” Dean’s voice raised in volume with every word. “She has the same stupid problem you do where she waits until the last minute!”

“Why are you yelling!”

“Because you didn’t talk to Frank!”

“I couldn’t. I tried.” Ellen lowered her tone. “I just . . . he said some things and I felt bad.” She saw the glare in Dean’s eyes. “No, Dean. He’s my husband what do you expect me to do? Just up and leave him. I can’t. I can’t do that to Frank.”

Dean had a sarcastic chuckle to him. “Yeah, but you did it to me.”

“Fuck you.” Ellen spun and walked to the door. “I refuse to play these stupid get even with Frank games of yours.”

“I’m not the one playing games.” Dean charged. “You are. You can’t have us both, El.” He grabbed the door as she opened it. “You can’t. You have to choose. And if you don’t choose soon I won’t be a choice.”

“I have news for you, Dean. You really aren’t a choice. When it boils down to it, Frank’s my husband. What are you?” With her hard words she stormed out with a slam of the door.

“Damn it.” Dean’s fist went to the door and the second he leaned into it he knew. The laughter from Josh. The complaining moan from Billy and the wail if a whine from Alexandra. Releasing a moan of his own, Dean turned around to see what he expected. Alexandra standing socking wet. “Aw, Alex.”

“It’s all your fault.” Alexandra marched in an awkward strained manner to the steps. “You yelled at my mother!”

“I can’t win with the women in my life.” Dean reached for the door. “I can’t win. Josh, I’m going to the meeting.”

“Spot!” Josh pointed to the carpet. “Spot.”

Dean took a deep breath. “I’ll get it when I get back. I won’t be long. Just mark it so I knew where it is.” he walked out.

Nodding his understanding of the request, Josh bent down, grabbed the paint set, and with the red paint, proudly marked a big ‘X’ on the wet portion of the carpet.

^^^

Joe paused in his meeting comments to the crowded room when Ellen storm into the social hall. “Ellen, we just started talking about . . .”

“Sorry.” She walked to the three tables joined together and pulled out a seat between Frank and Henry.

Twitching his head, Joe started to continue again, but stopped--again, when Dean walked in.

“Sorry.” He spoke in the same pissed of manner and sat across from Ellen.

Frank, priding himself on being not only the ‘Chosen’ but perceptive as well, couldn’t help but notice they seemed mad. “Dean. What did you do to my wife.”

“Shut up Frank.” Dean snapped.

“Don’t.” Joe warned. “We’re here for a meeting. A short one. No off the subject stuff. Now, back to what we were talking about. CDC Mobile lab search is slated for the 27<sup>th</sup>. John, you’re set for that. What about our motorcycles? They’ll be ready for tomorrow’s mock run?”

“Barring . . .” John Matoose gave a stare to Ellen. “Barring any inane interruptions to be interrogated.” He looked back to Joe. “Yeah. First thing. Then we’ll look them over again after the run.”

“Good.” Joe said. “We’ll do the mock run, having Dean and Frank ride them.”

Frank snickered at that. “Dean on a bike. I’m not gonna have to teach him like a five year old, am I?”

Dean shook his head, a sarcastic look on his face. “No Frank, I think I can ride. But if you do have to teach me anything, I’m sure it will pale in comparison to my library experience with you.”

Joe wanted to end it before anymore could be said. “Boys. We aren’t here to bicker. Work together, end of discussion. Now the motorcycle issue is settled. Onto tomorrow’s mock run.” He saw Ellen raising her hand. “This

isn't a classroom Ellen, what is it?"

"I was just thinking when they go to the library they should pick up some books on paranormal activity."

After a fluttered of his eyes, Joe had to ask. "Why do we need books on that subject?"

"We have a ghost in Beginnings." Ellen stated matter-of-fact.

"Ellen, we don't have a ghost in Beginnings." Joe had a bark to him.

"But what about . . ."

"No." Joe held up his hand. "No going off the subject. There is no ghost. Quit listening to Henry." With a huff, Joe continued. "The mock run. Tomorrow, Frank, Dean, is very important. We're going to send you with a team. But use the time and trip wisely. I want the two of you to find where you are suppose to go, so you don't look like idiot tourists when you arrive back in time. Find a place that we can fax to, get the number. Try to stay around the library. Practice not being separated. All we need is you two running amuck in Miles City, four years pre-plague. Now just so everyone knows exactly what we are doing, Jason will go down their agenda."

Jason gathered his notes, sitting up in his chair. "I will send the three of them back four years, three weeks pre-plague. When they get to Miles City, Dean will go straight to the library and Frank will go to the designated pay phone, call Joe and give him the information. The background checks will take about an hour and a half. That's all the time Dean has to get the info. So, after the call, Frank will go to the library and help out Dean." Jason shook his head 'no' to Dean who started to laugh. "There's a lot of copies to be made and information to be found. After giving Joe enough time, Frank will call him again to make sure the information is ready. Joe will fax it, Dean and Frank will get the fax, pick up mine and Joe's request and head back. They should be in that time frame three and a half hours tops. Henry, bring a good book."

Ellen waved her hands about. "Wait a second. What little request are they getting? Why do you two get a little request and not us?"

"Because El." Dean barked at her. "We aren't shopping for all of you. We're getting them cigarettes and that's it. Easy enough."

Ellen still felt like arguing on that. "Well what if we decide on one item we all want. Can you get it then?"

Before Dean could snap at her again, Joe intervened. "What is it that you want Ellen? Hair spray, fingernail polish, what, what trivial thing is so important that you have to have?"

"Well." Ellen smiled. "What about McDonald's French fries. I miss them."

"McDonald's Fries?" Joe started to laugh and expected others to make fun at them too, but that didn't happen. Instead, exciting conversation broke

out about it.

Andrea was just as thrilled at the notion. "Ellen, you are so right, there is nothing like those fries."

Reverend Bob, who was there as a spiritual guide, guided in *his* thoughts. "And they can't forget the little packs of ketchup. Ketchup . . . I miss that. But, Dr. Hayes, how will our systems handle that?"

Dean had to think about it. "Considering the fat content that some of you Beginnings people consume with our butter . . ." He looked at Ellen. "I don't see where it would be harmful if consumed in moderation."

The response at the table was as if Dean's word was the O.K.. Everyone began discussing how many orders of super size would be needed to accommodate those in on the project.

Joe whistled loudly. "All right! We'll get fries. Christ, Jason and I will figure out how many orders. Now! The Meeting. Trish!"

Trish screamed. "I didn't say anything."

"History disks." Joe grumbled. "You said you had something very important to add tonight."

"Oh." Perky as usual, Trish stood up. "Since Henry has to be the protector of the history disks and carry them around. I . . ." She giggled and reached under the table. "Worked with Ben from fabrics on making you this lovely purple panda carrying case."

Henry smiled as he took it. "Thanks Trish. This is nice. And big, I can carry my journal in here."

Joe rubbed his temples as he watched Trish sit down. "That was it? That was the big thing about the disk?" Joe had edge to him. "You couldn't wait until you gave him the final disks to give him the case?"

"No, Joe." Trish shook her head. "I worked hard on that. I wanted everyone to see."

"Christ." Joe grumbled. "All right. Final problem." He stood up. "I need suggestions. We need money, not a lot, but enough for this trip. Let's face it people, things just weren't free in the past. We need money for the phone calls, parking meters, copy machines, gasoline, faxes, magazines, cigarettes and even those fries. We need money and it has to be at least ten years old. So any suggestions." Noticing at that moment, Dean looking so much like Ellen with his hand waving about in a school boy fashion, Joe looked to Dean. Joe was relieved. Dean was the bright boy of Beginnings. If he had a solution, had to be good. "Yes Dean, you have a solution about money?"

"Yeah, Joe." Dean looked proud. "Ellen has money."

Joe, ignoring Ellen's loud gasp, and everyone's 'what?' spun his head in confusion. "Ellen has money?"

"Sure." Dean nodded. "And lots of it."

Standing up and holding his hand out to everyone, Joe walked down the table. "How does Ellen have lots of money, Dean?"

"Before we left Ashtonville. She robbed the first savings and loan. Then she hit up the drug store, grocery store, video store . . ." He felt the slight pain to his head when the pencil Ellen held came flying at him. "But she has money. A whole box full. Don't you Ellen?"

"No!" She answered quickly. "He's lying Joe. I don't have any money." Her hand slammed to the table as she shot eye daggers at Dean. "And I can not believe I mourned you!"

Dean laughed. "And I can not believe you won't own up to the money. Joe she has it."

Joe looked at Henry. "Henry, she lives with you. Does she have a box of money at your house?"

Henry shrugged, lost. "She has boxes, I don't know if they have money."

"No." Dean shook his head. "The money is in one of the boxes at my house."

Frank was curious, but not about the money. "What boxes does Ellen still have at your house, Dean? She still has boxes at mine."

"That's what I want to know!" Joe interjected. "She has boxes at Dean's house and at Henry's. Does she have boxes at your house Frank?" Getting Frank's nod, Joe took on an interrogation tone "How can that be? We were only allotted three boxes each when we moved here. Ellen?"

"Dean gave me two of his." She said. "And Henry gave me one of his."

John Matoose felt a little like adding fuel to the fire. "Uh Joe? I gave her a box and so did George."

"And me." Andrea added. "I gave her one of mine because I really didn't have anything."

Joe walked closer to Ellen. "Nine boxes? You brought nine boxes?"

"Joe, I had a whole house to pack up. You people wandered to Ashtonville, I had a house of memories." She began to account for the boxes on her fingers. "I had nicknacks, and not to mention my videos, pictures, my china, wine glasses, clothes . . ."

"Ellen!" Joe halted her. "And don't lie to me. Did you use one of those boxes for money!?"

After a short mind debate, Ellen came clean. "Yes."

"So you lied to me!" Joe scolded. "Now how much money do you have?"

"Not much."

Stopping Dean before he tattled any further, Joe stepped as close as he could to her. "How much is not much?"

Ellen slid down in her seat mumbling.

“Excuse me?” Joe cupped his ear. “I can’t hear you.”

“I said, twelve thousands, seven-hundred, and fifty-six dollars, in small and large denominations. Mostly small.”

“What!” His booming voice shook Ellen and caused her to scoot to Frank. “Why in the world do you have almost thirteen thousand dollars?”

“I thought that we may need it some day.”

“Guess what Ellen, we do.” Joe placed his hands on his hips. “And we need bills that are ten years old or older. With that much money it will be a tedious task of sifting through. Now, since you were so gifted as to be given the keen insight into our monetary problems of the future. We’re going to place that tedious task . . .” With a grin, Joe leaned down to Ellen and pinched her cheek. “In your capable hands.” Joe stood up straight. “Wow, that problem was solved fast.” He clapped his hands together then reached down and closed Ellen’s open mouth, “Meetings over everyone. Who wants to join me in a drink?”

The invitation extended was welcomed by those in attendance. The meeting was short and things were in motion. Everyone stood and headed over to the bar. Everyone but Ellen. She was still in a state of shock over the task she had a head of her. But she knew one thing for sure, she may have been the one that had to go through all of the money, but Dean was the one who was going to pay. In one time frame or another.

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Reading, PA

The cup of wilderness bred tea was hot but bitter. It did the trick of warming Steward as he sat before a fireplace of a small house in a sector of Reading.

Grant Collins was no more than fifty, but the hard years and work of building and leading his community made him look as if he were well beyond his years. His facial lines showed wisdom as he spoke with Steward. “So you understand?”

“Yes.” Steward nodded then took a sip of his tea again.

“I mean, it’s a fine offer. A fine offer.” Grant said. “But as you can see, we built this place back up. We’ve plenty of food. Other survivors aren’t a problem. We haven’t come across any of those . . . Savages.” He shrugged. “We’re fine. I spoke to my town. No one is interested in joining up.”

“Understandable.” Steward set down his cup. “We’ll leave in the morning then.”

“No hard feelings?” Grant asked.

“None.” Steward smiled as he stood up. “Just remember. No matter what. You are still protected by the United States Government. We’re rebuilding. We drop of a radio in a week or two if you run into any trouble or change your mind.”

“We appreciate that.” Grant smiled.

“We know.” Steward gave a nod of his head before walking away. “Good night.”

Grant felt a little bad turning down the offer from the peace ambassador. But he had the town to think about. And even though he declined to join the forming army of the United States, Grant took comfort in knowing his town would still be protected and they wouldn’t be forgotten about.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

November 24

Reading, PA

Before the sun had even crossed the horizon, while only the two guards walked the pitiful fenced off perimeter of Reading, The Society trucks rolled out. The rumbling engines in a departure were the only sound in the sleeping town. Unnoticed, unescorted they left.

But the trucks stopped just a mile away. Inside the back of the trucks, the armed society soldiers stood.

Steward paced slowly behind a line of four soldiers who were perched on the ground behind a small grade. Each soldier was positioned before a mortar gun.

After looking the battalion leader, Sgt. Hemsley, Steward checked out the time then nodded his head.

“Load.” Sgt. Hemsley called out. He listened for the shifting sounds. “On my call . . . fire.”

Holding off his one ear, Steward cringed some at the loud cracking of the firing mortars. The mortars sailed with a whistle. They could be heard exploding in the distance, not with a bellowing ‘boom’ but with four simple pops.

A short lived wake up call in the form of gas was delivered to the small population of the town. Moments after, the Society trucks restarted their engines and headed back to Reading to finish the job.

Beginnings, Montana

The reason for the gift was guilt. Dean felt bad for arguing with Ellen, and that was made worse when Andrea told him she treated Ellen for severe paper cuts brought on by sifting through old money. Old world germs could have resurfaced, and though chances were slim, Ellen still was a candidate for gangrene. If she got it, it would be all Dean's fault. So he did something out of character. He became a thief in the night. Actually the day, and he took something he wouldn't get in trouble within the community for. But trouble would be had when it was found out Dean took one. But he had to do it. He wanted his 'forgive me' speech to be special and he also wanted Ellen to be the first person in Beginnings--with the exception of Andrea--to get a rose.

So from the greenhouses where Miguel's special Andrea rose bushes were planted, Dean ran all the way to town and into containment.

Ellen was in her office, Dean saw her when he walked in. And he walked in quietly, definitely not wanting to disturb her from what she was doing. Stepping in without a peep, Dean reached behind him and shut the door. He smiled watching Ellen. Her backside peeking out from under the desk, as she semi-hid under there, on her hands and knees, head pressed almost to the floor. Moving to the desk, Dean rose behind his back, squatted behind her. "El? Why are you on your hands and knees hiding under this desk?" Dean grinned when she peered over her shoulder.

"I lost the back to an earring. See." She showed him the small gold loop. "Fell right out."

"Why are you wearing earrings? I don't think I've ever seen you wear them."

"Alex." Ellen looked around. "She asked me this morning why Jenny Matoose wears earlobe decorations and I don't. She said Jenny told her you have to be feminine to wear them and maybe her mother wasn't feminine." Ellen tossed her hands up and plopped to her backside. "I can't find it. I've been under here for ten minutes. I know it's these tiny speckles on the floor that's confusing me." She watched Dean sit on the floor as well. "Why are you here. I thought we were fighting."

"I don't want to fight. I come in peace." He brought from behind his back, the rose. "For you."

Ellen's eyes lit up when she took it. "Oh, my God. Did you . . . did you steal this?"

"Kind of. So don't let Andrea see it. You know how she is about those bushes."

Ellen sniffed the flower. "What a turn on, you being bad."

Dean smiled. "Even though I like that notion." He reached out and took the flower from her. "That's not why I brought it. I was wrong last night. Wrong for getting mad because you didn't talk to Frank. Wrong for opening my mouth about the money. I was bitter. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Dean." Ellen leaned into him and kissed him softly. "It's all right. I said some things too that weren't real . . . they weren't right. I'm sorry too."

"I just love you, El." Dean tickled the rose lightly down her cheek. "I want you in my life more than we are. But . . . I have to understand that right now you're confused on . . . El? Look." He pulled a strand of her hair to show her the back of the earring twisted within it.

"Dean you found it. Is it stuck in there?"

"I think. I'll get it." After reaching back and placing the rose on the desk, Dean began to maneuver her hair. He laughed on how such a tiny object could be interwoven in her hair.

"Dean, ow. Quit." She laughed with him. "Quit playing around with it. Either leave it in or take it out."

"I'm getting it out. One more minute."

"Just pull it out quickly."

"It'll hurt if I do that."

"Just pull it . . ." A ear piercing bang on Ellen's desk, rattled all of Ellen's objects on there. "What was that?"

Squatting down to their level was Frank, and he did not look happy. "Isn't this the cozy fuckin picture?"

Dean turned his head back to look. "Frank."

"Dean . . . El?"

"Hi, Frank." Ellen said chipper. "Dean was helping me with the back to my earring."

"Really? That's what I thought I heard." Frank stood up.

Ellen crawled out from under the desk. "How come you're here Frank?"

"Well it isn't to see the floor show you two were putting on." Frank snapped. "It's to get him." he pointed to Dean. "It's time. Bikes are done. Let's go. Mock run. I'm gathering everyone."

"Now?" Dean asked. "I have things to finish up at the clinic."

"Yeah, it looked like you were doing that." Frank looked quickly at Ellen who giggled. "Go finish them up, Dean. This run is taking almost three hours."

"O.K. El, if I don't get to them can you do Hap's sugar levels" Getting an agreement Dean headed to the door and stopped. "Frank, I do have a helmet, don't I?"

"Yes, Dean." Frank rolled his eyes. "I know you're a wimp. I got you a helmet."

“It’s not being a wimp. It’s being safe.” Dean said. “Not all of us have the hard head you have Frank. We all can’t be secure in the fact that if we crash head first at fifty miles an hour and wake up an idiot, no one will notice.”

“Real fuckin funny, Dean. See how funny you think it is when I leave your ass back in time ten years ago.”

“How do you know I won’t leave you Frank?”

“Because I’ll hunt your past self down and take you out. What the hell do I have to lose, the other me will still be around.”

Ellen looked to both of them “Joe and Jason actually trust you two?”

“Both of you are just the funny people, aren’t you.” Frank shook his head.

Ellen gasped. “What the hell is with the bad mood.”

“I’m chasing his skinny ass around, looking for . . .” In the midst of his complaining Frank saw it. Around Ellen his arm reached and he lifted the rose from the desk. “Who ripped off Andrea’s roses bush.”

“Dean.” Ellen pointed to him.

Frank smiled.

“Aw, look Dean.” Ellen said. “Frank thinks that was sweet.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank said in awe. “Real sweet.” He held up the rose. “It’s even gonna be sweeter watching Andrea go off on him.” Holding the rose, Frank walked to the door. He grinned wide at Dean. “And I’m telling.” He winked and took off.

“Shit.” Dean flew out after him.

“Hey!” Ellen called out as she stood alone in her office. “Great. They took my flower.” Tossing up her hands in defeat she went back to sit at her desk.

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So serious, as if the beginning to an interrogation, Joe approached Cole who stood before the doors to the field house. “He still in there?”

Arms folded, Cole nodded. “Thirty-five minutes now.”

Joe took a deep nostril breath. “No wonder we couldn’t find him for this meeting.”

“I’m frightened Joe.” Cole stated. “If you need a new logisticalizer for the time trip. I’ll go.”

Joe gave a swat to Cole’s arm. “Thanks for the offer. But I’m sure it’s not a repeat of the wall. He probably lost something.” Confident, Joe walked into the field house. But he soon started to get scared when he only saw Henry’s lanky legs extended from behind a storage hatch. “Cole said you’ve been crawling around in here for a while. We need you for that mock run.”

The clank of Henry hitting his head on the metal, sounded off first before emerged. “Oh, hi. Joe.” He dusted his hands off. “Just doing the rodent check.”

“Rodent check?” Joe asked. “Why?”

“To make sure they aren’t a problem.” Henry smiled. “Don’t want that.”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “And why are we suddenly concerned with rodents being a problem.”

“Since the mystery mouse.”

“What mouse?”

“You remember?” Henry chuckled. “The one I chased, but Frank found, stepped on then carried for fourteen hours dead in his pocket only to put it in my fridge before finally sticking it in my . . . Joe? Why do you look as if you haven’t a clue what I’m talking about.”

“Because I don’t Henry. There hasn’t been any mice before the plague.”

“Sure there has Joe. Oh!” Henry snapped his finger. “Forget it. The Dean is dead history. And I guess my theory is right. Oh good. They’re still trapped.”

“Trapped where?”

“Underneath the cryo-lab. I thought that’s where he came from you know with the explosion, but since there was no explosion, no mice. Great.” Henry grinned. “I feel so much better. We better get to that mock run.” Upbeat and looking as if the weight was lifted off his shoulders, Henry walked out.

Joe just scratched his head.

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Quite impressive.” Sgt. Doyle told George. “Ten percent causality. Ambassador Lange was the last to report in.”

“So Reading Pennsylvania went well?” George asked sitting behind the desk that used to be Commanding Officer’s of Quantico.

“Very. He requested another truck to bring the greenhouse supplies down. We need those. Population is growing.”

“So what are our totals from this sweep?”

Sgt. Doyle looked down to his paper. “The four ambassadors report no society injuries and a survivor sweep total of twelve hundred and sixty-three.”

We expect better next week when we move more south west.” He handed the sheet to George. “We’re making preparations now for those sweeps.”

“Thank you. We’ll have that army yet for you.”

Sgt. Doyle smiled a little. “Oh, I have plenty for a small army. However, I haven’t anyone to help me train them.”

“Cyborg enhancement says not long.”

“Good to hear.” Sgt. Doyle stepped back. “If you need me . . .”

“Sgt. Doyle.” George called out before Sgt. Doyle left. “Just curious. How many of these people can we expect to be defectors?”

“We’ve been doing these sweeps at full force for two months. By what we’ve seen, less than one percent. If that. They’ll trail out here and there.”

“But that’s not the case lately.” George lifted his glasses and put them on. He pulled a stack of papers to before him and thumbed through them. “Four days ago twenty-four. Two days ago. Six. Last night twelve?”

“That’s what the camp master counted.”

“Any connection between the first twenty-four and the last eighteen? Could they have all come from the same sweep?”

Sgt. Doyle took a moment to think. “Off hand, I couldn’t give a good answer. There’s twenty-seven hundred men living in that sector of base. In order to pinpoint an answer we’d have to check records.”

“Do that for me.” George ordered. “And get back as soon as you can.”

“Yes, sir.” Sgt. Doyle started to leave but stopped. “Sir, in comparison to what we have built in numbers here, those forty-two are minimal. They’re nothing to be concerned about.” With an assuring smile, Sgt. Doyle nodded and walked out.

“Nothing to be concerned about huh?” Georg spoke to himself. “So why am I worried?” George lifted the defector statistic sheet and just shook his head.

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### Beginnings, Montana

“Why am I the only one here?” Frank asked looking at his father and Jason in the quantum lab. “Here’s the bikes. Here’s the time machine. Where are Henry and Dean?”

Joe looked down at his watch. “Just give them a few more minutes.”

“Sorry.” Henry opened up the door. “I had to find a book.” He held it up as he walked in. “You know . . . if I’m going to waste three hours of my day.”

Frank grabbed the book. “You are gonna read for three hours?”

“Yeah Frank.” Henry took it back.

“God, how can you do that?” He shook his head and he saw the lab door open. “Oh look, it’s Dean. Dean, don’t you ever show up on time for anything?”

Dean closed the door. “Don’t you come equipped with a volume level or something? And I wouldn’t have been late had Andrea not been yelling at me and pelting surgical supplies at my head.”

Frank laughed. “She wouldn’t have done that if you didn’t steal her flowers to give to *my* wife.”

“I had to give your wife flowers, Frank.” Dean smiled arrogantly. “We have that special bond on a higher mentality level that you could never reach.”

“Bite me, Dean.”

“Boys!” Joe stopped them. “Please. It’s already eleven o’clock, can we do this?”

Henry held up his hand. “May I say something Joe? This is a mistake. A big mistake. Don’t send these two, you go.”

“No Henry, they worked fine together before. They’ll do fine.” Joe insisted.

“Sure Joe, but that was before Frank found out that Dean and Ellen slept together.” Henry felt the hard nudge to his back. “Ow Frank. What was that for?”

“For reminding me. Thanks Henry.” Frank barked.

Jason shook his head as he took his pseudo stance at the time machine. “I think I saw this episode on the three stooges once. Can we begin?”

Henry shaking his head opened his book and sat in the designated chair by the time machine. With one more audible ‘mistake’ he sat down and watched Dean and Frank go outside to their motorcycles. The mock run was underway.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Stepping into Miles City was a lot harder than Dean thought it would be. That street he walked down brought back painful memories he so much wanted to forget. Standing before the library door, just about to go in, Dean vividly remembered that day when he saw Andrea's son die brutally at the hands of Robbie Slagel's men. A thirteen year old boy Dean was powerless to save. It was a heartache Dean had buried so deep that he wasn't ready for when it resurfaced. And it did, the moment he walked back into Miles City, the place where Robbie held him and some of the children of Beginnings against their will.

Knowing that his time trip to Miles City would be better, it wouldn't look like it did now, Dean walked into the library and flicked on the flashlight. "Man, is this weird."

"What did you say?" Frank stormed in.

"I was talking to myself."

"I hear people do that when they have no one that will listen to them. Boring yourself yet Dean."

"I was actually waiting to bore you. Look Frank, this is a library." He walked in further. "These tall things are shelves. They used to contain things called books. Books Frank. Can you say . . ."

"Shut the fuck up Dean." Frank looked around. "All right, I'm done out there. I just needed to see how long it would take me from that payphone I found to get here."

"Did you find the store and a fax number?" Dean asked.

"The store, yeah. The fax was the hard part. But . . . I did find one. I found a place about a block from the parking lot where we're leaving the bikes. I think it was a copy place." Frank shrugged. "I'm pretty sure. Anyway, I got the fax number from the machine."

"Good." Dean moved to the door. "Because I'd like right now to get out of this place." Quickly, he stepped outside and stopped, staring up the street.

"Dean." Frank snapped his finger in front of him. "What's wrong with you? You seem weirder than usual."

"I can still see it Frank." Dean held his hand out. "I can still see them beating Denny. I tried. I tried with everything I had to help him. But there were just so many of them."

Frank lowered his head. "Denny." He let out a long breath. "I forgot this is where it all went down."

"Unfortunately I didn't. And it happened right here on this street." Solemnly, Dean began to walk. "Let's just get back to Beginnings."



It didn't take much convincing to Joe that it was time. His futile attempts at a half decent conversation with Ellen while waiting for the end of the mock run, pushed him over the edge. So during the time frame where he waited for Dean's and Frank's arrival back, Joe read through the 'Marcus baby' research and the three hours flew by for Joe.

Hearing the motorcycles as he pulled up to Jason's lab, Joe stepped from the jeep and went into the lab to join Jason and Henry. "Henry how's that book?"

"Boring Joe. I had other things I could have done."

"Sure you did. Like looking for rodents we don't have?" Joe laughed. "Think of it this way, now you're well practiced for sitting for three hours and doing nothing. Jason, did the small tests of the machine go well?"

"Yep." Jason answered. "Did you get the history disks?"

"I spoke to Trish." Joe said. "She is putting in today's mock run, and tomorrow's time trip and two other things. I'll pick them up from her tonight. She's gonna run a complete print out in the morning so they can check it out if need be when they get back."

Jason crossed his fingers. "Hopefully Henry will pick up the history and merely turn it over to the school as scrap paper."

"We're back!" Frank opened the lab door and made his loud announcement. "An hour and a half in town alone with Dean was an hour and a half too long."

"I enjoyed it too, Frank." Dean followed and closed the door. "Especially your little motorcycle tricks you were doing."

Joe checked out the time. "Timing is good. Now tomorrow remember, when you pull out onto that interstate there will be a flow of traffic. Trees and weeds won't be the only thing you see, so be careful."

Frank nodded. "I know, I know. Is there anything we need to discuss now? I want to take my bike to the garage."

Joe looked to Jason. "Anything you want to add?"

"Um, let's see." Jason ran down a list in his mind. "Just make sure tomorrow, you two clean up real well and try to look presentable."

Frank scoffed at that. "What for? I always look good."

"Oh but of course." Jason chuckled. "But Frank, if you don't clean up and wear normal clothes. Then when you two post apocalyptic time Regressionists step into Miles City, you'll look like Mad Max meets the Brady Bunch."

Dean looked oddly. "I understand the Frank comment to look presentable. But I don't think I look quite like Mad Max." He snickered, he

saw Jason didn't. "I do?"

"Don't get me wrong Dean, you look almost normal." He saw Dean comment silently 'almost?' "But you people have to remember, I was frozen for six years. I am far the best judge on if you look like you fit into society. When I saw you Dean, I suspected something was up. The scars on your face, and a sort of roughness to it. But the second I saw Frank. The second he walked in the room, I knew the world had been over for quite some time. Quite honestly Frank, you scared the hell out of me."

Dean raised his hand. "There you have it, Frank. Proof that you are not an attractive individual."

Though Jason did think Dean's comment was funny, he had to elaborate for the sake of not being rude. Covering his mouth to wipe the smile that crept on him, Jason continued as he looked at a stunned Frank. "What Dean said isn't the direction I was going. Frank, people just don't look like you, and they didn't ten years ago. I remember that more than any of you. You have a look of mean on you Frank that can only be brought on by hardship and hard work. Your face, your scars, your body, everything about you was made in this world we live in now. And it was evident to me. So for the sake of Miles City, and to just eliminate the risk that the local police aren't going to see you and think your some criminal wandering into town, you have to try to look normal. Just clean up, wear jeans and shave as close as you can."

"Got it." Un-insulted Frank gave a thumbs up and moved to the door. "Just like in the first Rambo movie." Frank opened the door. "Let's go Dean. I may be great, but I can't ride your bike for you too."

Dean couldn't help but chuckle. "Does it not figure that Frank just analogized himself like Rambo." he stood up. "It would be amusing to see the Miles City Sheriff chase him out of town." Still chuckling, Dean walked out.

Henry soon followed to the door. "I'm not a religious man, but I'm gonna pray they don't screw things up."

"Henry." Joe scoffed with a laugh. "It's a simple information gathering."

"Yeah, but you're sending Frank." Henry walked out.

With the close of the door, both Joe and Jason nodded at Henry's valid point. Sending Frank was a risk. But both Joe and Jason were intelligent enough to know there was a bright side. If Frank did do something to mess things up, Henry would be really annoyed.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Sector 48B. It was an area the Society administrators liked to call the 'dock and go'. A mere wait station for those deemed highly viable. Men who needed little training and would be an asset to one of many different aspects of the Caceres Society. The area could house three thousand and it was pushing the limits. Tents sprawled out with cots lined up inside. Men hung about biding their time in the one to two week wait until they were placed. It was crowded and a lot like a homeless camp where even the Camp master hadn't a clue the names. They were only given numbers.

Each sector had a recordsman and he was the only individual who semi knew who lived in the sector. Sgt. Doyle headed to Harv. Sector 48B's recordsman to check on the groups of men who defected in the night.

Sgt. Doyle knew Harv was probably trying to organize the personal data of the thousands of men out there before more were brought in. He hated to bother Harv, but he had to. The president had requested information on the defectors, and Sgt. Doyle only hoped Harv had the information organized enough to find it with little problem.

After knocking twice on the door of the small blue frame house where Harv deemed his place, Sgt. Doyle walked in. "Harv. It's Tim. You here." A step further into the home brought a stench that burned Sgt. Doyle's nostrils. "Harv?"

The creak of the floorboards were the only sound as Sgt. Doyle made his way to the diningroom. He stopped in the doorway. Back facing, Harv was in a chair at the diningroom table. Stacks upon stacks of papers were everywhere. But Sgt. Doyle didn't call out. He knew something was amiss. Not just the smell, but the dried blood that painted the table and the floor by Harv's feet confirmed that suspicion.

He stepped closer, hand out to the salt and pepper hair of Harv. Sgt. Doyle reached down to the head on the table and lifted it just to look. Harv was dead. His throat had been sliced. And Sgt. Doyle knew by the dryness of the blood, the peeling sound made when he raised the head, that Harv had been dead for days.

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Beginnings, Montana

Frank turned off the motorcycle, stepped off of it and walked it into the garage. "John." He called to John Matoose who was kneeling before another bike. "Oh, wow. You picked up more. And this one's way nicer than mine."

“You like it huh?” John stood up. “It’s a shame we didn’t think about them sooner. They barely use any fuel.” He wiped his hands off. “Now security is stocked.”

“So these bikes were in good shape?” Frank walked over to him.

“Dusty but excellent.” John knelt back down. “Good thing Dan used to be a biker. Speaking of Dan. Janet’s in labor. Another baby born in Beginnings.” John made an adjustment. “I bet him and Bill are ecstatic. I remember Patrick and I last year when Caroline was born. I think he was more nervous than me. How’s Denice doing with that future grandchild of yours?” John looked up at Frank, rubbing in the grandfather fact.

“Good.” Frank folded his arms. “Johnny’s not real excited about this baby. But then again, Denice lives with Curt. Fuckin share shit confuses me.”

“They’re called understandings. And they’re a way of life.” John grunted as he worked on the bike. “Well, for some of us. They work. Johnny’s just young, I don’t think sharing Denice has anything to do with being happy about the baby.” John stood up and moved to a work bench and grabbed a set of keys. He tossed them to Frank. “Try her out.”

Like an excited kid, Frank hopped on the bike. He tried to start it, it choked up and died. “John?” Stepping off and making room for John to check it out, Frank heard the call in his radio headset. “Yeah Chris?”

In the est entrance tunnel, Chris, a shorter stocky man peered into the thick overgrown brush. “Frank. I have movement of sorts out here. Tower spot anything.”

“Not in that region. You need a team?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t see anything. But I can hear . . . whoa!” Chris called out and flew backwards when he felt the brush against his chest.

“Chris. Come on. What’s going on?” Frank asked.

Chris laughed. He looked to see the frantic deer racing down the tunnel. “Ignore motions Frank. And for a while. We were just invaded by a deer.”

Frank’s laughter seeped through the airwaves. “Let me know if you need help catching him.”

“I will. Thanks.” Still laughing at his unfounded fear, Chris lowered the radio and saw him. The mangled hair, glaring eyes and dirty face. A savage. But he only saw him for a second. A gurgling sound and choke emanated from Chris when the savage lunged a spear into his throat.

Chris dropped down to the ground, and the savage followed by seven others raised like the deer, down the tunnels of Beginnings.

^^^

Yes, he was head of mechanics, but Henry also hated deers. Eavesdropping over Frank's channel told him that one was rampant in the tunnels. But Henry had promised Dean he'd find that water leak in the pipes that ran under the community. The last thing they needed was another line breaking. So flashlight in hand, Henry followed the stream.

Like a person floating into heaven, the stream led Henry to a light. But not a divine one. Henry found the cause of the water problem. The light seeped into the tunnels from the skills room in containment above. And Henry knew Ellen wasn't paying attention to her survivors, because they once again opened the escape hatch, and in some sort of demented water basketball game, had urinated through it. Pure disgust came from Henry in the form of a grunt. And not wanting to chance being caught in a bodily shower or feasted on by a blood thirsty Bambi gone mad, Henry, figuring plumbing problem was solved, hurried to get out of that tunnel.

^^^

Holding up her radio, Ellen walked into the small office that sat in the front of the containment building. She held the steel door that separated the office from the hall open with her backside. "News from the clinic on Janet." She smiled to Dan.

"How is she?" Dan swivelled his chair to face her.

"Progressing. Andrea says not much longer." Ellen hooked the radio on her belt.

Dan laughed a breath of relief. "Thanks for checking on her. I'm so nervous, I sound stupid when I check.."

"You're a guy and this is your first kid." Ellen moved to go back into containment, but stopped. "You know what, Dan. This is dumb. Bill's gonna be here in a half hour. Go to the clinic."

"Frank will have a fit." Dan said.

"No, he won't. What's gonna happen. My people are secured and the ones that aren't dangerous. They're just playing pee ball in the skills room."

"El, I don't know." Dan said in false debate. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go. Mike the Dog is here if there's trouble. And Diane too. I'll even tell Frank."

"Thanks, El." Taking full advantage of the opportunity, Dan bolted from his chair with excitement.

After a smile, Ellen shut and secured the metal door. She paused in the hall and lifted her radio. "Hello, Frank. Hey, I let Dan go to the clinic I don't have a guard for a half hour thanks." Quickly, she shut off the volume so as not to hear Frank's bitching response.

As she walked to her office, she spotted Mike the dog hurrying to her on his hands in knees. “Hey Mike. I can’t take you out.” She walked into her office and sat behind her desk. She felt Mike nudge her leg. “Not now Mike, I have stupid reports.”

He nudged her again and barked.

“O.K.” She reached down blindly and patted him on the head. “Good boy.” Lifting up papers from the clipboard on her desk, she heard the human growl of Mike and felt him pulling her pant leg. “Mike!” She scolded, but he didn’t stop. “You want me to come with you?” She saw him not giving up. “All right.” She stood up and followed him. “I hope to God you didn’t pee on my skills room floor again. Not like it matters” Carrying her clipboard, Ellen followed Mike. He darted to the skills room doorway and backed up. “In here?” Shrugging, Ellen stepped to the door and stopped cold. The clipboard dropped from her hands when she saw the total bloodbath her skills room was.

Almost as if they were devouring prey, the savages dug into the bodies of the six survivors.

Ellen’s scream caused them to look up. One of them opened his mouth, released a shrill war cry type shriek, raised his arm and hurled a spear. Quickly, Ellen reached out and pulled the door shut at the same time she heard the spear hit the metal of it.

“Shit.” She held the handle. “Help!” She called out. “Shit.” Feet planted she felt the door moving. “Help!”

Diane flew from the dining area into the hall. She saw Ellen’s body jolting as she held back the door. She raced down the hall to her. “Ellen?”

“Get my radio. Call for help.” Ellen instructed. “Hurry.”

Diane lifted the radio from Ellen’s belt. “Frank. Frank.” She called into it. “It’s dead.”

“No it’s off.” Ellen told her. “Hurry.” She called out panicked.

Fumbling, Diane turned the radio back on. “Frank. Joe, Someone. Help.”

“Hold it to my mouth.” Ellen said. “Frank, hurry. Come to containment.”

“El.” Frank blasted. “If this is a joke because you let Dan . . .”

“Frank!” Ellen screamed. “We have Indians in the skills room. Help!”

Frank who had taken the motorcycle on a spin to proudly show his father his new transportation, looked up to Joe oddly. “They have what?”

“Who the hell knows.” Joe shrugged. His and smoothed over the black bike so impressed. “This is a beauty.” Suddenly Joe looked up. “Indians.”

“Fuck.” Frank took off. “Savages.”

Containment was close, a few buildings away, and Joe sped after his racing son.

“El!” Frank cried out her name as he raced through the security door. He could see Ellen vibrating from the door struggle.

“Frank.” Ellen said in relief.

“El. Step away from that . . .”

It appeared as if Ellen flew when the savages won control of the door, flinging it open violently and bodily bringing a screaming Ellen with it.

“Door. Fuck!” Frank barged ahead moving top speed to the skills room. His boots skid on the slick, blood lined floor into the vision of the savages encircling Ellen.

On her back, violently flipped over, Ellen peered up to the group of men holding their primitive weapons high. It was over. She knew it. The arrow tipped heads lunged down. And then . . . *whoosh!*

A grip to her ankle, a tug to her leg and Ellen sailed in a fast slide out of that deadly circle a split second before the arrow heads clanked to the empty floor. The release of her leg sent Ellen on a childhood flashback ride on the ‘Slip and Slide’. Fast she slid, the momentum across the skills room floor was broken only when she slammed into the wall. Out of her roll, she looked up to see Frank in a battle with the savages.

Hand to hand Frank fought the ensuing eight human beasts from outside the walls. Using the spear he fenced off the savages. Swinging, hitting, stabbing. Trying to seize an opportunity to grab hold of his gun. But they came at him all at the same time, trying to bring the big man down.

Ellen stumbled to a stand. She had to help. Just as her foot moved forward to do something--she didn’t know what--she knew she didn’t have to. A single gun shot made her jolt to her right and see Joe blast into the room weapon raised.

He stopped, he peered, and Joe looked as calm as if he were standing on a firing range. He picked off the second savage. The instant he dropped, Frank had the freedom to step back, retrieve his revolver and join Joe in ending the bloody attack, loudly and quickly.

^^^

“Did we at least get the deer?” Frank asked into his headset. He held one ear closed to block out the noise from the clean up crew in the skills room. “O.K., good. Get back to me.”

Joe looked to Frank. “And?”

“And I’m definitely gonna post Sarge at that entrance. He psycho enough to handle any more sneak attacks. Rotate shifts there. Two men. That

should work.”

“I agree. So, did they find anything?” Joe asked.

“You mean with the deer?”

“No.” Joe snapped. “The savages. Anymore?”

“No. Johnny’s doing another air surveillance. He didn’t spot any movement. Greg took a team out, they found evidence about two miles away of a camp. They probably watched us for a while seeing how we shut down and such and pulled this little stunt.”

“I didn’t think savages were that smart.”

“Give them more credit than that, Dad.” Frank stated with certainty. “After all . . . We all were intelligent men at one time. Were we not?”

Joe just stared at his son for the longest time following his comment. He wanted to remark, but he couldn’t. In Joe’s mind Frank was doing good, sounding so credited up until that very moment. Then all Joe could do . . . was walk away.

^^^

Like the anally detailed oriented secretary Henry sat at his diningroom table. Small piles of paper spread neatly in front of him. He grabbed a few sheets, stapled them and set them to the side. Then in between his task he looked up to Dean who paced. “Don’t wear out my carpeting.”

“I’m not pacing that much.” Dean said, hands in his pockets. His attention was grabbed by the opening of the front door.

“Boys.” Joe said as he stepped in. He lifted his hand which held disks as he walked by Dean. “History. I don’t figure much will occur between now and tomorrow morning. But if it does we can copy another batch.” He straight to the dining room. “Put these in that purple panda pouch.”

“Thanks, Joe.” Henry took them and set them off to the side.

“What the hell are you doing, Henry?” Joe asked.

“Oh, I made copies of my journal just in case Frank screws something up. I don’t want to lose my original thoughts.”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna lose your position on council you waste our paper like that.”

“Joe.” Henry gasped. “These are four years of my inner feelings and views.”

“Swell.” Joe grumbled. “Where’s Frank? I want to get this short meeting over with.”

“Upstairs with Ellen.”

Dean looked up to the ceiling. “What exactly are they doing up there.”

“Trying to squeeze a Reverend Bob lesson in.” Henry stabled some papers. “Not that it should concern you, Dean. She’s Frank’s wife.” So

pompous, Henry stapled another pile.

Joe shook his head. "So, my son and Ellen are having sex."

Dean stopped cold. "I knew it. Frank saved her life. That hero stuff always gets her. You said they were working on the marriage plan."

"Why do you care?" Joe snapped. "Sit down. We'll wait."

"Not . . ." Henry paused to squeeze the stapler. "That it's any of your business, Dean. But hero aphrodisiac or not, Frank is following the plan. And they can't have sex for three more steps. So quit pacing Dean. They're discussing childhood fears."

The moan was raspy, deep and aching as it seemingly rolled from Frank's gut as his hands touched upon her bare chest. His large hands smothered with an edge up her sides as Ellen straddled his lap while he knelt on the bed.

Her lips followed directly slid up his chest, following directly behind his tee shirt that she lifted from him and tossed across the room. "Tell me." She whispered bringing her mouth to his neck. "How fast."

"Real fast." Frank spoke through his heavy breaths as his eyes rolled slightly. "I never ran faster."

"Were you scared?" Ellen brought her lips to his mouth.

"No. Not at all."

"God, I love when you save my life." She moaned and kissed him. Her arms wrapped as tight around his neck as her legs to his waist. The hand pressing hard to her back, Frank brought Ellen down to the bed. His mouth met hers wide, teasing the kisses that he hadn't had in so long. And his body moved against Ellen's in a reflection of the act that he needed, wanted and missed so badly.

There were an instant and a few articles of clothing away. Hands moved, body shifted, minds fogged. But then Frank . . . stopped. He not only lifted his mouth from hers, but his chest as well.

"What?" Ellen asked. "What's wrong?" She tried to pull him down. She felt his resistance. "Frank?"

"Trust me I want to. God, do I want to but . . ." He exhaled his frustration. "I want to make this marriage work and I really want to try to do that by following the steps."

"Frank." There was a certain amount of sarcastic laughter in her word.

"No. The last time we . . . we were together. It wasn't picture perfect." Frank swallowed. "It wasn't the way it should be. I want the next time we make love to be perfect."

"Yeah, well, now is." Ellen pulled at him. Frank still didn't budge. "Frank? Now isn't?"

“No. Now isn’t. Let’s make the whole night special. The whole thing. Let me do that. I feel I have to do that.”

“But I feel it now. Right now.” Ellen beckoned some.

“And you’ll feel it tomorrow too.” Frank said softly. “If we’re gonna do this, jump up the steps. Can we not do this when I have to hurry, pull up my pants and go to a meeting downstairs with my Dad?”

Ellen nodded. “You’re right.”

“How about this.” Frank kissed her quickly and pulled back. “How about tomorrow night after we finish with this time trip. You and I we have an evening. We’ll have dinner, hang out, and we’ll make love the right way.”

Peacefully Ellen looked at Frank realizing how badly ‘doing it right’ meant to him. “All right then.” She smiled. “Tomorrow.”

Frank returned the smile. “Tomorrow.”

^^^

#### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

The information George reviewed was sketchy, of course it was delivered in morse code. From Beginnings the information came. A message short and to the point.

*Trip back in time tomorrow. Information Gathering. Society Search.*

Basic knowledge was all George needed and thinking like Joe, he knew what Joe was trying to do. Find out what he could about the society. But what George didn’t know was how far back in time they were going. And that frightened him. Too many times in history, they left things wide open and themselves vulnerable. There were people that could be found. Data uncovered. And vital ‘organs’ as George called them, revealed.

Staring at the simple morse code message, and wondering when communications would be up in Quantico, George heard the light knock on the door. He was certain when the door opened and Sgt. Doyle walked in, what was going to be told was not good.

“Finished.” Sgt. Doyle said.

“Don’t tell me.” George leaned back in his chair.

“Any single listing that ever existed in this camp containing the names from sector 48B are gone.” Sgt. Doyle stepped closer. “It’s taken all day, but we pulled the remaining men. Got every single one of their names and the crew and I went to Harv’s.”

“Cross check the names with the files there.” George nodded with a smile.

“Our thinking exactly.” Sgt. Doyle explained. “But no such luck. All names given had an information folder at Harv’s. And just as suspected,

when they killed Hary, they took any and all information about themselves. It's as if any participation they had with the society, never occurred."

Though the numbers were small, George worried. It wasn't their defecting, but how they did it. They planned it down to a fine detail. He didn't like that idea much and as soon as he could figure where they were, he'd get rid of them. George already had one small community that was a pain in the ass to him. He didn't need the small handful of defector growing into another.

HENRY'S JOURNAL

*November 24*

*Mentally preparing myself for this next time trip is harder than the last. I have to deal with Frank and Dean and their constant threat to use the time machine against each other. I am grateful that we shouldn't run into anything that could cause mishap. Hopefully when I return, the information from the history disk should be the same as the one Trish will have printed and waiting. (Fingers crossed)*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

November 25 - The Trip

“So then . . .” Frank took a second to shift gears in the jeep then peer into the rearview mirror to Dean who sat in the back. “Dean, are you listening?” After getting a grunt from Dean and a snicker from Henry in the front seat, Frank continued. “So then, there I was, hand on Ellen’s breast and I, Frank Slagel stayed in control.” He looked back in the mirror. “Did you hear that, Dean?”

“Yeah.” Dean rolled his eyes. “You’re the man, Frank.”

“Oh, yeah.” Bringing his eyes back to the road, Frank stopped to look in the mirror. “Whoa. Look how good I look Henry.” Frank rubbed his goatee. “My beard’s all defined.”

“You’re the handsome guy, Frank.”

Frank laughed. “And the chosen time guy.” He lifted his head to the quantum lab. “We’re here.”

“Thank God.” Dean said from the back.

“Yeah.” Frank stopped the jeep. “El and I are gonna work this all out. I know we’re supposed to follow the twelve step plan and all, but . . .” He stepped from the jeep rambling as he walked with Dean and Henry. “But, tonight. Tonight we get back. I don’t know if I can handle all that sex. Ellen will be yelling . . .” stopping to open the quantum, lab door, Frank added a female sound to his voice. “Frank, oh, Frank. Dean who?”

“Yeah, yeah, Frank. You’re the champ.” Dean nudged him inside. “Let’s do this so we can end this working relationship.”

Frank, laughing in a taunting manner stepped in. “Sorry we’re late, Dean had to get his hair cut.” Frank’s eyes smiled when he saw Ellen standing with Joe and Jason. “Hey, El. What are you doing here.”

Joe answered for her. “Leaving.” He gave a slight push to Ellen. “She thinks she’s getting some of those fries first.”

Frank whispered to Ellen as she passed him. “I’ll hook you up with your own order.” He winked.

“Thanks Frank.” Ellen kissed him. “Good luck.” She stepped back. “Dean. Henry.” She gave a thumbs up. “Good luck. Enjoy it. I envy you.” Giving a nervous smile to them, Ellen turned and left the lab.

After seeing Ellen leave, Joe gave a single loud clap. “All right. Let’s do this.” Motorcycles behind him by the archway, Joe stepped aside and stood by Jason who was waiting and ready to charge up the machine. “Henry, disks?”

Henry held up the purple panda pouch. “Got them.”

“Good.” Joe faced Jason. “Wanna take it now?”

“Don’t I always?” Jason smiled and put out his cigarette. “I just need you three to take your positions. Frank and Dean holding the bikes, single form line.” He watched them get into position. “Both going and returning, when the archway illuminates, quickly go through. It’s only open for seven seconds. Organization is everything in timing. Also, when you step through, nothing should be there. Not even the archway. So if you go to take a leak Henry, mark the spot. Any questions?”

Frank raised his hand. “What if Dean gets hit by a car back then?”

Joe kept his cool. “You’ll make sure he won’t Frank. Now be ready.”

Jason began to punch his sequence. “Dean, you have the sack to carry the information, and the money you need?”

Dean raised it up. “Right here.”

“I’m ready.” Jason held off on pressing the final key. “I am sending you back ten years ago to April 14<sup>th</sup>. I know we said four years, three weeks. But Joe remembered what he was doing this date because, why was that Joe?”

Joe, almost embarrassed rubbed his head. “I got married that day and I remember hiding out at the office until three debating on what to do.” He heard Frank’s annoying laughing. “Enough. Can we do this?”

Jason checked one more time at Dean, Frank and Henry. All three looked just a little nervous. “April 14<sup>th</sup>, 9:00 a.m.. Ready?” He watched them nod, and with the final stroke of the key, the doorway lit up and instantaneously Dean, Frank, then Henry disappeared. “Five seconds and they’ll be back Joe.”

“Whoa.” Frank’s comment was the sentiment of all three as they walked from the middle of a laboratory into a high weeded, wide open field. “Shit.”

Henry looked up at the sky and coughed, he felt a heaviness in his chest. “Is it me?” He coughed again.

Dean began to choke. “No.” A tickle hit his throat. “Look at the sky.”

Frank looked up too. “It looks . . . God, it’s been a while since I saw haze.”

Dean shook his head and sniffled. “The air is different. Frank your allergies will kick in big time.”

“Swell.” Frank took one more look around. “It’s so silent.” He felt the tingle in his nose. “Man, why is it hazy when it’s April?”

Henry answered. “Pollution.” He placed his hands on his hips then stomped. “Damn.”

Dean faced him. “What’s wrong?”

“I forgot my book.” Henry shook his head.

Securing his helmet on his head, Frank began to push the bike. “Take a

nap or something. Let's go Dean, I got the keys, we'll push these to perimeter eight and shoot around the back. I hope there's a back trail, it was here when we got here."

Dean followed Frank. "Good luck, Henry. Frank . . . I'll give you the money when we get to town. And Frank? You'll look real cute in that helmet."

Before he could come back with a Frank comment, Frank sneezed loudly. "Shit."

They grew smaller and smaller as they disappeared into the high weeds. Nervous, Henry watched them. He knew it was going to be a long three hour wait. And though upset with himself for forgetting his book, Henry was glad he brought along a copy of his journals. He could kick back and read them. One thing was for sure, at least by reading his own thoughts, Henry wouldn't be bored.

^^^

Frank looked at the guy, really looked at the guy as he took off his helmet in the entrance of the parking lot. The clean shaven pudgy man with the bald head who chewed . . . gum. Something Frank hadn't seen in so long.

The man tilted his head to Frank. "Did you hear me pal? Park the bikes in the back."

"Pal?" Frank mocked him. "Pal?"

"Frank." Dean called to him. "Just move the bike."

"Fuckin called me pal." Frank, shaking his head in disgust followed the pointing finger of the man. He waited for Dean to pull aside him, and Frank got off the bike. "Was it me or was the whole ride in weird."

"There was traffic Frank. It was weird. I thought I was dreaming."

"It seemed like it, didn't it? Give me twenty dollars."

"For what?" Dean reached in his pocket and handed Frank the bill.

"I'm not carrying these helmets." Frank, walking in his rough way, headed to the parking attendant's booth. "Hey *pal*. You wanna make twenty bucks?"

Chomping his gum, the man leaned against his dirty stool. "Doing what?"

"Watch our helmets."

"Twenty bucks?" The man grinned. "Sure."

Frank took Dean's helmet and handed it to the man, causing him to grunt as it hit him, and then Frank handed him his helmet causing the same sound effect. "Here's the twenty." He gave the man the money. Frank turned and saw Dean had moved away from him. "What?"

"Frank, remember, try to be civilized."

"I am. Look at all these people. And all the . . ." Frank's eye caught

her. The tall brunette whose sweet smell of perfume carried by as she past them. Frank's head turned at the same time as Dean's. "Women."

"Yeah." Dean watched her then shook his head. "We have work. Any questions before you go make that phone call."

"Yeah." Frank said seriously. "How should I handle it if I get hit on."

Dean grunted. "Frank. Here." He handed him more money. "Go get change and call your father. I'll meet you at the library."

"All right, I'll be at the library in fifteen minutes." Frank began to walk in a different direction than Dean but he stopped. "Dean." Frank reached into his pocket. "Check out what Ellen gave me."

"What it is?" Dean moved closer. His eyes grew wide. "No, No Frank."

"Ha." Frank wiggled Dean's VISA. "Says right here you were a card member in this year."

"Don't use it, Frank. I was debt conscious back then." Dean warned him. "Don't."

"Now would I do that to you?" With an arrogant smile, Frank stuck the VISA in his pocket and moved down the street. The payphone wasn't far. Stopping at the newspaper stand ten feet from it, Frank got change and a pack of gum, just because. The ten dollars worth of quarters he paid the man twenty dollars for, barely fit in his palm. He moved to the empty booth and stepped inside slamming the quarters down. Pulling out the tiny sheet of paper, Frank dialed, then inserted the astronomical amount of money the recorded voice ask for. "Yeah, Joe Slagel please." Frank pulled the phone from his ear. "This is weird." He commented to himself when he heard the guy again. "Tell him Frank."

"Frank? What's up?" Joe answered sounding so much younger.

"Dad?" Frank started to laugh. The phone for some reason seemed fun. "Hey."

"Frank, are you drunk?" Joe asked.

"No, I'm not drunk. Hey, I'm uh, working on something very important and I need . . ."

"Are you coming down with something, your voice sounds awfully gruff."

"I am gruff. Dad I'm in a pay phone and this babe's gonna come on and ask for more money. I need your help."

"What's up?"

"I need . . ." Frank fumbled with the awkward phone. "Hold on. I need some information on a few people. I have birth dates and one social security number. Also I need information on an organization. It's highly confidential. It's important, I need it immediately and only you can access it for me."

“Thorough or standard.”

“Whatever is fastest. I actually need it pretty fast. Can you help me now?”

“Why not. I’m trying to waste time here. Am I faxing this to your base.”

“No.” Frank answered. “I’m on a uh detail, yeah. I’ll give you the number.”

“Go on, what do you need?” Joe sounded annoyed.

Pleasantly surprised that his father’s crass demeanor hadn’t changed in all the years, Frank began to spew out the information to his father. After getting instruction to call back in an hour, Frank said goodbye and headed straight to the library. He wanted little interaction with people, not just because he didn’t like them, but because he didn’t want to cause one of those ripples.

Dean was really enjoying the feel of the library. It looked so much different from when he was held prisoner there. It didn’t cause as many bad feelings. Slip of paper in hands, Dean searched out the books he needed in the quiet institution. It was a good feeling and so unlike Beginnings until Frank walked in. Dean didn’t see him. He didn’t have to. Frank’s blasting ‘Dean! Where are you!’ Not only caused the startling screams from the people in the library, but it caused Dean to hide in embarrassment.

^^^

It was fine with Frank that the librarian kicked him out. He was getting bored waiting on Dean to make copies of all the books and magazines he found. Of course, before he left, Frank--in order to help Dean’s copy task move faster--did shove a few of those books and magazines unknowingly into Dean’s knapsack. And then Frank left the library. Peacefully too. He did flinch a little, fearing a Rambo episode when the librarian yelled at him for viewing pornography on the library’s Internet computer. But he knew all would be fine if he just walked out after the fourth warning. No problems, no disruption, no mark in the old time frame. The last thing Frank wanted to do was cause one of those ripples.

Unlike any of the broken and robbed out stores he had been into since the plague, the large national chain drugstore was huge to Frank. He grabbed a couple of those little red riding hood basket and trotted through the store. He had some time to waste and he’d thought he’d use that time to figure out what else Beginnings needed aside from those french fires and the cartons of

Camel Filter cigarettes.

Careful not to talk to anyone--with the exception of the security guard who asked Frank if he needed any help--Frank took his items to the counter. He was proud of his shopping trip and had to admit he liked it. Not only did he get lots of stuff, he didn't make one of those ripples and he even got to get revenge of Ellen's behalf when he used Dean's credit card for that two-hundred dollar purchase.

Time flew by. He had to call his father, make sure the information was faxed, then head to the library to get Dean so they could retrieve those background checks. Change in hand, he went back to that telephone booth.

"What?" Frank whined miserably as he adjusted the two knapsacks on his shoulder. Someone was on the phone. Almost stomping like a child, he walked to the booth and stood next to it. He could hear the woman cackling on and on. Figuring intimidation stares worked with the survivors, he might as well try it on the forty-some woman wearing as fast food restaurant uniform. Frank placed his hands on his hips, tilted his head and stared into the open door. The woman turned to him and shut it. "Fuck." Frank knocked on the door. She ignored him. He knocked harder. "Lady, come on!"

She slid open the door. "I am on the phone."

"No shit. I need to use it."

"Wait your turn."

"Get off the phone." Frank snapped at her.

Giving him a dirty look, she spoke into the receiver. "Hold on." She looked at Frank and started to bitch. "You know, if you would be a little nice, you could get a lot further in this world."

"Why the fuck should I care, everyone is gonna be dead in four years anyhow."

Her eyes shifted quickly. "Let me call you back. I'm a little scared of this man by me. Don't forget, you have to show up. Be early too. No, just be there, Robbie."

Frank's eyes hit with a zoom when he heard the name. He knew she wasn't talking to his brother, but something about just hearing the conversation made his heart race.

"All yours." Snippy the woman brushed by Frank. "Oh yeah. I have a cold. I hope you catch it."

Frank scoffed at her. "You have a cold? That's nothing compared to what you're gonna get." Laughing, Frank stepped into the both pulling out his wad of change. Picking up the receiver, Frank called Joe. "Dad, did you do it?"

"Yes Frank. Seven pages. I'll fax it now. Is that all?"

"Yeah. And Dad . . . What uh, what's Robbie's number at base. I don't

have it with me.”

“I think I have it . . .” Joe had a stretching sound to him. “Here. Got a pen?”

Knowing he had many, Frank retrieved a pen from one of the five new bags he bought and took down the number. “Thanks. Oh, and Dad . . .” Just to make sure that no time disturbances were made, Frank decided to add a little insurance of his own. Jason would be proud. “Dad, you, uh, you never got this phone call. Thanks.” He hung up the phone and debated for a minute, only a minute. Then after quickly adding more change, he dialed. “Yeah, this is Sargent Frank Slagel. I need to speak to Private Robert Slagel. It’s urgent.” Turning his head to sneeze, Frank swore under his breath as he waited and added more change.

“Frank?”

Frank lost his breath and his body pummeled into the wall of the phone booth when he heard Robbie--sounding so innocent, so young--speak.

“Frank?” Robbie called again.

With a fast beating heart Frank closed his eyes. “Robbie.”

“What’s up? Is everything all right? Why you calling?”

“Robbie I don’t have much time, listen to what I’m telling you, it’s important.” Trying to think of how to say it, Frank just rattled on as best as he could without sounding stupid. “Soon you need to be in Ashtonville. You’ll have to go there, all right? It’s, it’s very important that you go there when the time is right.”

“What are you talking about? Are Kelly and the kids O.K.?”

“Fine.” Frank swallowed. “You will make a difference, Robbie. You can. Ellen . . . Ellen is gonna really need you.”

“Ellen? I’ll do it, Frank.”

From the corner of his eye, Frank saw Dean. “I uh have to go. Do that for me.” Frank closed his eyes again. “And little brother, it was good to hear your voice. I love you.” Frank smiled and slowly hung up.

“Ready?” Dean tapped on the booth. “Oh, yeah, you’re an asshole.”

“What?” Frank stepped out.

“I beeped when I left the library, thank you very much. Thank God they believed me when I told them you stole it. So, I checked them out.”

“You checked them out!” Frank nearly barked. “Oh way to cause one of those ripples. Now who’s the asshole?”

“Sorry.” Dean cringed. “I wasn’t thinking. My past-self will deal with it. I take it you talked to Joe.”

“Yep.” Frank began to walk. “That copy place is right down there.”

“Let’s go.” As Dean began to walk with Frank, he saw the knapsacks. “Hell Frank, what did you buy?”

“Stuff.”

“I hope you bought Ellen something.”

“Please, she’s my wife. Check them out.” Frank opened the sack and showed Dean. “She will have a virtually vat of health and beauty aids.”

“Just what we need in our atmosphere.”

“Who cares.” Frank zipped the bag up and stopped. “Here we are, this is . . . wait a second. This isn’t a copy place.”

“Are you sure this is the place?” Dean asked.

“Positive. Twenty-two fifteen.”

“Frank!” Dean scolded as he looked at the door. “How could you even confuse this place with a copy place?”

“They had a copy machine.”

“Everyone has copy machines. It’s a doctor’s office, you moron!”

“Shut the fuck up Dean and act responsible for once this trip.” Frank opened the doctors office door. “We have to get our fax. So go ask them.”

^^^

It was an eventful day. And Frank and Dean were ready to head back to their own civilization. One that was peaceful, quiet and safe. But they had one final stop to make..

“Man.” Frank took off his helmet as he stepped from his bike in the McDonald’s parking lot just off the interstate. “I forgot how crowded these places get. Smell how good.”

Dean sniffed. “It doesn’t even smell right.”

“Yeah it does. But . . . aw! Look!” Frank pointed across the road. “Taco Bell. We should go there. Screw the french fries and get everyone tacos. Come on, I love Taco Bell.”

“Figures.” Dean shook his head. “And no, just french fries.”

Frank grabbed for the doors and opened them, being polite and letting Dean go first. A little perturbed at the amount of people, Frank and Dean got in line.

It was bad enough that not only did Frank have to wait, but he had to listened to the woman in front of him ask about each items. He looked to Dean. “Can you believe this?” He pointed to her and listened some more as she debated. “Lady, today some time. This is a McDonald’s.” Hearing the very chipper ‘I can help you sir’ coming from his right was music to Frank’s ears. He moved over one line to the blonde hair girl who smiled widely at him flashing her braces. “See Dean.” Frank said and pointed to the girl. “Service with a smile.”

“Welcome to McDonald’s sir, may I take your order?” She was almost too happy to be working there.

“Yes . . .” Frank peered at her name tag. “Tracy.” Frank smiled and ran

his hand down his goatee and looked up to the menu. "Oh wow, O.K. I'll have a quarter pounder with cheese . . ."

"Frank." Dean tugged on him. "Don't get a quarter pounder. Don't. You won't be able to handle it."

"Yeah right." Frank scoffed and gave a smirk to Tracy and they both giggled as if Dean were being silly.

"Frank, as your doctor I am telling you. If you want a sandwich get a fish sandwich."

"What are you nuts? No one eats fish at McDonald's. Tracy . . ." Frank looked to the smiling girl. "Make that *two* quarter pounders, a large chocolate shake and . . . um, forty-eight orders of Super Size fries, please."

The smile fell from Tracy's face.

^^^

After shoveling down his two burgers, a taco--just because he had to get one--and sucking the milkshake so quick that it made his cheeks hurt, Frank and Dean headed back to Beginnings.

They were a sight for sore eyes, when Henry saw them pull up. "Guys!" He jumped to his feet from the spot he hadn't left. "What . . . what in the world did you get Frank?"

"Stuff." Frank patted his bags as he got off his bike. "And fries. Henry it was so cool."

"I bet. Did you get the information? Anything valuable?" Henry asked.

Dean shrugged. "We didn't really review it. We will when we get back. Of course, Frank will be sick tonight. He ate, get this, old world meat."

Henry cringed. "Ouch."

"What?" Frank asked dumbfounded.

"Just say you've been warned." Dean said. "So don't come to me tonight."

"Tonight?" Frank laughed. "Tonight I'll be too busy making love to my wife." Fixing his knapsacks, Frank nodded to Henry. "Let's do this."

"Let's go home." Henry waited for them to form their single line. "Ready?" He held up the pendant and punched in his birthday, opening the doorway for them all.

Pushing in their bikes, Dean stepped in followed by Frank then Henry. Joe and Jason stood in the exact same spot they were when they had left.

Joe clapped his hands together. "How was it?" He immediately grabbed the McDonald's bags from Dean. "And what the hell did you get Frank?"

"Stuff. I think we did good. Henry forgot his book and . . ." Frank saw the door open. "El!"

“Frank.” She semi smiled. “I heard the second power surge. Oh I see you got the fries. Great.”

“El, it was so cool. I bought you some stuff.” He rested his motorcycle against the counter.

“Frank?” She smiled at him. “Really? That was nice of you to think of me.”

Biting his bottom lip, Frank stepped closer to Ellen and cupped her face in his hands. “I always think of you.” Pulling her closer, Frank began to kiss Ellen. His lips separated from hers when he heard Dean’s loud ‘Holy Shit!’ ringing annoyingly in his ear. With his face still close to Ellen’s, Frank’s eyes lifted and his heart dropped. He swallowed harshly and caught his breath when he saw Robbie standing in the open doorway.

Robbie closed his eyes briefly and tilted his head. “Frank. Why are you kissing my wife like that?”

Henry, hit with a trembling effect like he never felt, blocked out Dean’s laughter. Panicked, he turned to Frank with a glare that could kill. “Frank! What the hell did you do?”

THE ALTERNATE BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Henry raised his hand tapping on the closed bathroom door in his house. He leaned against the wall next to it, a look of utter disgust and frustration on his face, as he folded his arms. “Frank? You all right?”

“What did I do?” Frank’s voice echoed in the porcelain of the toilet bowl in which his head was nearly buried into. “Oh God, what did I do?” His emotional words stopped to release a loud sound of regurgitation.

“You ate two quarter pounders with cheese, and a taco that’s what you did.”

“No. Not that. My life.”

Henry rolled his eyes and turned his head to the sound of Dean running up the steps.

“How is he?” Dean asked.

“Sick. But who cares.” Henry answered.

“Frank?” Dean knocked on the door. “I have something for you. It should stop the throwing up. Let me give you a shot.”

“Dean.” Frank hollered out from the toilet bowl. “What did I do?”

“You ate two quarter pounders with cheese.”

“No!” Frank argued. If being sick wasn’t enough, why weren’t they getting his point. “What did I do to my life.”

Henry was about as mad as he could get, the non-compassion in his voice showed it. “To your life, Frank? What about what your stupid phone call did to *our* lives? I am pissed at you Frank, really pissed. I hope to God you throw up all your insides.”

“Shut the fuck . . .” The flushing of the toilet was heard. “. . .up, Henry.”

Dean prepared the syringe as he listened to the water running in the bathroom. He held it up ready when the bathroom door opened. “Give me your arm.”

Frank leaned against the archway, his face was pale. “I screwed up.”

Henry shook his head. “Stick him hard, Dean.”

Dean couldn’t help but snicker. “Henry, calm down.”

“No. I hate Robbie. I really hated him while he was here. He attacked Ellen, amongst other things. And you . . .” He poked Frank in the chest. “You brought him back. Serves you right he’s married to Ellen now.”

“Oh God.” Frank covered his face. “How did it happen? When?”

Dean stopped chuckling. “Maybe they got married sometime in Beginnings. We keep record of that.” He saw Henry walking away. “Henry? Where are you going?”

“Downstairs. Beginnings keeps record, but so do I. My journals.”

For the first time, hearing Henry journal entries didn't sound quite bad. Frank and Dean followed Henry down the steps.

Dean grabbed hold of Frank's arm and led him to the couch. "Just sit until the meds kick in." He saw Henry grabbed a stack of journals.

Frank plopped on the couch. "Why are you being nice to me, Dean?"

"One." Dean answered. "I think it's really funny that Robbie is married to Ellen. And two, we're gonna fix this anyhow." He saw Henry stop pacing and give a cold stare. "We are going to fix this aren't we? Henry?"

"How Dean?" Henry threw his hands in the air. "What's done is done and we are all stuck with it now. Stuck because of Frank." Henry cut his hand through the air. "Shit." He stomped like a child. "All right." Henry took a deep breath. "We don't know, that's the problem. We don't. None of us even hung around anyone long enough to find anything out. Maybe Robbie and Ellen just got married. Maybe things really aren't so different. With exception of Robbie Slagel, whom I don't like. Did I mention that Frank? I don't like Robbie."

"Yes, Henry." Frank grabbed his head.

Dean took a seat in the chair. "The wheels are turning Henry, what do you have in mind?"

"We have to find out." Henry said. "Dean, you go to your lab check into the medical aspect. See if we're still dealing with the pending virus. I have my journals, the history disks and Trish has the printout. Let me go there and do a quick review."

Frank peered up. "Why are we bothering to learn all this. We're changing it back."

"If . . . if we can change it back." Henry stated. "And if we can, we still have to live here until we do. So we have to know what's going on. Or we're gonna look like idiots. Frank . . . Frank you stay put. Do not move from this couch. You understand? Do not interact with anyone."

Frank raised his eyes from the tips of his fingers. "I'll stay here."

"Good." Henry took a breath. "All right, lets do this. Let's meet in an hour at the school. It's empty. I may need the board. And if we run into anyone. Act as normal as possible. One hour. Got that Frank? And don't leave." Shacking his head like a disappointed parent, Henry holding his journals, stormed out.

Dean stood then walked slowly around the couch. He snickered some and patted Frank on the back. "Look at the bright side, Frank. At least now you don't have to worry about messing up the twelve step plan by sleeping with Ellen tonight." Laughing once more, Dean left the house as well.

^^^

Dean felt fortunate that his walk, or rather trot to the clinic went uninterrupted. Running into no one was a bonus. Of course when Dean moved quickly through the community, rarely did anyone ever stop him. Things looked the same in Beginnings, which to Dean was a good sign.

Holding his breath as he grabbed his personal notebook, Dean slid down onto a stool and opened it. Like waiting for a surprise, he opened his eyes. "Excellent." He saw an entry. "Excellent."

"Someone is excited." The mellow voice called in. "Care to share." It was Ellen, and she walked into the lab.

"El." Dean felt a twinge of nervousness. He looked back at her. "What are you doing?"

"I was coming to find you. And I saw you run in here." She stood next to him. "I brought you your fries." She laid them down in front of him. "Seems Frank ruined the celebration for you guys."

"Thanks El. No, he didn't ruin it." Dean took a french fry. "He just ate the wrong thing and we couldn't leave him alone."

Ellen leaned her elbows on the counter as she stood close next to him. She slowly reached her hand and flipped a page in his journal. "Checking?"

"What um . . . do you mean?"

"Checking to see if there's anything you don't remember?"

"Yeah." Dean breathed outward. "I remember how frantic you and Henry were when you discovered after your time trip there were things . . . shit."

"What's wrong?"

"Did I say something that may not be true?" Dean looked at her.

"No why? I remember how frantic we were too. Of course that was coupled with the excitement of bringing you back." She ran her fingers through the side of his hair. "I like the hair cut Andrea gave you." She fixed it. "It looks really nice. You always look so handsome when she cuts your hair."

"El?" Dean grabbed her hand. "Are you all right? You seem kind of quiet."

"No, I'm fine." She went back to propping her face on her hand. "Anyhow, I understand why you three didn't come to the social hall. When you do the time thing, you feel like you are in a fog. Like everything is a dream. Kind of frazzled." Ellen smiled slightly. "Trust me, you'll be better, you'll feel less disoriented tomorrow. Henry should have told you all this." She played with his hair again. "You *really* look handsome."

"Thanks." Dean shifted his eyes awkwardly to her. "Are you sure you are O.K.?"

"Yep." Ellen nodded. "So how was it. How was ten years ago and being around people."

“Strange. El, I have to tell you. Frank, he was funny.”

“Frank was funny?” Ellen tilted her head. “Now that’s odd.”

“He was funny. He was so out of place.” Dean snickered. “And you know how . . .” He saw the peaceful and somber look on her face. “I’m sorry. It’s just that you seem, you seem so down.”

“I’m not down. But . . .” She looked at her watch. “I’m late.”

“How can you tell?” Dean laughed. “You’re cute when you look at your broken watch.”

“My watch isn’t broken.” She showed him. “It broke a while ago, but Robbie fixed it right away. Don’t you remember? Sorry, maybe you don’t. I have to go. Are you sure about tonight?”

Dean’s eyes widened. “Um . . . yeah, tonight is fine.” He was clueless.

“Are you sure? I mean with tomorrow and all.”

*Be more specific Ellen.* “Yeah, it’s fine.” What he agreed to, he didn’t know.

“Thanks. My husband is being so compulsive about this new exercise for the survivors.”

“Frank working with survivors. Now there’s something I’d like to see.”

“Frank? I said my husband. Not Frank.” She patted Dean on the cheek. “If you need to talk. I’m here.” She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. “See you in an hour at your house.”

Using the time machine memory loss theory in his favor, Dean stopped Ellen before she left. “El.” He mustered up an embarrassed look. “Don’t tell anyone. But where do I live?”

Ellen smiled. “Second row, last unit on the right.”

Dean breathed out in relief. “Thanks. And remember . . .”

“You didn’t ask.” She winked and smiled at him before she walked out.

Grabbing another french fry, Dean continued to look through his journal.

^^^

Joe thought it was amusing as he stepped into history. The vision immediately took away the curiosity of why Trish was still there after five. He chuckled at her as she sat with a packet of ketchup. Squeezing the last drop onto her index finger and tasting it with a smile. “Like that, huh?”

Trish nodded. “Joe, it’s been so long for ketchup.”

“Why are you still here.”

“Waiting on Henry. He asked if he could review the history for an hour.” She shrugged. “He’s been in there close to that now.”

“He’s not taking it with him?”

“He said he was. But Frank was gacking or something at his house and

Henry said that makes him sick, so he's here."

"Thanks, Trish." As Joe stepped to the back office door he heard the oddity of it. Henry swearing. And it wasn't Henry swearing that was odd. It was the fact that Henry kept saying the word 'fuck' over and over and that was just not Henry. He knocked once to get his attention.

Henry looked once, then looked again, nervously closing the printed history papers. "Hey Joe."

"Something wrong?"

"No not at all. In fact . . ." Henry stood up. "I'm going to go check on Frank." He spoke rapidly.

"You're reviewing the history. Is it the same?"

"Um . . . yeah, Joe. Same boring stuff you know." He tried to get past him. "What's wrong?"

"You tell me. You run from the social hall. You're in here saying fuck. Let me see the disks." Joe held out his hand.

"What disks?"

"The history disks. Let me see them."

"Why?" Henry asked.

"You seem nervous, Henry."

"It's the time travel thing. It made me jittery when El and I traveled. It's just the time thing, that's all. The history is the same Joe. Take my word. I am the logisticalizer."

"All right." Joe put his hand in his pocket. "Sorry to come off so interrogating. Look, I'm going to go over the stuff, Jason and I, that you guys brought back. Can you make a meeting with me tomorrow morning, say ten?"

"Sure Joe. But I have to go now. I want to check on Frank."

"You go on." Joe stepped aside. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Thanks Joe." Clenching tightly to the history print out, Henry headed to the school.

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"Same." Dean stated as he, Frank and Henry sat in the school. "Medically we still the same. We're still facing the virus. We still went to Nebraska. So in that aspect we're good. How about you, Henry. What did you find out?"

"We're screwed. But first . . ." Henry stood, took the chalk and wrote on the board. As he did, loud moaning shrieks came from Frank and Dean who sat in the too-small-for-their-butt chairs. He set down the chalk only after writing in really big letters, 'Frank is an asshole'.

"Hey." Frank pointed. "That's not right."

Henry scoffed at him. "You are the last person right now to complain about anything. Do you even know how much is different. I reviewed not only my journals but history, and I only went through major events. First . . ." Henry flipped a page in history. "Big party last week. Guess why? Ellen and Robbie's . . . tenth wedding anniversary."

"Ten years!" Frank barked. "They've been married for ten years. How the hell did that happen?"

"I'll tell you, Frank." Irritated, Henry spoke. "You told Robbie to go to Ashtonville ten years ago and he went."

"But he wasn't supposed to just up and go." Frank defended. "And how did he end up with her that year? I distinctly remember, I was stationed in Tennessee. That was the year Ellen found out about that woman Peter was involved with. They had too many problems for her to . . . oh!" Frank smacked himself on the forehead in a discovery way. "Oh."

"Answered your own question?" Henry asked. "Timing Frank. Robbie probably showed up at the right time. Robbie himself always admitted he had a thing for her since he was a kid. He slipped right in there and . . ." Henry raised his eyebrows. "Just to add salt to your wounds. They have children."

"Wait a second." Frank held up his hand. "I did not cause that. Robbie can't have children. He had rheumatic fever as a kid. He's sterile."

Puzzled, Henry looked through the history, flipping pages. "Oh." His eyes shifted to Dean. "Oh."

Dean smiled when he saw the look. "They're mine aren't they?" He nodded with a gloat to Frank. "They're all mine, aren't they Henry?"

Henry saw Frank cover his face. "Yeah, Dean they are. I just looked at the birth name. Alexandra and William Slagel. Mother, Ellen. Father, Robert Slagel slash Dean Hayes."

"Yes." Dean clenched his fist, "I still have my kids. But I wonder if I share in raising them. I bet I do." He started to ramble. "I bet that's what Ellen was talking about. She probably . . ."

"Dean!" Frank scolded. "Shut up! Aside from fucking up my personal life, Henry, what effect did Robbie have being here?"

"Ready?" Henry asked as he sat back down. "Unfortunately more positive than negative." He waded through the moans from Frank. "From my quick review, Robbie's been an asset. He works in Mechanics and security. He flies the choppers. But most importantly he works our survivor program with his . . ." Snide, Henry looked at Frank. "Wife. Our population in Beginnings is about forty people higher. We've had less oustings. From what I gathered, a lot of survivors were eliminated in some extensive screening program . . . Robbie started. Never make it past his screening, never make it in. Once in, most stay. Remember your gal pal Michele?"

Frank cringed.

“Never made it in.” Henry said. “But, before you smile. With the good comes the bad. Four men are here that we deemed dangerous and kicked out. One of which . . .” with a shifting of the eyes, Henry took on a very serious tone. “Reverend Thomas Barnhard. That’s what the people in this time know him as. We know him as . . . Moses.”

Frank jumped up, knocking the little chair to the ground. “I killed him.”

“No Frank you didn’t. He is Reverend Thomas here. He is the Baptist minister of Beginnings. He and Reverend Bob do it all.”

“Wait.” Dean interrupted. “If Moses is here, what about those men he led outside the gate?”

“My mind went there too.” Henry said. “And they’re still outside of Miles City. We surveillance them once a week. See, we . . .”

“Hold up.” Dean halted Henry. He closed his eyes with a thinking look. “Robbie was never kicked out. Robbie never joined them.”

“That’s correct.” Henry nodded. “And you were never kidnaped. So we never had that big stand off between Beginnings and . . .” Henry’s hand released the history papers. His eyes lit up. “That means.” He smiled widely. And as if he was a psychic messenger, the lights above Dean and Frank’s head went on at the same time. They both, at the same time jumped to their feet and smiles hit their faces.

Dean looked at Henry. “Do you think?”

“It has to be. Frank?”

Frank took off like a bullet. “I’m first.” He burst through the door of the school.

Like it was a race the three of them, trying desperately to get ahead of one another, bolted like teenagers down the streets of Beginnings to the living section.

They all arrived at the second row of houses at the same time. Frank ran to the first unit, and Henry pulled him from the door to knock. Dean pulled Henry out of the way, then Frank took control, opening the front door to Andrea’s house without knocking.

The three of them stumbled over each other in their power struggle into the empty living room. With hearts beating with excitement they looked around.

“Hey guys!” The young voice came from the bottom step. “What’s going . . .” Denny looked at the three men who suddenly turned to him. “. . . on?” His young blue eyes widened when suddenly--and loudly--the shrieks of the grown men filled the room and their bodies flung forward to him with reaching and excited arms. “Mom!” Denny screamed. “Mom! Help!”

Frank grabbed Denny’s head rubbing his blonde hair and trying to hold the teenager as did Henry and Dean. “Denny.” Frank kissed him.

“Mom! Frank’s kissing me! Help!” He was trapped. Trapped in an enthusiasm that confused the fourteen year old. “Mom!”

“Hey!” Andrea yelled out. “What in the world are you three doing to my boy? Get . . .” She waved her dish towel hitting them. “Get.” She reached to her son. “Come here, honey.” She pulled him out. “Why are you attacking him?”

Frank’s hand reached to Denny again. “Denny. We are so glad to see you. So glad. Man.” He shook his head once. “Man are we glad to see you. We . . .” Frank pointed to Dean and Henry. “We missed you.”

“Out!” Andrea pointed to the door. “Out! I remember Henry and Ellen when they made that trip. I don’t want you three projecting that weird time machine after effect stuff on my baby. Out! And Dean, you best get home.” Her head went back and forth as her hands waved. “Ellen is waiting with them kids and you know how Robbie gets when she’s late.”

“O.K.” Dean stepped quickly to Denny and kissed him on the cheek. “Good to have you here Denny.”

“Mom.” Denny wiped his cheek. “They’re kissing me.”

Before Andrea could scold at them again, the three of them, breathing heavy stepped outside.

Henry gave a happy hit to Frank’s arm. “That is one good thing that came out of it. This is great, Denny’s alive.”

“Yeah.” Frank looked proudly to Andrea’s house. “But I still lost my wife.”

Dean began to back up. “I’m going to go find her now Frank. At *my* house.” He snickered. “I’ll see you guys.”

After flipping Dean off, Frank turned back to Henry. “Let’s go back in and see Denny.”

“Andrea will have a fit.”

“Screw Andrea.” Frank reached for the door. “He’s alive.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Sorry I’m late.” Dean spoke to Ellen who looked as if she was waiting on him when he opened the door to his house. A house that looked the same.

“That’s all right, I’ll make something up.” Ellen said.

Dean smiled as Alexandra ran to hug him, he kissed her, then Billy. “Am I keeping them all night?”

“No. We’ll pick them up later. Here take the baby.” Ellen handed him the child.

“Look at this.” Dean held him up with a smile. “I still have you. Hey Brian.” He laid his lips on the baby’s cheek.

“Dean?” Ellen snickered. “What did you just call him?”

“I uh . . . Brian?”

“Brian? His name is RJ, Robbie junior?” She shook her head.

“Sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.” He cuddled the baby. “This is really great.”

“Thanks, Dean. I have to run.” Ellen reached for her coat.

Dean, adjusting the baby, moved to the diningroom where he saw yet another child. One he didn’t know. Was it one he should? The stocky child about the size of Alexandra, hurried from the kitchen eating a cookie. Crumbs were scattered about his face. His short black hair was not of the sandy blonde of Alexandra, Billy or Brian--rather RJ. “El, who’s that? He looks just like Frank. Wow that’s scary.”

“Dean!” Ellen scolded. “That’s your son.”

“My son?” Dean started to laugh. “You’re joking. You aren’t joking?”

“I’m leaving.” She placed on her coat. “Time machine memory loss or not, could you not talk like that in front of him? He’s only three.”

“Three?” Dean gasped. “Look at the size of him. Holy shit.”

“Dean!” Ellen walked to the door.

“Sorry.” Dean bent down to him. “Hi.”

The deepest voice Dean had ever heard emerged from the child. “Hey, Dad.”

“El?” Dean tried not to laugh. “Do they all call me, Dad?”

“You’d better talk to Jason. This is worse than what I had. Yes, Dean. They call you and Robbie, Dad.” She brushed the crumbs from the boy’s face. “Be good all right? Dean? Watch his sugar intake, he’s in one of those wild moods.” Shaking her head, Ellen made her way back to the front door. It opened and in walked Frank and Henry. “Don’t you two knock?”

Frank stepped in first. “Nope. Hey El.” He walked right up to her.

“Don’t kiss me, Frank.” Ellen moved back. “I’m still shuddering from

this afternoon. Speaking of kisses. Almost forgot.” She walked over to Dean and laid her hands on his face. She kissed him, then kissed him again. “See you later.” Running her hand down his face, she headed back to the door, pausing when she saw the look Frank gave her. “What Frank?”

“Why are you kissing Dean?” Frank asked.

“Why wouldn’t I kiss Dean?”

“For starters, you are married to my brother.”

“So what, he has an understanding with Dean. And is this the monthly gripe about it from you?” She headed faster to the door.

“Hold up!” Frank shouted to her as she opened the door. “My brother has an understanding with him? Why does he have an understanding with Dean?” Frank asked.

“How else would we have the children?” Ellen answered.

“In a lab.” Frank stated.

“Now that’s silly.” Ellen began to walk. “And stop Frank, all right. Robbie will get pissed if he hears you starting again. You do this all the time and it gets *me* in trouble. Bye guys.” Ellen left the house.

Dean’s laughter was heard from across the room. “Frank, I really owe you. I have four kids to Ellen and an understanding. This is good. This is really good.”

“Shut up Dean.” Frank headed to him, but stopped when he felt the bump into his legs. He looked down to the child and it took Frank aback. “Whoa.” He lifted the dark haired boy up. “Who’s kid is this?” Frank held him at eye level. “This is scarey, he looks just like me.”

“Mine.” Dean held up his hand.

“No way.” Frank smiled. “He looks too much like me to be yours.”

“Tell me about it.” Dean watched him put the kid down. “Hey, Frank look.”

“Brian?” Frank held out his arms and took the baby. “Brian?” He began to kiss him. “Hey baby. It’s me.”

“His name is Robbie junior, Frank. And, he’s mine too.” Dean gloated.

Henry’s eyes grew wide. He shifted them from Frank, to the baby, then to Dean. “It’s the same baby. Oh shit.” He looked quickly at Dean. “It’s the exact same baby, Dean.” Henry moved closer, speaking with such intimidation. “Why is that? Why is it the same baby?”

Frank knew the answer. “I’ll tell you why.”

Henry hunched. Reality check.

“I had an affair with Ellen, that’s why.” Frank kissed the baby again. “I had to of. Look at him. He’s the same. He’s my kid. And that other one, I’ll bet money that he’s mine too.”

Dean looked at the dark haired boy who suddenly ran into a wall and bounced back rubbing his head and laughing. “Looking at his size and

mentality, you're probably right, Frank. Wait . . . what's his name?"

Henry took a thinking look. "I know this. I can see it on the paper. Shit, what is his name."

Frank rolled his eyes at both of them, still holding Brian, he bent down to Alexandra. "Alex, what's your brother's name?"

"Robbie." She answered.

"Not this brother, the other one."

"Billy."

"Not him, the other one." Frank pointed to the boy who proceeded to jump from the fourth step.

"You're silly." She took off running.

Frank waved his hand at her. "She's too much like her mother. Billy? What's your brother's name?"

After cringing at the loud thump of the boys landing, Dean decided, he would take control. "I'll handle this." He walked to the stairs, the boy was racing up to the sixth step. "Hey, don't even try to jump from that one. It's too high. Get down here. Now." The kid stomped to him. "What is your name?"

"Huh?"

"Your name?" Dean asked him. After getting a clueless look from the boy, Dean stood. "I give up." He walked back to the livingroom. "Henry, what's wrong? You're quiet."

"Just frustrated." Henry said. "I'm going home. I have six years worth of screwed up history to read. Thanks Frank." Henry walked to the door. "And are you coming? Let's leave Dean alone with *his* kids, that *you* gave him, along with Ellen. Sure Dean's the happy guy. And me? I'm stuck in Beginnings with Robbie Slagel again. I don't like him, Frank."

"Henry!" Frank shouted at him. "Shut your skinny ass up. Quit bitching. I'm going to fix this. If we have to break into Jason's lab and figure out that time machine ourselves, things are going back. And Dean?" Frank pointed to him. "Understanding or not. To the three of us, she is still my wife. Don't touch her."

"But Frank, we have to act normal." Dean defended. "How will it seem to Ellen if I don't . . ."

"Dean, don't do it." Frank warned. "Tell him, Henry."

"It wouldn't be right Dean." Henry insisted.

"All right, all right." Dean held his hands up in surrender. "I'll be good."

Grabbing a blanket from the couch, Frank followed Henry to the door. "We'll see you tomorrow. We have to discuss this."

"Wait." Dean hurried to him. "The baby. Give me Brian, I mean Robbie."

“No fuckin way, he’s my kid.” Frank threw the blanket over the baby. “I’ll bring him back in an hour.”

Dean heard the loud thump to his right and he looked to see the dark haired child excitedly pick himself up from the bottom of the steps. “Wanna take this one too?”

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“Empty.” Henry closed the closet door in his spare bedroom later that night. “Completely empty Frank. None of her things. She doesn’t even live here. Never has. The best and only roommate I ever had is gone.” Storming to the bed Frank sat on, Henry grabbed a pillow and hit Frank with it.

“I would like Ellen to be here too.” Frank stood up. “And why am I staying at your house? I have my own . . . I think.” He scratched his head.

“Because I don’t trust you, that’s why. And this is your punishment for screwing around with time. *You* have to listen to me bitch.”

“Well quit it. This won’t be for long.” Frank walked to the door. “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going? Stay put.”

“I have to see her, Henry. You go on, start working on that history.”

“Frank, she lives with Robbie. And you don’t even know . . .” He shut his eyes tight when the door closed loudly. “. . . where that is.”

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Tossing his shirt over the side of the couch, Robbie placed his hands on Ellen’s face bringing her closer to his body. “Try to be a bit more responsive. Please?”

“I’m sorry.” She laid her chest close to his. “We should have gotten the kids by now.”

“Tough, Dean can handle them for a little more. I would like to be with you.” Robbie slid his hand up her bare thigh, positioning her closer across his lap. His fingers slipped under her shirt--the only item of clothing he left remaining on her. “Responsive, El.” He tilted his head.

“Sorry. More responsive.”

Getting the reaction he wanted, Robbie moved his lips more intensely on hers, sliding down just a bit in the position he had on the sofa. Moaning slightly, Robbie paused and lifted his head to what he thought was a loud ‘Ellen!’ coming from a distance. Shaking his head, Robbie returned to kissing Ellen. Again, he stopped. “No.”

“What’s wrong. Now who’s not being responsive?”

“You can’t hear that?” Robbie rested his head against the arm of the

couch. It grew louder.

“Ellen!” Frank’s voice blasted in the distance.

“No.” He shook his head. “Tell me my brother is not calling your name in the middle of the street.”

Ellen closed her eyes tightly. “Shit.”

“Fuck would be a better word.” He heard Frank’s voice grow louder. “I’ll handle it this time.” He waited for Ellen to slide back from him and he stood up. “Put some clothes on incase he barges in here again.” Robbie walked to the front door. “Frank.” He whispered loudly at his brother who was walking down the street. “Knock it off.”

“Robbie.” Frank spun to the house. “So this is where you live.” He walked to the door. “I need to talk to Ellen.”

“No you don’t, Frank.” Robbie held his arms close to his body. The fall air was chilling against his bare chest. “We are busy, Frank. We are really, really busy at this moment.”

“Tough. I’m coming in.” He stepped inside.

“You’re drunk, aren’t you?” Robbie closed the door.

“I don’t get drunk.” Frank stated.

“Yes you do.” Robbie said.

“I do? When?”

“All the time.” Robbie spoke with disgust. “Just like you are now.”

“I’m not drunk. El, do I get . . .” He stopped when he saw her half dressed. “No, No. Please don’t tell me you just slept with him.” He moved to the couch. “Why would you do that?”

“Why?” Ellen stood up and fastened her pants. “He’s my husband Frank, that’s why.”

“No, El see. That’s wrong.” Frank stepped closer. “I’m you’re husband, not Robbie.”

Robbie threw his hands in the air. “That’s it. He’s loaded again. Where’s my shirt?”

“Frank.” Ellen stepped to him. “Listen to you. Can’t you see when you drink, how you get?”

“Ellen, I never, never, get drunk ever.” Frank argued.

Tossing his shirt on, Robbie ran his fingers through his hair to straighten it. “You always, always get drunk, Frank. El, I’m getting Johnny, he can straighten him out before I kill him. Watch him.” Robbie grabbed his coat. “And don’t let him touch you.”

Frank scoffed at the slamming of the door. “He’s nuts. I’m not drunk.” Frank grabbed a hold of Ellen. “El, listen to me.” He tried to kiss her.

“Frank stop that.” She stepped back.

“No listen to me.” He kissed her again, despite the fact that she fought him. “El, listen.” Frank dropped to his knees and grabbed her hands. “This

isn't the way it's suppose to be. You are suppose to be with me. Me, El. Not him."

"I'm married to Robbie, Frank, I think that says who I'm supposed to be with."

"See but you aren't married to Robbie." Frank kissed her hands. "Actually you aren't. Just don't mess around with him until I can straighten this mess out. Then you'll see."

"See what?"

"That you're my wife."

"I'm not your wife. I'm Robbie's." Ellen pulled back. "And get up. Get up before he comes back. You are really bad tonight, Frank. This is getting out of hand."

Frank stood up. "I'm not out of hand. I am very rational right now."

The reopening of the front door, brought a comment from Robbie. "And drunk." He said as he stepped in with Johnny. "Take care of him John."

"Come on Dad." Johnny walked to him. "We'll walk this off."

"I'm not drunk." Frank said pulling from Johnny's reach and walking to the door.

Robbie approached him. "Then why are you here?"

"I just wanted . . . I just wanted to see Ellen. That's all. I'll leave." Trying for that guilt effect, Frank dropped his head, slowly opened the door and walked out. He stopped when he reached the sidewalk. "Hold up. Drunk?" He turned back and walked into the house again. They stopped talking when he walked in. "Um . . ." Frank closed his eyes and tried to think of how to phrase his question. "You guys insisted I was drunk. Now I can't remember, the time machine thing. Do I have a drinking problem?"

Robbie laughed in disbelief. "If it's true and that time machine lapsed your memory. Let me put it this way Frank. You could be the sole cause for the reorganization of Alcoholics Anonymous."

"Shit." His eyes shifted around the room. "Thanks." He stepped back out, closing the door. "I'm a drunk? Nah . . . It's the ripple thing." He started to walk and stopped again. "Maybe it's not. Shit! Maybe I am and I just forgot." He took off running, he had to ask Henry.

HENRY'S JOURNAL

*November 25*

*Frank is an asshole! Why he would even think that calling Robbie was a good idea. I don't like Robbie. Now were stuck and everything is screwed up. He's such an asshole, I'm too pissed to write.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

November 26

Robbie Slagel looked totally drawn. He slumped in the chair across from his father in his office, finishing the last of his cigarette and slamming it out in the ashtray. "Dad, he's worse. I was dealing with it, I think pretty good. But it's been worse with him since he rescued her from Colorado."

"And he was drunk again last night when he showed up?"

"He said he wasn't." Robbie sat up some. "He was talking crazy shit. Dad, he said he was married to Ellen."

"Oh dear God." Joe rubbed his eyes, leaning forward on the desk. "This is a new one. What in God's name is next?"

"Ousting him. That's what should be next. I actually thought of sticking him in containment, as a form of rehab, but then he'd love that."

"We can't get rid of your brother. You know and I know he runs the security and runs it well. He's the meanest man we have and we need that."

Robbie closed his eyes and shook his head. "He's also the craziest man we have." He threw his hands in the air. "I give up. But mark my words, this time machine memory shit . . . he'll use it." Robbie stood up from his seat. "He'll use it like he's doing now. Pretending he didn't remember he had a drinking problem." He blew from his mouth in frustration. "He's doing the Frank-pattern shit again. He does the crazy shit, runs to Ellen, plays on her sympathy for him. And then you know what happens. I can't deal with that again."

"I know." Joe held up his hand. "I'll talk to him. He's coming in for a meeting anyhow about the Cleveland run. I'll try to knock some sense into him."

"I appreciate it." Robbie looked at his watch. "And I want to get to containment, so I'd better finish my morning mechanics work, before the little prick . . ." He heard the door open and turning around, Robbie snickered. "Speak of the devil."

Henry's shock to see Robbie hit him the second he stepped in the door. It was only the second time he had been face to face with the returning Slagel. Henry, one of the most logical men in Beginnings, stood there staring and having a hard time with his feelings. Distinguishing Robbie from the one he remembered, and the one that stood before him would be one of his most difficult tasks.

"Dad, I'm gone." Robbie slowly walked to the door, stopping in front of Henry. "Why are you staring at me?"

"You . . . I um . . . no reason." Henry stepped in further.

Robbie, ignoring the constant stares, walked out.

With a twitch of his head in confusion, Henry pulled out the chair near Joe's desk and sat down.

"Problem with my son, Henry?"

"I just don't like . . . I just don't . . ." Knowing that he may not have any reason for disliking Robbie, Henry thought quickly. "No."

"Good." Joe slid a stack of papers before him. "The information you guys brought back. It gives us two places to check. That's all. I'll pass this around to see if I missed anything, maybe I did. But right now, we have two more shots than we did yesterday morning."

"What are they?" Henry asked, reaching for the information.

"We have the address to the Cleveland site. That's step one. Now, we have the group going for that CDC mobile tomorrow. Jason says as soon as you get that ready, there shouldn't be a problem doing that future trip."

"That's good to know we aren't waiting the three weeks." Henry said. "The sooner we get a sample of that virus, the more time Dean has to work on it."

"My thoughts exactly. Now . . . I wanna plan a week long run to Cleveland. An info run." Joe leaned back in his chair. "The men will be prepared to scout the area. I don't expect to find a SUT camp. Cleveland is too obvious of a place. I'm hoping when Chester booked out of there, he left a lot behind. Four men. Frank and the usual crew."

"Frank?" Henry questioned with concern. "Why would you send, Frank?"

"I always do."

"But it's dangerous. Joe, you should send someone without small children."

"Frank doesn't have any small children."

"Yes he . . ." He paused embarrassingly. "Doesn't. He doesn't. That's right. Sorry."

"Henry? Should you be working today?" Joe twirled his finger in a circle around his temple.

"I'm fine." Henry nervously pushed the paper back to Joe. "How will the Cleveland run affect the future time trip? Won't they coincide?"

"If they do, they do. I don't see a problem with it, neither does Jason. After all, you guys are only going to the future then into quarantine. We can do two things at once around here."

"You're right. I hope the quarantine isn't too long. That'll only leave two people to run mechanics and the work will be . . ."

"Three." Joe interrupted. "Three people in mechanics Henry. John, Scott and Robbie."

"Sorry I forgot." Running his hand over his face, Henry thought it was just about that time to go. "Anything else Joe?" He stood up.

“No that’s it.”

“All right, see ya.” Henry darted to the door.

“Henry.” Joe called out.

With a squeak of his shoes, Henry stopped. “Yes, Joe?”

“Is everything fine? Are you doing all right?” Joe asked with concern.

“Couldn’t be better Joe, bye.” Like a jackrabbit, Henry sped off.

^^^

“I have to find out.” Dean spoke to himself, laying his mug of coffee on top of the file cabinet in the records room of the clinic. “I’ll just pull you and take you back to the lab. First, what is your name?” Bending down to the last drawer where the ‘S’ names were, Dean adjusted his glasses and opened the file drawer between his legs. “Slagel, Slagel. God!” He gasped out. “Look at all the Slagels. It’s an invasion of them. Alexandra, Ellen, Frank, Joseph, Joseph . . . two?” He pulled both folders out and opened the first one. “Well you aren’t fifty-nine. You must be . . .” Dean flipped just the corner exposing the birth date. “Three. You are three.” He shut the folder and laid it on the floor. He pushed in the file drawer, nearly falling over to his side as his foot was stepping on his lab coat.

Grabbing the folder, standing up, then collecting his coffee, Dean left the records room and headed back down to the clinic lab.

His curiosity could have waited until he was well inside, but it didn’t. Dean set down his coffee on the counter to his right as soon as his first foot stepped inside. Peering down he opened the folder and kept walking. “O.K. What can I find out about . . . Holy Shit!” Dean banged right into a stool causing it to crash to the floor with a rattle. He leaned down blindly picking it up while reading. “Ten pounds, eleven ounces.” Feeling for the flat surface of his stool, he began to sit then realized he wanted his coffee. He looked back to how far away it was, and still reading he went to retrieve coffee in hand, folder open, Dean sat down before the counter. “Oh my God. Four weeks early?” Dean lifted the sheet. “Where is it? It has to be somewhere. We always . . . no.” Dean folded the third sheet over. “This can’t be right.” He took off his glasses and ran his hand over his face several times. “How can that be? He’s my kid? Where in the world did I get the genes to create him?”

“Dean?” Ellen’s voice softly called in the lab.

Dean was startled to the point his hand slid down to the table, flinging the chart and it’s contents across the room. “El?” He spun to face her then quickly got up.

“I was just . . .” She giggled at his nervousness. “Leaving for containment.” Her words slowed. “What are you doing.” She walked over to help.

“I got it.” Dean bent down.

“Let me help.” She began to gather papers with him. “Dean?” She stood up reading. “Why do you have his chart out?”

“Why?” Dean took the paper from her. “I uh . . . couldn’t for the life of me . . .” He grabbed all of the papers sticking them in the folder. “Remember if we tested . . . um . . . um . . . gees.” He peeked at the chart. “Joseph for hyperactivity. Yes, that’s it.”

“Joseph?”

“Don’t you remember now, El?” Dean gave a fake laugh. “You know my son, that dark haired kid.”

“Joseph?” She tilted her head.

“His name’s not Joseph?” Dean panicked.

“Yeah, but since when did you start calling him Joseph?”

“Joe?”

“Joey.” She corrected.

Dean thought quick. “Well, I uh . . .” He fluttered his lips. “I thought maybe if I started calling him Joseph, maybe he would be . . .”

“Smarter?” Ellen asked. “Won’t work. One of the children was bound to lack your intelligence.”

Dean’s mouth opened. “That is so wrong.”

“And I have to go. You know how Robbie gets.” She leaned forward and kissed him.

“How *does* Robbie get, El?” Dean asked.

“You know.” She kissed him again, sliding her hand down his arm. “Dean? Are you mad at me? You seem different. It’s just that . . . I’m kissing you, you’re not kissing me.”

Without saying anything, Dean slid his hand to her and kissed her. “I’m not mad at you.” He kissed her again.

Ellen let out a sigh of relief—a long one. “Good. Right now is not a good time for it either. Frank’s doing his thing again, and you know how Robbie get with me when that happens. I need you.”

“El.” He felt her hand slip from his. “El.” He watched her wave and leave. Turning and leaning, gut first against the counter, Dean spoke softly out loud. “How does Robbie get?” He felt frustrated. How many times had he heard her use that phrase in a short period of time. He needed an answer. Ellen wasn’t giving one. And aside from Joe, there had to be a person in Beginnings, nosey enough and close enough to give Dean the answers to Robbie he sought.

“Dean.” The woman’s voice called out.

Bright eyed, Dean looked up before turning around. He never thought he’d be so happy as to hear Jenny Matoose’s voice.

“Dean.” Slightly crass she spoke. “I need some more of that nipple cream. My areola are cracking from breast feeding.”

After taking a moment to cringe, Dean turned around to face Jenny with a bright, but forced smile.

^^^

Ellen slowly brought a piece of bread to her mouth as she sat during her lunch break in her office. She turned the page in the book she read, laughing softly at what was on the pages, then she heard it. The shuffling of feet from her quiet visitor. Raising her eyes, she smiled softly and tilted her head at the oddness of the visit. “Henry?”

“Hi El.” Henry slowly took another step in. “Can I sit?” He showed his hand at the chair then sat. “Boy, I’ve been wanting to just sit and talk to you.”

Ellen closed her book. “Henry, right now we shouldn’t be talking.”

“Why?”

“Robbie is coming to containment. He’ll be here soon. He hates when we’re together, especially since the wall. He’ll think we’re up to something.”

“Since when do you care what anyone thinks?” Henry asked.

“I always care, Henry. Less tension that way. And you being here right now will cause tension.”

“Why?” Henry wanted to understand.

“Frank came by last night in one of his drunken binges. You being here will only make Robbie think you’re helping Frank again. And we shouldn’t be talking here. Maybe at the social . . .”

“El, I want to talk to you. Can we just talk. Talking, that’s it.” He saw the nervousness as her eyes shifted around. He wanted to change the subject. “El.” Henry tilted his head and raised an eyebrow with a sneaky smile. “I saw Jenny Matoose. Jenny Matoose?”

“I did too.” Ellen smiled. “She is so excited about being in charge with Josephine with the Christmas cookies this year. Her and I were discussing the new ones we were going to try since we got the cocoa thing down good.”

Henry froze. Ellen and Jenny baking cookies? He thought for sure he was inside a bad remake of *IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE*. Change the subject. With a snicker he reached to her desk. “El? Are you reading?”

“I was when you walked in.” She lifted the book. “Did you read this? Jenny lent it to me. John picked it up the last time he was out getting . . .”

“Since when do you read books?” Henry asked.

“I always read. It’s my form of escape.”

“Escape from what?”

“Escape. Everyone needs an escape.”

“But reading El. You find . . .” Mid thought he stopped, this was a different Ellen and he was discovering that. “El, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How are things with you and Robbie? Really. How are they?”

Almost in a slow whine, Ellen stood up saying his name. “Henry.” She walked over and shut her door. “You know how things are.” She slid to the edge of her desk sitting before him. “Did Frank send you?”

“No El. I sent me.” Henry reached up and grabbed for her hand. But before he could touch her, Ellen’s office door opened and in walked Robbie.

Ellen quickly pulled her hand from Henry. “Robbie.” She spoke his name with surprise.

Robbie’s eyes shifted. No smile was on his face. “What’s he doing here?”

Henry stood up. “*He . . .* came to talk to Ellen.”

“*He . . .*” Robbie pointed. “Is not allowed. Especially since last night. And especially behind closed doors. Let’s go, El.” Robbie held out his hand. “Now.” He snapped his fingers. “I have the people waiting.”

Ellen grabbed his hand.

“El?” Henry called out. “He just snapped at you. You hate when people do that to you.”

Ellen’s head quickly turned to Henry in a ‘shut up’ manner.

Robbie moved Ellen to behind him. “Go on to the skills room, El.” Ellen did and he stepped closer to Henry. “Why would you even say that?” Robbie asked him with snide arrogance.

“Because she does.”

“What do you know Henry. You don’t know anything. Except how to start trouble.”

“It’s not trouble Robbie. I know.” Holding his head high, Henry walked to the door. “And I also know about that small little birthmark on the upper inside of her thigh. So there.” Henry nodded and walked out.

Closing his eyes tightly and shaking his head in disgust, Robbie blew it off. “Fuckin Frank.” Tapping his hand against the archway as he walked out, he headed to the skills room, looking once more at Henry who was leaving.

^^^

It was perfect timing and it aided in a better explanation. Henry’s interruption into the lab when Dean was asking Jenny about Robbie. Henry concerns over Robbie’s behavior deepened Dean’s. After all, Henry had spoken to Robbie, Dean had avoided him.

“Nothing.” Jenny said softly. “And does Jason know both of you are forgetting the same things. Weird.”

Dean was confused. “How can there be nothing wrong with Robbie. You heard Henry. Robbie was down right nasty. Plus, demanding. Ellen’s

frightened of him. Isn't she?"

"Yes." Jenny replied. "I would be, too."

"Then there." Dean stated. "He'd doing something to her."

"No, he's not." Jenny shook her head. "There is nothing wrong with Robbie. Yes Robbie get bitter and angry. He even gets violent. But never does he direct it toward Ellen. He loves her too much. And . . . Ellen should be afraid. She knows what she does to him. Afraid that he will say enough is enough." Jenny softened her voice. "You know about it Dean. He raised Josh and Taylor with her, watched them die. He put aside his personal convictions, knew he couldn't give Ellen a child, and allowed you and her to be together for that. And what does she do? Sleep with his brother. The best thing he did was make that understanding official. At least her and Frank don't sneak around anymore. And you . . ." She pointed to Henry. "If he acts that way toward you, you deserve it."

"Mel!" Henry nearly shrieked. "What did I do?"

Jenny laughed. "Run interference all the time for Frank. You wanna know what's wrong with Robbie, try finding out what's wrong with Frank. In my personal opinion, we should just toss Frank out. No one likes him or cares about him. He's nothing but a troublemaker and a drunk. And I'm going to leave." Jenny backed up. "The last thing I want is for Robbie to think I was involved in a negative conversation about him. He doesn't deserve it."

So in shock, Dean and Henry watched Jenny leave, then they just turned to each other dumbfounded.

^^^

Frank stared down at the palm of his hand. He mumbled some, closed his eyes, then walked more towards his Dad's office. A few more steps, a stare at his hand, and Frank continued on. Nearing the line of utility buildings, Frank looked up to make sure he wasn't heading straight into anything and he saw Josh. Josh walked with a sack, picking up anything that might look like litter. Frank knew this was an odd job for the teenager, maybe it was punishment of some sort. After all it was late afternoon, Josh should have been down or starting with his shift. "Hey Josh." Frank walked by him.

"Hey Uncle Frank, what's up?"

Like he smacked into a wall, Frank stopped walking. His head spun back with wide eyes to the blonde teenager. "Josh? You're talking?" Frank moved closer. "Say something."

"What do you want me to say?" He laughed at Frank. "How are you doing . . ."

"Stop." Frank held up his hand and ran his it over his goatee. "Wow, amazing. Diane worked wonders with you. And fast." Frank hit Josh on the

back. "Good job."

"Thanks." Josh shrugged, bending down and picking a cigarette butt from the ground.

"Amazing." Frank headed to his Dad's office. He knocked once then walked in. "Hey Dad."

"Frank." Joe held out his hand. "Sit down."

"Did I do something?" Frank asked.

"What the hell happened last night? I thought you told me you were going to control that drinking of yours."

"Dad, I wasn't drunk. In fact. Check this out. I really don't have a drinking problem. I thought I did and I just forgot, but Henry told I don't have one, so there. I wasn't drunk."

"Yeah Frank sure. Just stay away from Ellen, and for crying out loud, quit calling her name out so loud in the middle of the street."

"But you want me with Ellen." Frank commented.

"Since when? And why in God's name would I want you with your brother's wife?"

"She's not his wife. She's my wife."

"No Frank, she isn't your wife."

"Dad, I'm telling you."

Angry and frustrated, Joe slammed his hand down. "And I'm telling you! Knock the shit off!"

"Fine." Frank gripped the arms of the chair. "But you'll see."

"We have work to talk about Frank, let's try that. All right? First, as I mentioned this morning, we're going to Cleveland. You and three other guys will be there for about a week."

"I can't go to Cleveland for a week, why would you send me? I can't be away from my family that long."

"What the hell are you talking about Frank?"

"Uh . . ." Frank brought his hand up to his eyes. "Um . . . sorry. Nothing. When do I go?"

"About a week. I need you to square together the travel route. It's the usual. Next, Sarge." Joe reviewed his checklist. "Robbie says that Sarge is getting frustrated hanging out in containment. He wants to know if you can have another man posted in there instead of Sarge. Ellen reported Sarge snapped at a few survivors for talking too loud."

"I had Sarge in containment because of the savages. Did we have a savage attack?"

"Frank?" Joe pulled his chair into his desk closer. "Of course we did. Lost six lives."

"How the hell did that happen?! Didn't Robbie divert it, he works there."

“Robbie doesn’t work in containment all the time, Frank, he works with . . .” He saw Frank bring his hand to his face and squint his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Thinking. O.K. You’re right. Robbie works at mechanics. Time machine memory loss thing. I’ll put someone else in there.”

“Good.” Joe checked that item off. “Next. Tower watch. Andrea says that your guy Steve will be out for three days with that knee surgery.”

“Josh. We can put Josh in Steve’s position until . . .”

“Josh? Josh? Are you out of your goddamn mind? Josh is fifteen years old! You can’t put a kid on watch for Christ sake. What the hell is the matter with you?”

“Josh is good, I trained him to . . . sorry.”

“Time machine memory loss?” Joe asked.

“Yep. I’ll find another replacement. Don’t worry.” Frank breathed slowly out of his mouth. Perhaps he should have listened to Henry and brought Henry along for the meeting. “Anything else?”

Joe’s head spun. It really did. Why he was getting a feeling of lack of accomplishment from this meeting he didn’t know. “Frank, have you been drinking?”

“No I haven’t been drinking. Why would I drink at three in the afternoon. Wanna smell my breath?”

“Christ no.” Joe rubbed his head. “Just, just plan the Cleveland trip and run it by me in two days, all right?” It was clear he was frustrated.

“Yep.” Frank stood up. “Dad, I’m really sorry I’m like this. I feel like I’m in the fog a bit. I’ll be better tomorrow. It’s just that . . .”

“Time machine memory loss?”

“Yeah.” Frank pointed. “That’s it.”

“Frank, memory loss or not. No screaming Ellen’s name up and down the street tonight.”

“Dad.” Frank held his hand up. “I am under control. I have everything under . . .” He saw Joe hunching some, peering as he crept to him. “What are you doing?”

“Give me that hand.”

“Nope.” Frank pulled it back. “See ya.”

“Frank!” Joe reached up and snatched his son back by his shirt. “The hand.” He grabbed Frank’s hand and looked at his palm. “List of things to avoid . . . Why is Henry’s handwriting on the palm of your hand?” Joe squinted and held tight to the hand Frank started pulling away. “Avoid talking about . . .” The hand was abruptly pulled from his eye view.

“Bye.” Frank opened the door.

“Frank!” The door shut before Joe knew it. “I have to find Jason.”

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It must have been a Robbie suggestion, but somehow Dean liked it. An alarm clock in his lab. It buzzed like a school bell, and that was Dean's signal that it was time to go home. Mid review of notes, his hand extended blindly to the right to shut off the annoying sound. When it did and silence hit, the lights went out. Dean looked up. "Weird. An automatic shut down?" Thinking it even more of a great addition, Dean heard the door to the lab shut, then lock. A bit of fear crept up into him, he could hear the soft footsteps as if someone were deliberately sneaking into the lab. Just as he went to move his hand, another hand laid on his. He felt the body press behind his and the warm breath from the mouth so close to his ear.

"Thursday, Four-fifteen." Ellen spoke softly. "Ellen and Dean time." Her hands crept around the front smoothing their way up his chest. "We missed our time last week." She kissed his neck softly. "Jenny has the kids a little longer. I missed you. You make me sane. Make love to me."

Her words not only made his heart drop, but they made Dean spin around. When he did, Ellen's body pressed hard to him and her lips to his.

The kiss was so deep, intense, that the separation made a noise when Dean moved her away. "El, we can't."

"Yes, we can." Her hands moved to his pants. "Dean." She whispered his name. "Come on." She smiled ornery at him. "You know you love doing it in here."

"Here. Right here?" Dean's eyes rolled when her hands roamed about him and her mouth slowly teased his neck. "We can't." He reached to stop her hands. Maybe not as diligently or forceful as he could have.

Ellen took control. "We can." From his undone jeans, Ellen brought her hands to the collar of his lab coat. Seductively she moved into him, hovering her mouth over his. "Dean."

Dean swallowed. "Here? Right here?"

"No." Ellen said. "Right here." With a hard tug, Ellen dropped down pulling Dean with her to the floor.

He fought that final body to body connection with the linoleum. His hand gripped the edge of the counter for leverage in his fight. But not for very long, in a sexual defeat, Dean's hand slid from the counter and he joined Ellen on the floor.

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"I'm telling you he's here." Frank said as he walked with Henry down the hall of the clinic.

"No, Frank. It's after five. He's home. We should go there first."

"No, Jenny said it's Thursday. They're at the lab late on Thursday."

Henry stopped before the door. "Why Thursdays?"

Frank shrugged and reached for the handle. "Locked."

"And the lights are out, Frank." Henry observed. "They aren't . . ."

The door opened and Ellen stood there. "Hey, Frank. Henry. Bye." Tucking in her shirt, she hurried by them and down the hall.

Frank looked at Henry and walked into the lab. He flicked on the lights. "Dean!"

With a surprised, 'huh?' Dean popped up from behind the far counter.

"What the fuck were you doing with Ellen?" Frank asked.

"Looking for something." Dean cleared his throat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"In the dark?" Frank questioned.

"Had to." Dean gathered up folders, a twinge of nervousness showed. "We were searching for our light sensitive baby rabbit we created in the lab."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "Makes sense."

Henry gasped. "Frank! You believe him!"

"Henry." Frank snapped. "He's a scientist! He should know if he should look in the dark for a rabbit."

"But you . . . he . . ." Henry grunted. "You know what? You're so dumb you deserve it."

"Deserve what?" Frank asked.

"Forget it." Henry slammed his hand on the counter.

"O.K." Frank shrugged. "Then we'll just talk about the history later. I'll just go see the kids. See ya." Like he didn't have a care in the world, Frank turned and walked from the lab.

A growl came from Henry. "Frank!" he yelled. "We have work now!" He marched to the door and turned around. "You." He pointed to Dean.

"I didn't do anything," Dean acted clueless.

"Right." Henry shook his head. "That was like so not right. You're such a dog." He stormed out.

The second Henry left, Dean's elbows plopped first to the counter then his face dropped into his hands. He could only moan, and mind mumble his agreement with Henry's statement.

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"I don't know, Joe." Jason walked slowly side by side with Joe down center town of Beginnings. His hands were in his pockets as he and Joe headed to the social hall. "We didn't have these types of problems with Henry and Ellen. They were a little confused. Some minor, minor memory loss. Nothing as major as you are telling me."

"Could it be . . ." Joe paused to think. "Could it be because of the

distance in time you sent them that it may have fried something in their brains?”

“Medically, I’d have to say no. If I fried something that would cause the behavior you are describing to me, I would have fried enough to cease them from walking or talking.”

“Right now with the way Henry and Frank are acting, that may not be a bad idea.” Joe chuckled. “He wrote on his hand Jason. On his hand. No, wait . . . Henry wrote on his hand. Now what’s up with that shit?”

“How about Dean? Have you spoken to him. How has he been?”

“Haven’t seen Dean today at . . .” Joe stopped as he reached for the door of the social hall. “But Ellen has.” He saw Ellen walking from containment. “Let’s talk to her.” Joe, with Jason behind, hurried to her before she made her way home. “Ellen, can you stop for a second. I’d like to ask you about Dean.”

Pulling her coat closer, Ellen faced him. “Sure. What about him?”

“Has he been strange at all since this time trip?” Joe asked.

“Dean?” Ellen thought for a second. “A little nervous, jittery, but not strange. He seems to be . . .” She halted mid sentence.

“What is it?” Joe asked. “Did you think of something?”

“Well . . . Dean said something odd yesterday. He didn’t know who Joey was. He knew the other kids. But he drew a complete blank on Joey. In fact, he actually thought he was Frank’s. I thought here we go again. But he really didn’t know him.” Ellen shrugged. “Time machine memory loss I guess. But that’s it.”

“That’s it?” Joe asked sarcastically. “Don’t you think that is an awfully big ‘it?’”

“Joe, it was the time travel thing. I’m sure he’s all right now.” Ellen shivered. “I’m really cold. Do you want to go inside and talk.”

“No.” Joe waved his hand. “You go on.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Bye Joe.” Ellen backed up and waved. “Jason.” She walked casually off.

“Joe?” Jason stepped in front of Joe to see the look on his face. “What are you thinking?”

Joe shook his head and reached into his pocket for a smoke. “Something is up. I think we can get to the bottom of this and pretty easy.”

“How is that?” Jason asked.

“A little game of Beginnings trivia with our three time travelers. Can you meet me in my office tomorrow afternoon.”

“Sure, but Joe, how is asking them Beginnings trivia questions going to help them?”

“Not help them, help us. Help us figure out what the hell happened and Jason, something did. We have Frank, who is usually down right nasty

and mean walking around even tempered and sober. Sober mind you. He has cheat sheets written on his hands. And he thinks Ellen is his wife. I have Henry who is usually reserved, so damn nervous he can jump from his skin and saying 'fuck' while reviewing history. And Dean, Mr. Father of the Year, he can't remember his own goddamn son. I'll tell you Jason, they did something and we just have to get them to admit it." Joe began to walk to the social hall again. "I need a drink." He opened the door. "Time machine memory loss my ass."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

November 27

The puddle spewed out in a large circle on the floor behind the bar in the social hall. Apparently it seeped from somewhere, but for the life of Henry he couldn't figure out where. Mopping it up and giving it a minute to dry--Henry didn't want wet knees--he pulled out his flashlight and with open cabinets, searched out and felt every single pipe or line under there--nothing. On the emergency work order in his pocket from Joe, there also mentioned something about sparks coming from the bar outlet. Henry didn't want to dare check for that until he cleared up the dampness problem. Of course Henry chuckled to himself on he thought of sending Robbie Slagel to fix the water and electric problem. Zap the arrogance right out of him so to speak. But, because Henry was that type of guy, he tried to be nice. And, because Joe insisted that the job get fixed before Beginnings so called happy hour, Henry sent himself--like Joe wanted--directly after his brief lunch.

Dean sounded so frantic when he flew into the social hall. "Henry!"

Henry startled, lifted his head under the bar hitting it with a thump and a loud 'ow!"

Flying behind the bar, Dean slid on the still damp floor grabbing the counter top before he did a legs in the air flip to his backside. "Henry, don't move!"

"Why?" Henry stared into the blackness of the under-bar his head was emerged into.

"Because something could be broken and you could cause more damage. Just stay still." Dean squatted down.

"I only hit my head." Henry tried to pull out. "Damn it. I'm caught up. Now, see this is why I don't usually wear long sleeves." Henry tugged his arm, trying without ripping his shirt, to free his sleeve from the small piece of metal that had him. "Why are you here, Dean?"

"Joe told me something heavy fell on you and you couldn't move."

"Joe said that? Why?"

"I don't know. Let me see if I can help you." Dean reached under the bar for his arm. "It's kind of twisted in there."

"Ow Dean, it's scratching me."

"If you would just stop." Dean almost had it.

"Ow, I'm bleeding."

With a loud voice that could have blasted them through the floor, Frank hollered out. "All right! Knock off the fighting shit!" Frank barged to

behind the bar. Such intimidation was on Frank's face as he stared down at the two. "Get up! And Henry I can't believe you let Dean get the best of you."

Henry, who's arm was finally released, shook off the tiny pain and crawled out, standing up. "What the hell are you talking about, Frank?"

"You two fighting?" Frank answered and watched Dean stand up laughing. "You weren't fighting? I got a call from my Dad saying you two were tearing each other up in here."

Dean scratched his head. "I got a call from Joe saying that Henry was hurt."

Henry added too. "I got a call from Joe saying mechanically the social hall fell apart. What is going on?"

The social hall door shut, and oddly enough, was locked by Joe who walked in with Jason. "I'll tell you what's going on." Joe said. "I wanted all three of you together at the same time, without any of you knowing you'd be here at the same time." Joe walked over to a table and pulled out three chairs, lining them up. "Have a seat boys."

Henry, who didn't know whether to shake his arm or rub his head led the pack over to the chairs. "How come you didn't want us to know we were all going to be together here?"

"I didn't want you to cheat, Henry."

Dean sat down first. "Cheat?"

"Cheat." Joe said. "Jason and I have come up with a form of entertainment for the people of Beginnings. A game show so to speak, and you three are the first three contestants."

Jason, hid his snicker well. Standing there in the normal, tall, thin man fashion. Looking so much like he was up to something the way one arm was crossed across his waist while the other rubbed his chin. "We worked very hard on this . . . sit Henry. It's a trivia game. Beginnings history." He saw the hesitation in Frank to join the others. "Frank a problem?"

"Fuck." Frank moved slow to the chair. He stood above Henry who sat in the middle chair. Bending down, Frank whispered. "Let me sit in the middle. I'm screwed." As Henry moved a seat over, Frank sat. "I hope at least we get prizes for doing this stupid shit in the middle of the work day."

Joe opened his notebook. "Oh, you get a prize if you win Frank. A big prize."

Henry raised his hand. "Why . . . uh, why us?"

"Simple." Joe answered. "You three are originals, there should be nothing you don't know about the history. We even made it easy. True or false and multiple choice." Joe watched all three of them look to each other and try with diligence to look prepared. "We have questions that pertain to each of you. Ten points for each question answered correctly." He saw

Frank's hand raise. "Yes Frank?"

"What's the prize?"

"Don't worry about it. First question." Joe turned to Jason. "Ready to chalk up their scores?" Jason held up the pencil. "Dean . . . your question is easy. When we made the survival runs out of Ashtonville, which of the following were not a team? Frank and Jonas. Andrea, Jenny and Miguel. Me and George. You and Ellen. Which one is not a correct?"

Screwed! Dean tried not to look like he hesitated while he deduced which one was not true. Rewinding that list that sounded so right in his mind, he leaned forward with his hands folded and fingers tapping before him. Then it hit him. Ellen was married to Robbie. "Me and Ellen did not make the run together."

Joe smiled. "Very good." He saw Dean sit back in relief. "But wrong. Ellen was the only woman to make the survival run . . . with you." He shook his head. "Minus ten on that one, Jason. Frank . . ." His son sat up. "Easy one. Who headed security and put it together when we first came to Beginnings?"

Frank opened his mouth to answer but stopped when he heard Henry whisper 'think about it ' Frank closed his eyes. "Um . . ." It *was* too easy. Surely the answer he wanted to give was wrong. Remembering Robbie was in Beginnings and Robbie skills, Frank would not have stuck out like he did. Someone else would have put it together. "John Matoose." Frank held his hand out.

Joe snickered then left out a loud buzzing sound. "Since when haven't you ran security?"

"Fuck, Henry." Frank hit Henry's leg. "I was going to say that."

Joe pointed to his son. "Jason, give him minus ten also. Henry . . . multiple choice. Which of the following was the very first major repair you had to handle in Beginnings. The back gate perimeter. Generator one, or the greenhouse three humidifier."

"Oh that's easy, Joe. The Generator one. I was so frantic, it was solar and I hadn't a clue on how I was going to go about . . ." He saw Joe shake his head. "It wasn't? Yes it was."

"No it wasn't. The back gate was, Henry. It happened before we even moved here. Robbie was arguing with Frank in the cab of that truck and he drove right into the fence remember?"

"Uh . . . yeah. But you said major, Joe." Henry argued. "That wasn't major."

"Wasn't major? They caused a short that took you three hours to shut down the power. They were stuck in that truck the whole time. We had to make a run to get new supplies to rebuild that entire perimeter."

"But . . ." Henry held up his hand. "It didn't frazzle me as much as that

generator.”

“You’re so full of shit, Henry.” Joe shook his head. “Minus ten. Next round, these should be easy. Personal issues. Dean . . .”

“I don’t want to play anymore, Joe.” Dean stood up. “I really have a lot of . . .”

“Sit!” Joe scolded then, calming himself ran his hand over his head. “What is Joey’s birthday?”

“Who?” Dean asked.

“Minus ten. Frank . . .”

“Joe, wait.” Dean tried to stop him.

Joe ignored him. “Frank, true or false. A month after we arrived in Beginnings you took off and didn’t return for a week.”

Frank knew that didn’t happen, but because Joe said it. It had to have. “True.”

“Very good, give him ten points, Jason.”

“Yes!” Frank clenched his fist. “I’m winning the game I have zero.”

Joe seeing Frank’s happiness decided to damper it. “Why *was* that Frank, why did you take off?”

“Is this a bonus question?” Frank asked.

“Never mind. Henry . . . your turn.” Joe smiled. “For six months, you and Frank did not speak, Robbie busted your nose, all because you had a one time affair with Ellen. When did this happen?”

Henry thought he had it. He had it covered. “Joe.” He spoke somberly. “It was such a bad time in my life. I’ve tried to forget about it.”

“Knock the shit off, Henry.” Joe came back. “When?”

Frank turned completely around in his chair. “Yeah Henry when? When did you sleep with my wife?”

“Frank I . . .” Henry stuttered.

“And I’m just finding out about this?” Frank scolded.

Henry gritted his teeth to Frank, speaking through them softly. “Shut up Frank.”

“No And since we’re revealing bedroom secrets.” Frank poked him. “What the hell happened outside of Beginnings that one night?” Frank titled his head and then he felt the annoying pain of Dean laughing. “And you!” Frank faced him. “You think this is real fuckin funny don’t . . .”

“Hey!” Joe shouted as loud as he could. “Knock it off! Forget answering me, Henry. There is no answer, it didn’t happen. You know why? Because you’ve never been allowed to be alone long enough with my daughter to get an erection!” Joe was red faced.

Henry widened his eyes. He huffed and grunted then pointed. “See Frank, you asshole. I told you.” He folded his arms and sat back. “That was a trick question, Joe.”

“Trick question?” Joe asked calmly then raised his voice to the highest of levels. “Trick question!?” He handed his notebook to an uncontrollably laughing Jason as he walked up to the sitting three. He peered closely at all of them. “How in Christ’s name can I give you a trick question about your own damn lives? I’ll tell you how. They’re trick questions if you don’t know what the hell is going on. And the only way I can come up with why you three are so goddamn clueless, is because you three morons messed with time.” He reached his hand out to Jason. “Give it to me, Jason.”

Turning his head from the amusing verbal punishment he was watching Joe hand the three, Jason reached into his coat and pulled out Henry’s purple panda pouch. He gave it to Joe.

Joe held it up. “Recognize this?” He showed Henry.

Henry reached for it, but Joe pulled it away. “You went into my home, Joe. That is an invasion of my privacy.”

“Oh yeah?!” Joe raged. “You messed with time. That is an invasion of *my* privacy. Now, before I go to history and find out for myself what the hell you three did. Let me know now, right now.” Mistake. At that second the fingers started pointing at each other and Frank, Dean and Henry argued like teenagers back and forth on who’s fault it was, and who did what. The voices had meshed together with such speed, it gave Joe an instant headache. “Hold it!” He got the silence he wanted. “Henry, you tell me and tell me simply what happened?”

“Your son, Joe!” Henry spoke with blame. “He’s an asshole. He made a phone call and not to just you. To Robbie. Telling him that Ellen would be needing him in Ashtonville. But what the big goof didn’t realize is that it was four years before the plague.”

Joe closed his eyes and took a breath. “The phone call that put the two together. All these years you insisted you never told Robbie to go to Ashtonville. We thought you were nuts. Here, in that past you never made that phone call, in the future you did. I have to see.” Joe wacked the pouch off his hand and turned around storming out. Jason followed.

Henry, Dean and Frank all jolted with Joe’s slam of the door. They sat quietly and waited.

In silence, in the social hall five minutes had passed, Henry grew antsy. “Should we face it with him or hide?”

Dean stood up and walked to the door. “Let’s go. Frank? Frank?”

Frank waved his hands in the air. “No way! My Father will kill me! No!”

Henry tugged on his arm. “Tough Frank. Because Joe hasn’t a clue how much things are different, and he’s about to find out what you did.”

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“Dear God.” Joe gasped as he reviewed the disks in the computer. “Dear God.”

Joe sitting on a chair with Jason next to him was what Henry, Frank and Dean saw when they walked in the back room of history. Joe rubbed his eyes, staring at the screen, his face was so drawn it said it all.

Hearing them walk in Joe faced them. “This . . . this is like a dream. Do you realize how hard it is for me to believe what I am reading? But I have to, because these are the disks that Henry came through with. If this is the way it was, what in the world have you three done?” He shook his head. “Frank, all these years you and Robbie were called by people, Cain and Abel. You were Cain Frank, trying to steal your bother’s wife. But the truth to you, to you three is, Robbie was Cain. Robbie, attacked Ellen? Robbie kidnaped you Dean? He shot Frank?” Both of Joe’s hands went to his face. “And Denny? Denny died during all this?” Breathing slowly Joe stood up. “Frank, I can understand why you made that call. I can. But the truth is . . . the truth is . . .” Joe’s head dropped. “Jason you tell him.”

“You can’t ripple time like that.” Jason began to explain. “To me it is easier to believe what I am reading. I haven’t been here all that long. Now being that you made the phone call and that was the event that changed time. It would be easy to change it back.” He looked to Joe who just stood stunned. “But should we? Should we mess with time any more? It’s risky sending them back. They could stop Frank from making that call or miss him. We also have to consider, things are better in this history, yet . . . that doesn’t give us the right to change fate that much. It’s a hard call to make. I’ll send them back, Joe. You call it.”

Joe looked at the three silent faces of Frank, Dean and Henry. “No. It’s their conscience. Let them decide what we do.” He handed Henry his pouch. “It takes Jason two hours to prepare that machine. While he’s preparing it, you three discuss this. Really discuss this.” Joe walked to the door with Jason. “If you decide to do this, have Trish make you another set of History disks, mark them and be at the lab in two hours.” Saying no more, Joe left with Jason, pulling the door closed behind him.

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“No Dean.” Henry spoke stern in argument. “No.”

“Yes Henry. Leave it be. Just let things be. We messed up enough we shouldn’t chance messing it up anymore.” Dean came back to him, in their discussion on what to do. And those two seemed to be the only ones discussing. They paid no attention to Frank who sat off way in the back holding a notebook. “Look at things. Good things have happened and we

can't take them back, we shouldn't."

"We should!" Henry shouted. "And this is bull shit, this worrying about anyone else. This is personal for you and you know it. This has to do with Ellen."

"It has some to do with Ellen."

"No Dean it has everything to do with Ellen and that is selfish."

"And it's not selfish why Frank wants to switch it back? It has everything to do with Ellen also."

Henry laughed. "Have you spoken to anyone in this town about Frank? Come on Dean, we know Frank with respect. These people don't respect him, they hate him. In this Beginnings he's a mean nasty drunk. That's not right, because the Frank I know deserves more than that. Anything that Frank has done in this history has been overshadowed by his behavior. And let me honestly ask you this?" Henry stepped closer to Dean. "Have you spoke to Ellen? She's different Dean, really different. Is that the same Ellen you fell in love with?"

Dean's head raised up. "No she's not. The Ellen I love drives me nuts. She makes me scream and rambles on and on about the stupidest shit."

"You know why she does that Dean? Because that is her way of escaping things that bother her. If something is bothering her she bothers other people. The Ellen we love doesn't sit back and read a book. She doesn't jump when a man snaps his finger, she snaps back. Ellen doesn't just fit in a room when she walks in, she takes over a room. And she certainly wouldn't be caught dead baking cookies with Jenny Matoose." He saw Dean smile. "Jenny Matoose? Come on Dean. Would you like to know why she is so different? I'll tell you my theory . . ." He saw Dean slump and moan, and even Frank gave a sigh from the back of the room. "She has no spark. She hasn't any life in her. Why? Because the winning combination that pulled Ellen from her tragedy and made her live again is not in this Beginnings, it's in *our* Beginnings. Frank and you Dean. You two. Not Robbie. And we can't get Ellen back with out having you two in her life constantly fighting over her like two highschool kids."

"And the only way to do that is to stop Frank from making that call." Dean said.

"Exactly." Henry dropped his head. Dean had seen his point.

"That's . . ." Frank stood up holding the note book. "Not necessarily true." He looked at the two of them. "I have another plan. I can get our Ellen back and keep Robbie in Beginnings along with all the good he's done."

"Frank!" Henry scolded. "Listen to you. We have to change things back period. Haven't you ever seen Star Trek? They have this thing called the prime directive. What that means is . . ."

"Fuck the Star Trek shit Henry, listen to me." Frank held up the

notebook. “If we can get Robbie to Ashtonville at the onset of the plague or at least before we take off for Beginnings, we can have the same Beginnings history as now, less, the Robbie, Dean and Ellen thing.”

Dean had to disagree some. “You can’t be sure of that Frank. What effect will Robbie have on our lives if he never married Ellen? He certainly wouldn’t be the same man. There would have to be some differences.”

“Sure there would be.” Frank stated. “But I’m willing to chance it. I’m certain my plan will work. We stop me from making that phone call and mail this letter.” He handed it to Dean despite Henry’s snickering at him. “I place this letter in an envelope saying do not open until May 29<sup>th</sup> the year of the plague. Then mail that envelope to him. Here’s what I figure will happen. The phone call is stopped. Robbie gets the letter and one of two things will occur. He will either hold it until that year or, he will open it right away and think I’m nuts and blow me off. But if he blows me off, somewhere in the back of his mind . . .”

Dean smiled. “He’ll remember the letter that made him think you lost it.” He handed the notebook to Henry. “The letter really makes you sound nuts Frank if he reads it too early.” He saw Frank nod. “And if it never makes it to the back of his mind, he’ll never show up in Ashtonville and we will be back to square one when we return.”

Henry slammed the notebook back to Frank. “Listen to you two. You can’t do this. Doing this is trying to actually conform things to the way we want them to be. That just can’t be done. How do you know that he’s not going to open the letter and see the name Ashtonville and run there anyhow?”

“The same way I can’t guarantee that when I stop myself from making that phone call and walk away, that my past-self won’t just wait until I leave and pick that phone right back up.” Frank had caught Henry’s and Dean’s attention on something they hadn’t thought of. “I know me. I’m a hard head. At least this letter is a back up, a weird one, but a back up. Yes we still stand a chance that Robbie will go to Ashtonville early. If that happens and we return and Robbie is still married to Ellen, then we are no worse off than we are now.”

Henry closed his eyes in thought. “If that happens Frank, then what do we do.”

“We fight Henry.” Frank clenched his notebook with passion. “We fight to make our lives what we want them to be. I’ll do it. I’ll get the respect I deserve. Maybe when I do that, I can get Ellen in my life. And Dean, Dean can work on her. And you Henry, you have to just say screw my brother and make her that friend that you need. If he has her when we get back, then together, the three of us will take her and make her who she supposed to be. Not too mention one very important thing . . . Denny. Let’s make Beginnings

the way it *should* be.” Frank held his hand out, palms down to the center of the three. “Who is in on this with me?”

Dean raised his hand and laid it down with a smack of assurance over Frank’s. “I’m in.”

Henry saw them looking at him, waiting. With a sighing, whining stature, Henry lifted his hand. “Aw Frank.” He laid it down over both of theirs. “If things don’t work out the way you want them to be, no whining like a baby and gacking in my toilet . . . I’m in.”

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Joe noticed the uneasiness of Henry as he stood last in line behind Frank and Dean to make their second time trip. “Henry? I thought you of all people would be happy about changing things back.”

“Sorry Joe.” Henry shook his head. “I’m just a little upset that this happened in the first place. Wait until I tell my past self what he may or may not see when he comes through the machine with the past Frank and Dean.”

Dean, who stood in front, looked back at hm. “What do you mean, Henry?”

“My past self. If you two are gonna find Frank, who do you think is going to be sitting at the time machine archway when we go through there. Me. And I brought myself a book to read while I write in my journal, if that makes any sense.” He took the pedant that Jason handed him. “However, I know me. I’ll know something is up when I see me coming back though the . . .”

Jason just held his hand up to Henry halting him. He spoke soothingly to him. “You’re confusing even me. Now, knowing the time of day it is, you three are in luck. I won’t be in this lab when you return so make sure you pull the door closed tightly.” He began to punch the sequence in. “Ready gentlemen, do this right.” With a loud humming, power surging sound, the archway lit up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The fix it trip

Henry expected it, and there it was. The look of utter shock and surprise on his past-self's face when the three of them came through the archway. Holding his hand up to his past-being, Henry faced Frank and Dean. "Go on. And don't screw up again."

Frank nodded in agreement, pushing his bike alongside of Dean. He stopped midfield, looked back and smiled. "Bye Henry. Bye Henry. Have fun talking to yourself." He snickered and faced Dean. "I didn't want to hang around two Henry's. One drive's me nuts enough."

Henry stood close, but not too close to his stunned past-self who's mouth hung open. "You don't want to know. But I'm going to tell you." He handed over a book to him. "I forgot this, rather you forgot this."

Past-Henry looked down at the book. "Thanks. Why . . . why are you three here?"

Henry flutter his lips. "Let me tell you. Sit down." They both sat at the same time, pulling their legs up the same fashion to their chests as they sat in the high weeds. "Frank screwed up time, big time. You are going to be so pissed off when you get back there and see what he did if him and Dean don't fix this. I will tell you what that is. But first." Henry nodded with a smile. "I'm pissed at Frank and you are going to help me pay him back. When you go through the time machine today. You have to find Ellen. She will play a big role in this."

"Ellen? How's that?"

Henry smiled at his past self assuredly. Then with pleasure began to tell the plan he himself had come up with, and after that was all said and done, Henry informed his past self of what exactly happened, what he may or may not see, and what things were like. Just to save himself the shock he felt that first time. Henry did however, elude from telling his past-self the plan that was presently in motion. He didn't want to hear himself bitch.

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Frank motioned his head to Dean as they rode side by side slowly down the street of Miles City. Frank spotted her, that unpleasant and annoying woman in the fast food restaurant uniform. She walked, rather waddled down the street away from where the phone was. Frank knew at that moment, he had to be on the phone. Hopefully with Joe.

Pulling off to the side walk, Frank stumbled from the bike, running to

the payphone, pulling off his helmet as he did. He saw his past-self on the phone as he stepped to it. The door was open and that allowed Frank's heart to sink when he heard his past-self spew forth with exasperation one single word. 'Robbie'. Frank knew what that meant, he saw his past-self's expression, the way he leaned against the booth. With a heavy fist, Frank slammed the glass on the payphone. "Hang up the fuckin phone!"

The phone fumbled from the past-Frank's hand it dangled down. "What the fuck."

"Don't say it. Don't say shit to him." Frank spoke harshly to himself, then lowered his voice to a whisper. He could hear from the dangling receiver, Robbie calling out. "Pick up the phone and just tell him you wanted to say 'hi' and say no more." He watched himself hesitate. "Do it."

Past-Frank picked up the phone and placed it to his ear. "Robbie." He closed his eyes. "Hey, I just wanted to say hello. It's . . . It's been awhile." There was silence. "Yeah, good." Past-Frank heard the sound of snapping fingers to hurry him along. "Robbie, I have to go. I'll call you soon. Be good." He hung up the phone and turned around. "What?"

Frank curled his lip at his past-self. "I can not believe I was that stupid. Do you know what that call you were gonna make did? You went back to Beginnings, yeah, Robbie was there and guess what? He was married to Ellen. You . . . me . . . whatever. We're the town drunk."

"No way. I don't get drunk." Past-Frank said.

"In the new and improved Beginnings we do." Frank turned his head to the pair of old ladies who had slowed down to gawk at what they probably thought were the meanest looking twins. "What!?" Frank snapped at them. "Beat it!"

"So you're here to stop me. Will it work?" Past-Frank asked.

"I hope." Frank crossed his fingers to his past-self. "Dean is waiting. Do not call Robbie. Got that?!" He saw himself nod. "Good. Because if you do. Not only when you get back will Robbie be married to Ellen. But Dean, him and Robbie share her." He saw the look of disgust and anger on his past-self's face. "That's right." Frank backed up. "And don't eat them quarter pounders with cheese either." Turning and running, Frank made it back to his bike, and Dean. "Done."

"You think it'll work?"

Frank looked up as he straddled the motorcycle and placed on his helmet. "Now I do. Look, there you come."

Dean peered forward. "Wow, am I that short?"

"What the fuck have I been telling you for years, Dean. You thought I was lying?" Frank prepared to start his bike. "But, I have to say, for a little man, you throw a hell of a punch."

Dean grinned. "Thanks, Frank. That's a big compliment coming from

you.”

“You’re welcome.” With a jump up, Frank started the bike and waited for Dean.

Frank sat on his bike biting his nails. He watched the glass doors of the post-office waiting for Dean to come out. His eyes shifted from the doors to the block up the street where the meter maid was walking with her ticket pad. Not that Frank cared if they got a ticket for parking in a yellow zone. But he worried more so about the fact that the registration on the bikes weren’t do to expire for another five years. Somewhere between his watching the blond police woman-wanna-be and the doors, Dean came out. Frank’s shoulders dropped when he saw him. “Did you do it?”

“Yep.” Dean hopped on the bike. “Mailed.”

“Are you sure. You were awfully insistent that you go in there.”

“Frank, I insisted I go in there because I didn’t want them to mistake you for any of the pictures they had on the wall.” He placed on the helmet with a smirk.

“Oh.” Frank placed on his. “We’d better move before that meter maid gets here. She’s getting close.”

“Yeah, let’s head back and save Henry from himself.” Dean reached for the key to the bike.

“Dean?” Frank looked with seriousness to him. “What do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know Frank.” Dean looked back to the post office and thought of the letter he had mailed. “Only time will tell.”

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**NEXT: State of Time**