

CAIN

Beginnings Book 2

By

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By Jacqueline Druga
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CHAPTER ONE

April 28th

Beginnings, Montana

Bringing his deep raspy voice to a whisper's level was never an easy task for Frank Slagel, nor was keeping his towering body hidden just beneath the small grade in the secured back gate region of his community. But he did both, and not without a look of irritation on a face that had hardened and sculptured a look of 'mean' after years of living in a world that had gone bad.

Glad the darkness of the night kept him hidden, he crouched down behind the grade next to Dan, one of his security men. Though dressed in military garb, Dan was a complete contrast to Frank who, with the exception of his goatee, kept up his military appearance from his attire to his buzzed black hair.

"What do ya' got?" Frank asked, giving a yank to Dan's long ponytail.

Dan motioned his head to the perimeter fence. "He's been out there for a while. Been calling out. Now's he trying to break in."

"Did you say anything?"

"No."

"No? Why?"

"I was waiting for you."

Frank grumbled and pulled his revolver from his shoulder harness. He checked his clip, grabbed the unlit spotlight and stood. The flick of the spotlight beam surprised the thin man who was kneeling before the perimeter, apparently digging. "Back away from the fence!" Frank called out strongly as he stepped toward him.

Straggly, tattered, and clothes too big, the man stood up. "I want in."

"We have a front gate for that. About four miles east. Go there."

"I did." The man responded. "No one's there."

“Well, that oughta tell you something. Try in the morning.”

“I want in now. Why can’t I get in . . .”

“Back away from the fence . . . now.” Frank gave what he felt was fair, hard warning. “Now.” He stared for a moment at the man, shut off the spotlight and turned around. A few steps into his walk, a sizzle sound rang out as the man sailed a large stone through the electric perimeter. It made it through the beams, into the Beginnings area and landed with a deadened ‘thump’ at the base of Frank’s neck.

Frank stopped cold. Then, with an angry glare upon his face, he shifted back the chamber on his revolver and spun around shining the spotlight on the man. He lifted an aim. “You were warned.”

The man scoffed, holding a second stone in his hand. “What are ya gonna do? Shoot me?”

Bang.

The man dropped to the ground. Frank calmly returned his gun to his harness, shut off the spotlight, turned and walked away.

“Welcome to Beginnings. I’m Joe Slagel.” Wearing his typical white button down shirt, Joe stood behind a table, hands in pockets facing the small group of people that had gathered in the large recreation style room. To look at Joe, one not only saw his wisdom and leadership, one also saw how crass and gruff he could be before he even opened his mouth. It was a standard thing to him, a welcome introduction to the newcomers they had selectively let in. “You are in a place called containment. You’re here because you asked to come in. We don’t open our doors freely, and we don’t open our doors easily.” He looked at the worn faces of the twelve people in the room. One woman, nine men, and two children. All of them looked frightened. “Containment is your

first step. Here you prove you remember how to be civilized. In here you learn that skill all over again. We take caution in who we let in. We worked too hard to build this place. In Beginnings, we have plenty of food, houses, a safe environment, medical care. Out there . . . well, you know what's out there." Joe paced some as he spoke. "Our rules . . . they're pretty simple. If you want it, you have to work for it. Everyone pulls their weight. We have no crime, therefore we have no prisons. Blunt and simple, you screw up . . . you're out." Just as Joe prepared to slip into a gentler speech, he saw Dr. Dean Hayes.

Dean's small, thin frame leaned against the doorway of the skills room. Making eye contact with Joe, Dean lifted his hands some in a silent question mode.

"Christ." Joe mumbled and shifted his eyes not far from him to where George Hadly sat. He gave a quick twitch of his head to the stout older man, then motioned to the awaiting newcomers. "George, can you take over?"

George looked amused, almost hiding his smile as he stood up slowly. "Sure." He exchanged spots in the skills room with Joe, hesitating in the continuing introduction as he watched Joe walk to Dean.

Joe knew why Dean was there and his cringing was hard to hide the closer he moved to him. He tried to smile, but even under easy circumstances, that was a chore for Joe. "Dean." Joe laid a hand on Dean's shoulder moving him more to the hallway. "What can I do for you?"

"It's Thursday."

"That it is."

"Where's Ellen?" Dean raised his eyebrows, then in frustration ran his fingers through his dark blond hair in dire need of a cut. "Last I knew, Joe . . ." He said, pointing to George. "Ellen wasn't sixty with grey hair. I thought you guys were doing this class together."

"She's not here."

Wanting to say ‘no shit’, Dean refrained and just blinked long instead. “O.K.,” he spoke calm. “I have to get to the clinic. I have an emergency. Where is she? I have Denny with the twins, but that can’t be for long. He does stupid things with them.”

“Do you need me to go over?” Joe asked.

“I’d like for Ellen to be there.”

With a slow deep breath through his nostrils, Joe tossed his hands up.

Dean shook his head. “I have to go.” He stepped back. “I . . . I appreciate you going over as soon as you can.”

“You got it.” Joe watched Dean turn and walk away. He hesitated then called out. “Dean, did you check Frank’s?”

His immediate stop caused a high squeak as Dean’s canvass high-tops slid against the linoleum. Slowly, he turned around. “No. And . . . and I’m not. I’m just going to hope she’s somewhere else.”

Dean’s return to a hastened exit made Joe whistle softly at the very focused doctor’s chosen blindness. Figuring he said all that he could, Joe turned and went back into the skills room to help finish class.

No sooner did Frank open the front door to his home, the motion blur of a little blond haired woman sped by him. “Whoa.” He extended his long reach halting Ellen just as she made it to the front porch. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“Frank . . .” Ellen seemed agitated. “I have to go.”

“No-no.” He pulled her back in, leading her into the house. “You said tonight . . .”

“You’ve been gone.”

“I had something to take care of.”

“I’m sorry.” Ellen tried to get by him.

“El.” Frank stopped her again. “Come on.” He had a certain amount of pleading to him. “I thought we were going to be together tonight.”

“I thought so, too.” Ellen peered up to him sincere. “But I waited. And I can’t be . . . I have to be home, Frank. And this, this is not my home.” With another attempt to leave through the open door, Ellen was stopped. “Frank.”

“El. Give me an hour.”

“I can’t.”

“Then just . . . just a half an hour. Please.” Like he had always done, he looked right into her. “Please.”

Ellen closed her eyes briefly and exhaled. She said nothing, walked to the door and closed it.

Behind her, Frank grinned.

Ozark Mountains, Missouri

A sharp crack of a twig awakened Robbie Slagel from a not-too-deep sleep. He sat straight up, and in the same motion, grabbed from beneath his sleeping bag a long hunting knife. Holding it with a firm grip, he waved it slowly in front of his tall, thin body. His long blond hair dangled in his face, mixing with his thick beard. He removed his hair from his eyes, peering around his campsite. Nothing. It had to have been an animal. Being careful was something Robbie couldn't overdo. He had his close calls before. And every single time a sound awakened him, it played vividly the memory of the first time he had to take a life in order to preserve his own.

It was so long before, Robbie couldn't remember the year. His body, achy and tired, had just settled in for the night. The group of people he happened upon, had set up camp and he joined them. That particular group were what Robbie referred to as Wanderers. They traveled the land, scavenging it for their survival. They were dirty, mean, and nasty. But they were company to him none-the-less, and every so often he needed that. It was a time when Robbie trusted people more. Rather, trusted people at all. Robbie's trust was something he should not have given them, but he did.

The crack, the cracking of the twig just above his head. It was a sound he'd never forget. With that, all he remembered was his sleeping bag being zippered closed, and the painful blows delivered to his unsuspecting body. Were they feet? Were they branches? Robbie didn't know. He managed to grab his hunting knife, still strapped to his thigh, and rip it with intense rage straight through his sleeping bag. The rest still remained a blur. Blood rushing to his head, heart racing, fighting with instincts. His knife spearing out, slicing flesh. When it was over, three men lay in a bloody pool. Robbie, frightened and shaken, gathered his belongings and ran. He ran until daybreak.

Once again . . . he was alone. Robbie was used to it. Occasionally he would join up with a band of people. But that never lasted long. He always clashed with someone in the group. And Robbie would move on.

A part of him felt he was meant to live alone. Living in the wilderness suited him fine. He had trained for so long in the Special Forces, that being alone in unscathed lands was second nature to him. The world had become his real life training field. Cities which once stood tall and bright were dark and over grown with weeds. The concrete jungles of the previous world cracked as the wilderness that laid there thousands of years earlier, made its comeback. A newly unchartered world, offered little opportunities to the very few that survived the plague. A plague that ravaged out civilization so fast, it was over before it began. Robbie was grateful for all of the skills he acquired in his younger years. Those skills kept him alive. They kept him warm in the winter, fed when he was hungry and strong when others were weak. The only thing those skills did not teach him was the ability to remain sane throughout the horridness of what had happened. Yet he was not alone in his struggle for sanity. The ever balancing of wits seemed to be a constant with everyone he encountered.

With a deep breath, Robbie rubbed his eyes. He secured in his mind that he was safe. No one was around. He hadn't seen anyone in two days. He took his knife, along with his paranoia, and tucked them away for the night. He lay back down and tried to go back to sleep.

The next day would be the same as always, he would continue on. His mind and his body would both wander as he traveled on the mission that he had been on for so long. A mission he knew he would never give up. His inner struggles would not let him quit. He had made it too far. Giving up was not an option.

Beginnings, Montana

The smell of cigarette smoke sent warning signals off to Ellen as she quietly slipped into her home. A part of her knew she couldn't do it, but she gave it her best shot. Thinking that perhaps if she pretended she didn't see him, nothing would be said, Ellen closed the door with barely a click. She innocently moved across the living room, beyond the back of the sofa where Joe sat reading and toward the freedom of the dining area. She strived for the 'home free' feeling she sought in the kitchen.

"Ellen."

Ellen cringed, stopped and turned around with a fake smile. "Oh, uh, hey, Joe. What are you doing here?"

Joe set down his book as he stood up. "Oh, uh, hey, Ellen. Babysitting."

"Thanks," she said brightly. "You can go." She turned to make her escape.

"Just a second."

"Shit."

"Where have you been?" Joe walked to her.

"Um . . ." Again Ellen faced him. "Out."

"Out? Out. This is Beginnings, where are you gonna go?" Joe asked with edge. "You weren't at the social hall."

"Joe, look, don't start. I'm not in the mood for a lecture."

"Really?" Joe placed his hands in his pockets. "Ask me if I care."

Ellen huffed out. "Fine." She walked over to a chair and plopped down. "Go on. Get it over with. But keep in mind I am not a child."

"Then grow up." Joe walked to her. "Ellen, in all these years I have never treated you less than one of my kids. But I swear, if you were one of my sons, I'd be kicking your ass."

Ellen stared out. A Joe lecture was something she was used to. She raised her eyes when he walked around the chair to in front of her.

“I’ve kept my mouth shut.” Joe saw the glare Ellen gave him. “O.K., all right, I haven’t. But . . . it’s gone on long enough. A lot has happened in our lives. Losses we tried to overcome. So, I understood what happened to you and Frank when we were getting ready to come here. You both had a lot to deal with. I didn’t understand why you went to Dean to help you have a child. But you did, and when you did, you made a lifelong choice.”

“No, Joe, you’re wrong.”

“No, Ellen . . . you’re wrong. You are doing it again. You are doing the same thing to Dean that you did to Pete.”

“It is hardly the same thing.” Ellen scoffed with a small amount of laughter as she stood up. “We are not married.”

“And you think that makes a difference? My God, Ellen, you have children with the man. You live with him. You sleep in the same bed as him.”

“This is really one of your business.” Ellen’s hands flew out as she backed up.

“The hell it isn’t. You have been like my daughter, Frank is my son. This community is way too small for such an explosive situation.” Joe followed her toward the dining area. “Do you know Dean refuses to believe you were with Frank tonight?”

“Then that’s his problem.”

“You told him it was over last year when he busted you and Frank.”

“I lied.”

“Do you know how bad you hurt him?” Joe asked with fatherly anger.

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t care?” He stepped to her speaking with more passion. “You better start caring. The world we knew may have ended, Ellen, but the human race didn’t. For nearly twenty years you and Frank have been doing the same thing. Do you realize that

most of the world is gone, and you two are still managing to find people to hurt?"

"What do you want me to do Joe?" Ellen asked with emotions. "Huh?"

"I want you to do things right. If you don't care about your life in this house, then stop deceiving Dean and do things right with Frank."

"I can't." Ellen's strong words brought silence. "I can't. I don't know how to be with Frank the right way. And Joe, I'm sorry, I don't want to." She stared at Joe for a moment following her cold words, then Ellen, saying no more, quietly and calmly walked away.

CHAPTER TWO
April 29th
Miller County, Missouri

How long had it been? Robbie thought to himself as he spread open his worn out map of the United States onto the damp grass. A picture of his Dad and Frank lay on the corner. The sun was starting to warm up everything, causing a dew to form. How long had it been since he first started his search? He had lost track of time, but he hadn't lost track of hope. He looked at the photographs of his father and Frank. He knew they were alive somewhere. But where?

"Robbie, you're gonna be getting busy, I can't say why . . ." His father's voice spoke on his answering machine.

Robbie played that message over and over. What did his father mean? Robbie recalled trying to telephone his Dad several times, there was never any answer. Little did he know, within ten hours of hearing that message, he would be stationed at a check-point post not far from his base in Seattle Washington.

The virus. Robbie realized his father knew of it, and was trying to warn him. Stating in his last telephone message to remember their contingency plan. Robbie did. He only wished that he had tried to follow the contingency plan sooner. But why would he? He hadn't spoken to his father. The inability to contact his Dad led him to believe that his father merely fell victim to the plague, as well.

Robbie stayed behind in Washington, he had to. That's where he met Marissa during the plague. They became friends. She needed him. But he should have known. Marissa didn't want to live, having lost her two sons, the only thing in the world that mattered to her. She barely spoke, nor ate. For months she'd curl up at night in a ball and cry herself to sleep. He couldn't help her. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't. He never knew anyone could die of a broken heart. Marissa did. It was she, that made him

believe that he had to search for his family. Search until he had the answers.

“If I had family out there,” she spoke to him that last night. “Even with the slightest possibility that they were alive. I’d find them. I’d look until I had proof they weren’t around.”

Marissa never woke up.

How many years ago was that? Robbie looked down at his map, and at the markings he placed upon it to show everywhere he had gone. He placed the photographs of his father and Frank back into his chest pocket. He knew he would pull them out again, as he always did, anytime he met up with survivors.

Robbie would pull out that picture and show it to anyone who would look. Anyone who was still alive. He’d ask, “Have you seen them? Have you seen these two men? They are my family. I know they’re alive. Have you seen them?”

Never in all the time had he ever heard the answer his heart longed to hear. The hope of waiting for that answer kept him going. One day he would get that answer, and his life would change. He needed it. He needed to hear that one simple word, yes.

Beginnings, Montana

Joe adjusted his small walkie-talkie on his belt as he waltzed into the hanger not far from the fields. He had just finished speaking to Miguel. Miguel who had been working and running the fields was worn out. His brawny body had begun to thin out from the stress and work, and he begged Joe for more help. But what could Joe do? His hands were tied. If he had the help to give him, he would. Miguel’s request was one of the reasons he had to speak to George in the hanger that morning. The other one was Denny.

Denny was having his very first flight lesson. Though only thirteen, he was big, strong and old enough to start pulling some of his weight in the community. Johnny, his grandson did at his age. And as Joe saw it, Denny would too.

An uneasy feeling hit Joe the second he flung open the hanger door and heard the echoing sound of mouth-motor noises. Wondering what kind of odd teaching exercise George had embarked on, Joe walked to the chopper and opened the pilot side door. “What’s going on?”

Denny lifted his shoulders. “Sorry, Mr. Slagel, just having fun.”

“Fun?” Joe looked past Denny to George, who sat holding onto his head while he leaned it against the window, hardly looking like a man who once was president of the United States. “George, what’s going on? You look like you had a stroke.”

George huffed and opened his door. “I’m getting too old for this shit.” He stepped out and walked around to Joe. “Forget it, Joe. He’s not ready for this. It’s all a big game to him. He’s a kid, plain and simple.”

“He’s thirteen. Johnny started at thirteen.”

“He’s not Johnny.” George proceeded to flatten his hair, the same grey hair he pulled upon while trying to show Denny the instruments. “It’s useless.”

“That bad?”

“I wouldn’t trust him to take me for a ride in a Big Wheel, let alone in a chopper thousands of feet above the ground.”

“I have to do something with him.” Joe turned back to look at Denny who had jumped from the chopper. “Look at the size of him. I need that.”

“Yes, Denny may be big, but he’s a little boy in a man’s body. You have to remember that.”

Again Joe peered back at Denny who was screaming softly in his playful simulation of decapitation by chopper blade. “Is he normal?”

George only shrugged.

Rolling his eyes, Joe tried to ignore Denny. “All right. The other reason why I’m here. Men. I need men and I need you to make a survivor run . . . or two this week.”

“You said you were holding off for a while.”

“I know. I know.” Joe rubbed his eyes in frustration. “But we need bodies. If we could pick up five, five healthy strong men, we’d be good.”

George whistled long. “It’s not going to be easy. Finding just men is one thing, hell there are no women. But finding men that meet your criteria. Joe, it’s gonna be like . . .”

“Can you try?”

George released an argumentative grumble and scratched his head. “I’ll try. I’ll get a hold of Johnny and make some sweeps of the south and eastern regions we haven’t hit in a while.”

“Appreciate it.” Joe swatted George’s arm. “I’m heading out.”

“Whoa.” George snatched Joe back and motioned his head to Denny who appeared to be in his own world. “Do something with the kid.”

Placing two fingers in his mouth, Joe whistled loudly to get Denny’s attention. “Den! Let’s go. You have new work. The fields await.”

“No.” Denny whined as he approached Joe. “Can’t I help my mom at the clinic?”

“Andrea doesn’t need your help. Miguel does. Besides, he likes you. Thinks you’re swell.”

“He hates me.” Denny moped. “I live with him remember, I should know. Please, no fields.”

“Tell ya’ what. Because I’m a fair guy.” Joe said. “I’ll make you a deal. If you make it to the field house on foot before I get there in my jeep, you never have to do field work again in your life. But . . .” Joe held up a finger. “If I beat you. You, Denny, have the nickname, Farm Boy.”

“O.K.!” Denny smiled brightly at the ‘sucker’ bet he thought Joe just made with him. “Thanks, Mr. Slagel. See you aren’t as

bad as everyone says.” Not wanting to take a chance that Joe would change his mind, Denny took off running from the hanger.

“Joe, that’s terrible.” George contained his snicker. “It’s nearly two miles to the field house. Thought you were fair.”

“I am.” Joe tossed up his hands. “But I need field workers.”

George shook his head. Though he thought Joe’s joke a little mean, he was grateful for it. His headache started to dissipate. Denny was out of his hair.

Miller County, Missouri

Robbie stopped walking on the weed overgrown road. It was time for his daily reminder. The reminder that always made him go on. He placed his backpack down and pulled from the side pocket, the note. The note he took from his father's front door all those years ago. Went to Ashtonville 5/30, Love, Dad. He remembered the heart pounding relief he felt when he found it. He needed to have that message. And though four months had passed since his father had written it, to him it was a sense of hope.

Hope.

Robbie was filled with the hope of finding his family. It wasn't the message or even the date. It was the place his father went. Ashtonville. Ashtonville meant Frank. They had to be there, it had only been four months. Robbie couldn't have been more wrong.

At dawn he had pulled up in Ashtonville all those years earlier. He chalked up the quietness to the early morning. Frank's house was his first stop and he ran in without knocking. Empty. Dusty. Quiet. Dark. The smell of death lingered along with bloodstains that told him more than he wanted to know. Searching Frank's house and piecing together what had happened, explained to Robbie why Frank didn't stay in the house.

Robbie's next thought went to Ellen. That had to be where Frank or his father were at. Again, carrying an abundance of hope, and caring less if he woke anyone, Robbie darted to Elks street calling out in his charging run. "Frank! Ellen! Dad! Frank!" He made it the two streets over. Picnic tables joined together, sat on Ellen's lawn. Papers flew about in the early morning breeze. Robbie remembered grinning at the sight. Chairs, tables . . . people. "Frank! Dad!"

Nothing.

No one answered. No one was around. They were all gone.

The pity he felt that day, years before, when he dropped to his knees on Ellen's lawn and cried was long forgotten. It had been replaced with the knowledge that he had to find his family. Robbie knew they were alive. The scribbled notes and survival lists in his father's and Frank's handwriting confirmed that. Robbie just had to find where they went. He would search until he could search no more.

Replacing his father's note back into his pack, Robbie grabbed his gear and moved on. Though the roads, towns, and places that turned up empty filled him with pain, they kept him going. He vowed always to view his travels not as failures, but as factors he eliminated in his strive to reach his goal.

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen likened Joe's fatherly lectures to tetanus shots. Initially irritating and easy to take. Yet, like a tetanus shot, Joe's lectures became abundantly clear the next day to Ellen that she had received one. They sank in and she felt them.

Carrying not only a cup of coffee, Ellen carried some guilt as she stepped into a place that, nearly a year earlier, she vowed never to return. Dean's laboratory.

"Morning," she spoke, walking in as if she did it every day.

"Ellen?" Dean nearly spun off his stool in surprise. "What . . . what are you doing in here?"

"I brought you coffee." She set it down before him.

Dean suspiciously looked at the cup then at her. "You're either killing me or you want something."

"Neither." Ellen leaned across the counter from him. "I'm here to work."

"You don't work here. In fact, didn't you record into my Dictaphone, 'Dean you suck. I'll never work with you again'?" Dean started to stand. "I think I still have that tape . . ."

"Dean." Ellen grabbed his wrist. "Look, I know you're busy with your new experiments. Andrea told me. I'm also getting survivor whacked out at containment. I know you can use me. And . . . enough time has passed since our blow out over my little incident."

Dean mouthed the words 'little incident' as Ellen rummaged through his notes. "Ellen."

"What is this, P.C.R.S.?" She held up a sheet of paper.

Dean looked up at her. "Poly-Cardiac-Rhythmic-Synthesis."

"What is that?"

"Something I've been working on for a year."

Ellen squinted as she tried to read Dean's handwriting. "It must be important, for you to be working on it for a year."

“It’s important to me. Unfortunately, it hasn’t had my complete attention. Other things are more important.”

“But now you have me again. What is it?”

“Ellen.” Dean sprang from his seat and took the paper from her. “Why are you doing this? You never come in here anymore, let alone show any interest in my work.”

“Fine.” Ellen lifted her hands and stepped back from him. “Fine. I’m sorry. I’ll leave. But the next time you whine I pay no attention to you, don’t think I won’t bring this day up in my defense.” Ellen turned toward the door, she reached for the handle and opened it.

“It’s a way to jump start the heart, after it stops beating.”

Ellen’s attention was caught. She shut the door and turned to face him. “Almost like an adrenaline?” She walked to him.

“Better. I’m hoping.” He noticed the interest on Ellen’s face. “You really want to hear this?”

“Yes.” She pulled up a stool and sat next to him. “In what way do you mean better?”

“Well, adrenaline, injected directly into the heart will jump start it. In a person with a strong heart, that worked fine. It gave them the boost they needed, and the heart beats on. Then came problem number one. Any supply we had of adrenaline became useless three years ago. Problem two. If we had adrenaline, it wouldn’t work on someone who had a massive coronary, or say someone who had a trauma and lost a lot of blood. Those candidates, their hearts are too weak to pump the blood needed. With my P.C.R.S., one dose to start the heart, and lesser dosages, say at one hour intervals to keep the heart pumping, so the body can recover.”

Ellen smiled at him. “Dean, this is really great. Does it work?”

“I guess, it’s still not perfected. It’s never been tried on a human. At first I had the overkill effect. Man, I was exploding hearts all over this lab. I’d inject the heart. Boom. Blood was everywhere. Then I calculated the dosage with the weight. And it

worked. Sort of. The heart stopped in ten minutes. So I administered smaller dosages and was able to keep the subject alive like that. That was, of course, until I stopped the P.C.R.S.. Then they bit it.” Dean was proud of his explanation, but was surprised at the puzzled look upon Ellen’s face. “Did I lose you somewhere?”

“Yes. You mentioned subjects. Who exactly were you trying this on?”

“Rabbits, various other animals. Mostly rabbits. We’re overrun with them.”

Ellen started laughing. “Good thing for you the animal rights movement is dead.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You really killed bunnies, then exploded their hearts?” she asked.

“You’re making it sound rather raw. It’s science. And it’s a science we need.”

“I know that. Better not tell our kids though. Alexandra and Billy would have a fit if they found out your mad scientist tortuous means to furry animals.”

“Alexandra, yes. Billy, no. He’s too much like me.”

“True.” Ellen smiled with pride at him. “I’m so impressed, Dean. No. In fact I’m proud of you.” She leaned to him and kissed him. “You’ll really make a difference. And with this P.S. C.R.,”

“P.C.R.S.” Dean corrected her.

“Whatever. I’m complimenting you here, take it. You said it’s important to you, is it because of your father?”

“A little. Yeah. My Dad probably wouldn’t have lived even if I was there when he took his heart attack. But a young man or woman who just had a bad deal, may get that chance that right now our medical technology won’t allow.”

“Like Carl last year.”

Dean closed his eyes. “Yes. Carl shouldn’t have died. He wouldn’t have in the old world. But he lost so much blood when the survivors killed him. By the time Frank found him . . .”

“There was no turning it back.” Ellen sighed a breath to change the conversation’s demeanor. “But now, with this drug, you will save lives.” She touched his hand. “How did you make it?”

Dean’s other hand covered hers. “It’s complicated. But the basic ingredient was epinephrine taken from the glands of . . .” His eyes raised and he stopped speaking.

Ellen waited. “Of? Dean? Of? Did you forget?”

Frank’s voice gave the answer to the question as he walked in the lab. “He’s mesmerized right now at the magnitude of my presence.”

Dean rolled his eyes in slight irritation. “Keep using big words Frank, people might think you made it past the third grade.” Releasing Ellen’s hand, Dean stood up. “Why are you in my lab?”

“Why is Ellen here?” Frank asked.

“Ellen works here.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“She does now,” Dean said smug and grinned when he saw the surprised shifting eyes Frank gave to Ellen. “Frank?”

Frank stepped slowly to Ellen. “You’re working with him again? I thought he kicked you out.”

Dean laughed in disbelief. “Is that what you told him?”

Ellen bit her bottom lip. It was time to change the subject. “Frank. Why are you here?”

Frank slowly breathed out. “I’m pissed. And I need you to tell me I’m right.”

Ellen nodded. “You’re right.”

“Thank you.” Frank smiled and stepped back. “I have to go find Jonas.”

Dean looked quickly back and forth. “Wait a second. Just like that? El, you don’t even know what you told him he was right about.”

“Yes, I do. It can only be one thing. Has to be about . . . it.”

Frank nodded. “Exactly.”

“It?” Dean questioned.

“It.” Frank reiterated. “It has been given a new job. It now has access to too much shit. It can’t be . . .”

Dean shot up a hand halting Frank. “You have got to talk to someone about this obsession. It meaning Michelle?” Dean cringed at Frank’s vocal disgust.

“Dean, the bitch took the van.” Frank stated.

Dean had to laugh. “Frank, she was scared. You and Jonas found her on a survival run. You two frightened her, she took off with your van. Get over it.”

Frank waved an arrogant finger in front of Dean. “You’ll see. She cannot be trusted and we let her in. You’ll see.” He gave a single nod and moved to the door. “El, thanks. I’ll see you tonight.”

Dean’s eyes stayed fixed on the door until Frank was gone. He turned to Ellen. “You’re seeing him tonight?”

“Absolutely not,” Ellen said with certainty and grabbed for notes again. “Now back to this. . . S.P.C.R.”

“No, El, it’s P. C. . . .” He closed his eyes with a smile. “Forget it.” He snatched the notes from her hand, and gave a playful smack to the top of her head with them. Grateful they were back to working together, Dean moved easily into his scientist mode.

CHAPTER THREE

Gravois, Missouri

Robbie emerged from the small lake. His nude body, numbed from the coldness of the water, ran quickly to shore to gather his clothes. He hurried and pulled on his pants and the rest of his clothing. He ran his fingers through his wet hair to steer it from hanging in his face.

As Robbie tilted his head to one side to clear the water from his ears, he heard it. That sound. Thinking it was a figment of his imagination, he plunged his ears one more time and listened again. The sound of music. The sound of an acoustic guitar being picked with perfection carried to him from the distance.

Robbie gathered up his belongings and followed the sound. Closer and closer it grew. As he made his way from the wooded area to the clearing, he saw a man. A black man, no more than thirty years old, sat playing his guitar while sitting on a fallen tree in the midst of a well set-up camp site. He was alone, except for a horse tied to a tree twenty or so feet away.

Robbie neared him, slow and mesmerized. The man played so well, his head swayed back and forth, eyes closed as his fingers took each string. He stopped playing when he heard Robbie approach.

Robbie cleared his throat so he could speak, he hadn't spoken in days. "No. Don't stop." Robbie's voice was soft and deep, unlike his brother Frank's, whose voice seemed to bellow on every word. "Please." Robbie sat down across from the man, the small fire separated them.

When he finished his song, the man looked up at Robbie. "You like?"

"I . . . uh, yeah." Robbie cleared his throat again. "I used to play. But things keep happening to my guitars."

"I know that." He smiled. "Paul." He set his guitar off to his side and rested it on the tree. He then extended his hand to Robbie.

A hand shake? Robbie could not recall the last time he shook someone's hand. No one he met had ever offered him their hand. "Robbie, Robbie Slagel." Robbie shook the hand. Paul gripped it firmly, a sign to Robbie, that this man was different. "Play some more."

"I will. But . . . lunch is done. Why don't you play?" Paul grabbed the guitar and handed it to Robbie, then lifted the lid from the frying pan which sat upon the metal grate over the fire. An aroma of well-cooked food blew outward. "Want some? I have plenty."

Why the man was being so civil, Robbie did not know. It was odd, he was different from anyone else he had ever met. Taking the guitar, Robbie held it all right, but it had been so long since he had played he felt awkward. He placed it down. "If you're sure."

"I am. Of course it's rabbit, the meat of choice."

Robbie smiled at Paul. "The only plentiful meat you mean."

"Right." Paul removed the frying pan from the fire and placed it on the ground. He pulled from a bag, which sat next to him, two tin plates, and forks. He served up a helping to Robbie and handed it to him.

Robbie stared at the fork, it had been a long time since he used eating utensils. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he saw someone use a fork.

"Something wrong?" Paul asked.

"A fork." Robbie turned it about. "You're different from the other wanderers I've met."

"Wanderers?"

"Yeah. People who go from place to place moving around. I've met lots of them. Never anyone like you. You have it together." Robbie stared at his food, then awkwardly took his fork, plunged it into his meat, and shoved it in his mouth. "It's like you're on vacation."

Paul began to laugh. "I'm not a wanderer. I guess you can say I am on vacation. You see, I live in Texas. There's a small town

down there where some survivors have gathered. Anyway, Texas is hot. So every April I head north for awhile.

There was something about Paul that intrigued Robbie. Something likeable and civil. “April? How do you keep track of time?”

Paul lifted his sleeve and showed Robbie a monstrous watch. “I’ll probably be lost when this finally goes. But it lets me know the time, day, month.”

“What day is it?” Robbie asked.

“April 29th.” Paul pulled down his sleeve and began to eat.

“You mentioned that you live in a town, a town that survivors had gathered.” Robbie placed down his plate and pulled the pictures from his pocket. “Have you seen these two men?”

Paul took the photographs and stared at them.

“See they’re my family. I know they are alive. I found proof of that. But they moved on and I don’t know where they went. Have you seen them?”

Paul shook his head. “No man, sorry.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’d remember this one.” He indicated to Frank’s photo as he handed it back to Robbie. “He looks like a big guy and mean. I’d remember if I met him.”

“Yeah, you would remember Frank.” Robbie put them back in his pocket. “Thanks. It’s just that I haven’t searched Texas yet, and you mentioned survivors. I just thought, well, you know.”

“Sorry.” Paul noticed the disappointment on Robbie’s face. “Is that what you are doing? Are you searching for them?”

“Since about four months post-plague.”

“Holy shit.” Paul was astonished. “That’s a long time to be looking. And you haven’t given up yet?”

“I’ll never give up. I know they’re alive. I have to keep looking. I have nothing else to do.” Robbie picked up his lunch and continued to eat.

Beginnings, Montana

Soft spoken and meek was how Jonas Lyons talked when he was relaxed and not in the ‘security guy’ mode. And even though it was health related in his visit to the clinic, he still was relaxed. He was quite used to his frequent checkups and blood work done by Andrea Winters, the woman appointed a doctor after William Hayes had passed on. Her years of experience in the nursing field, and compassion, made her the best one to care for the ill in Beginnings.

“Jonas.” Andrea closed the chart as she spoke softly. “You know there is no change.”

Jonas smiled gently. “I know. I didn’t think there would be.” He reached for his shirt.

“This . . . this . . . disease.” Andrea closed her eyes. “Dean is continuously working on it. He’s trying. It bothers him he’s not making progress.”

A chuckle escaped Jonas. “Andrea, tell Dean don’t worry. If the doctors in the old world couldn’t make progress, with what we have, how can he expect to.” Readyng to place on his security shirt, Jonas looked up to see Frank approach the open examining room door. “Hey, Frank.”

“You ready?” Frank pointed back with his thumb. “We have rounds in the underdeveloped to do.” He watched Jonas nod, then Frank shifted his eyes to Andrea. “Hey, Andrea.”

Andrea slammed the chart, glared at Frank with such a motherly scold, then turned her back again.

“Ouch,” Frank said sarcastic. “Did I do something?”

Andrea faced him with slightly rolling eyes. “Oh, no Francis Slagel, you never do anything.” She grabbed her things and brushed by Frank out the door. “Excuse me.”

Lifting his hands in question to a snickering Jonas, Frank shook his head and stepped into the hall. “Andrea. Stop.” He took a few steps to her when she halted. If she was upset, he wanted to

know. After all, she was like the mother of the community. “What did I do?” he asked.

Andrea turned and looked at him. “We are a close knit community, Frank. Us ‘originals’ we’re a family chain. I hate to think a member has caused a kink.”

“Did . . . did someone else do something?”

“No. You!” she snapped. “You’re up to your shit again. Stop it. Stop it now, Frank. Dean is my friend. Joe all but told me. That affair you and Ellen had last year, he said it didn’t stop.”

Frank stared at Andrea for a moment. He wanted to tell her to mind her own business. But seeing he had too much respect for her he opted for lying and playing dumb. “What affair?”

Andrea growled and even though she was a black woman, the red grew on her face. “You’re causing problems, Mr. Slagel. You are not all that. And if you were, you’d either stop it right now, or you’d be man enough to own up. Make a change and do things right.” With strong final words and not wanting to frustrate herself any further by talking to Frank, Andrea stormed off.

Jonas softly cleared his throat. “She impresses me with her tact.” Giving a pat to Frank’s back, Jonas walked by him. “Let’s go do those rounds.”

The fading vision of Andrea moving away down the hall were where Frank’s focus stayed. He hesitated before following Jonas. Frank was frozen there in thought over the unexpected, scolding words of a woman he really respected.

Joe tapped his pencil on his desk in disappointment as he heard the sound of the helicopter fly overhead. He looked across his desk to Henry who sat with him in his office. “They didn’t have any luck, Henry. They radioed in about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Joe what do you expect? You’re only sending them out to get criteria fitting men. Did they stop to talk to anyone?” Henry Kusakari, an Asian man who looked younger than his thirty-three years, always searched for the right answer for everything. He was known amongst Beginnings as the ‘original’ with theoretical rationalization.

“Nope. They said they didn’t see a soul.”

“Maybe they’ll have better luck next time.”

“Yeah, they’re going out Monday, they said they’ll go farther south and see.” Joe pulled one of his homemade cigarettes from his pocket and lit it. “So what brings you in here?”

“I brought back the walkie talkie’s I repaired. Tell Frank I don’t know what he’s doing to his, but I can’t keep fixing them. Also, just wanted to let you know mechanics is making batteries again. It’s always a big task. Do you have any people you think could do this menial work?”

“Sorry.” Joe shook his head as he rocked back and forth in his chair smoking his cigarette. “Maybe one of the new survivors, everyone else is placed already.”

“Speaking of which, that new lady Michelle, she’s brilliant. She really knows electronics. I think she’ll be useful. I’m glad you finally put her with us in mechanics. Michelle’s nice.”

Joe squinted. “Do me a favor Henry, don’t mention those comments in the presence of Frank, will ya?” The reason she worked the greenhouses for so long is because I didn’t want to argue with him.”

“I won’t Joe. I know he’s neurotic about her.”

“Neurotic is putting it nicely. I just thank God we only have one Frank. He’s odd enough” Joe quickly looked up when the door to his office opened. Johnny Slagel, a picture perfect younger version of his father peeked his head in and tossed Joe a set of keys.

“Hey, Pap, just wanted to check in and say sorry about the nil run.” He spoke rather hurried. “It’s really dead out there. See ya.” He laughed and pulled the door closed.

Joe nodded, leaned back at his chair and looked to Henry who was trying not to laugh. “Forget that last ‘Frank’ comment.”

Gravois, Missouri

“Smoke?” With an after meal grunt, Paul reached for his bag, opened it and pulled out a rolled up cigarette, he showed it to Robbie.

“No, thanks.” Robbie had to get his energy going if he was going to move on.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Paul lit up, inhaled deeply, held in the smoke, then slowly blew it out.

Robbie’s eyes widened to the smell. He sniffed once, thought he was imagining things, then sniffed again. He sat up. “You’re gonna think I’m nuts, but, that smells like a joint.”

Paul laughed as he coughed on the smoke. “It is. I grow it outside my cabin back home.” He took another hit. “Are you sure you don’t want any?”

“No, never touched it. Me, I always was a drinker.”

“I can oblige.” Paul dug into his bag again and tossed Robbie a bottle of whisky. “The booze is the easy thing to pick up on my travels. It gets better with age.”

Robbie unscrewed the cap and took a swig. He gasped as it burned his esophagus all the way down until it knotted in his stomach. “It’s really been a long time.” He handed the bottle back to Paul and looked up to the sky. “Day’s moving on. There’s still miles to be got.”

“Yep.” Paul looked up as well, enjoying his smoke. “A little bit longer and I’ll gain momentum to get moving again.”

“Good luck to you.” Robbie stood up. “I want to thank you for your kindness. It was really nice.”

Paul was surprised. “You’re not hanging with me?”

“No. I have to keep moving.”

“I move, I will for a few more days at least. I don’t understand, you said you were heading north, so am I. Why don’t we just travel together until I stop?”

“You trust me enough?” Robbie asked.

“Man, anyone that I encountered that tried to hurt me, needed what I had because they couldn’t hack it on their own. You don’t need anything I have. And you certainly can hack it without my stuff.” Paul held out the bottle. “The choice is yours. I don’t fear you. I think you don’t fear me. All I’m saying is it might be good for both of us to travel together for a little while.”

He did want to stay awhile with Paul. Knowing how long it had been since he actually had a civilized conversation was reason enough for Robbie to want to travel for a few days with him. Sanity was something Robbie often feared he was losing. And it was the first day in a long while Robbie felt sane. “You know what? I will take you up on your offer.”

“Good. Let’s just sit for a little more and then get moving.”

Robbie smiled and dropped back down to sit. He grabbed the bottle back and took another drink. He vowed he’d never travel again with anyone, but Paul was different. Paul was still human.

Beginnings, Montana

“Mommy?” Alexandra, Ellen’s four year old daughter, stood on a chair at the sink with Ellen as she did her dishes.

“Yes, Sweetie.” Ellen tried to hurry, she was ten minutes late for her class at containment.

“Are you going with Pap-Pap tonight?”

“Yes, if your father would hurry up . . . Billy!” she called to her son. “Tell Daddy to hurry.” Ellen washed another dish.

“He’s coming.” Billy ran into the kitchen dragging his words as he ran. “Are you going with Pap-Pap tonight?”

“Yes,” Ellen told him, as well. “Why are you guys asking me so much?” She turned off the water.

Alexandra smiled. “Daddy said he’s gonna show us something fun tonight when you’re gone.”

“Really? What?”

“Cells,” her daughter answered.

Ellen put down the towel. “Cells, as in blood?”

Both of her children nodded.

“Wow,” Ellen spoke sarcastically. “Sounds like a blast.”

Alexandra jumped from the chair. “I’ll tell daddy to hurry so you can get drunk with Pap tonight.”

“What!?” Ellen turned around in surprise from her daughter’s comment and Dean was standing in the kitchen door. “Dean? Did you tell these kids I get drunk with Joe?”

“No.” Dean walked into the kitchen, kissed Ellen on the back of her neck, then opened the fridge. “I told them you drink whiskey with Joe. They’re smart El, they know alcohol makes you drunk.”

“They don’t even know what drunk is. One drink and I come home. That is not drunk.” Ellen grabbed the towel that lay on the counter and hit Dean on the head with it. “Why would you tell these kids this shit?”

Dean shut the refrigerator. “It’s fun. You should hear the stuff I tell them when you’re not around. El, why are you still here? Joe’s gonna be pissed that you’re late.”

“You were napping, Dean, what do you want me to do. Leave them?” Ellen with a slight smile darted by him. “Foods on the stove. See ya later.”

Dean followed her as she made a mad dash to the door. “Will you? Should I wait up?”

Ellen stopped before leaving. She turned back around to see Dean picking up Alexandra, holding her like such a father. She stared for a moment. “You know what? Yeah. Yeah, please wait up.” Surprising Dean, she hurried to him, gave him a quick kiss and left.

The evening chill started to hang over Beginnings as it fast approached six pm. Frank, tired, feet dragging, continued on his security rounds. Rounds he began at six in the morning and ended at nine. It was the same routine. Rounds, then his office for those stupid reports Joe wanted, then inter-community rounds. He could break them up, but Frank always preferred to do the far away perimeters first, so he could be available should there be any trouble. John Mattoose was also in security, however unlike Frank’s long day, John put in eight in security, then helped in electronics. It was Frank’s responsibility to keep things secure. It was Frank who would pull men from the field whenever they had trouble with a new survivor. Frank ran security.

He sipped his coffee as he checked the structures which lay just on the edge of the fields closer to town. The last of his coffee tasted bitter. He tossed the remainder of the still hot beverage on the ground. Frank sniffled, and rubbed his nose with the back of

his hand. He looked oddly ahead when he noticed the double doors to the hanger were wide open. He walked to the building and went inside, calling out as he did. “Hello?”

“Dad.” Johnny came from behind the helicopter. “What’s up?” He wiped his hands with a cloth.

“Johnny, what are you doing in here?”

“Pap has us doing runs again. I just wanted to give the second chopper a look over. But I’m finished. You can check with George. He cleared it.”

“I’ll do that.” Frank walked further into the building, and closer to his son. “You know, I’m glad you’re here. I want to talk to you.”

“About what?” Johnny tossed the greasy cloth onto a box.

“Pap was talking to me. It seems you’ve been messing around with a few of the women in the community.”

“What? I’m allowed to smoke cigarettes. I’m allowed to drink alcohol. But I can’t have sex?”

“That’s not the point.” Frank was trying to be reasonable with his son. He always took the man-to-man approach with Johnny since Johnny showed signs that he was much more mature than his sixteen years. “The point is . . . there aren’t that many women, John. You’re gonna cause resentment. You have to kind of be . . . responsible.”

Johnny laughed and shook his head. “I love you Dad. I do. And you can get pissed at me. But you’ve got room to talk about being responsible. I’m not hurting anyone. I’m having fun and messing around. You . . . you’re screwing with people’s lives.” And after saying what he did, he just walked out.

Frank swallowed hard as his son left. Johnny didn’t just deliver the final word, he delivered the final straw to Frank.

His hair was pretty tamed for being a mannequin. The residents of Beginnings kept him clean and tidy. After all, he was the stock bartender at a converted warehouse they deemed their social hall or neighborhood bar. Joe's arm bumped into 'Sam' the mannequin in his reach over the bar for a bottle of moonshine. He poured a drink for himself then for Ellen. "Rough class."

"I hate them." Ellen took the drink and sipped it.

"Oh, you do not. It gives you a sick sense of pleasure trying to make the survivors normal again."

Ellen tilted her head with a smile. "Yeah, I guess it does."

"How late are you staying? Wanna throw darts?"

"No." Ellen answered. "I'm going home. Dean's waiting up."

Joe choked in the middle of his drink. "For you?"

"Joe." Ellen softened her voice. "Despite what you think, I heard you last night. I've been hearing you since I was a kid. And I thought about it, I really did." Her hand played with her glass. "Dean, he isn't Pete. He's not a shit. He doesn't deserve what I do. Frank . . ." Ellen lowered her head. "He has this hold on me. He controls me, and I let him. I love him I do, but I . . ."

Joe waited. He thought Ellen was searching for the right words. "But you what?"

Ellen shook her head and gave a shift of her eyes.

Before Joe could see who she was trying to point to, Frank's big arm separated them as he reached for a drink. Joe watched Frank grab the bottle. "Aren't you on duty?"

"Nope." Frank poured. "Jonas is. El." He put his back to his father. "I have to talk to you. Really talk to you."

Around Frank's body, Joe poked his head. "Not here, Frank. People will talk."

"Dad, you think I care?" Ignoring his father, Frank looked down to Ellen. "I've been thinking about our situation."

"Christ," Joe complained. "Not here!"

"Dad!" Frank snapped. "Please." He returned to Ellen. "Andrea said something today that made me think. I've been thinking."

“Me, too,” Ellen said.

“El, us, we . . . it’s not the right way to go about it.”

“I agree.” Ellen grabbed her glass.

“Too long, El. We’ve been doing this for too long. We have to stop.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “I agree.”

“Good. I’m glad we’re thinking on the same lines.” Frank kissed her on the cheek. “Because it will be hard I know . . .” He watched Ellen nod in agreement. “But, with some work, and time, we can do this ‘you and me couple thing’ right, finally.”

Ellen’s whole expression changed to a surprised one. She looked at Joe who was snickering at her dilemma, then she peered to Frank who looked as if waiting for an answer. She picked up her drink, gulped it, set down her glass, flashed a fast grin and flew out.

Frank nodded slowly and looked at his father. “Went well.”

Joe just rolled his eyes and lowered himself down into his drink.

Stover, Missouri

“My father? Let me tell you about my father.” Robbie laughed as he spoke, his head bounced side by side, flopping his long hair all over the place. He walked with Paul on the road going north. “He is a story all in himself.”

“Then let me hear about him. What else to we have to do?” Paul held on to the reigns of the horse that paced along with them. The horse, boggled down with Robbie and Paul’s belongings, gave Robbie and Paul the freedom to move without baggage. They shared the horse for a while, then decided to walk.

Robbie thought in his mind the best way to describe his father. Describing him was definitely not a one sentence job. “I guess to tell you about my father, I should first tell what made him like he is. My Dad married my mother right after high-school. He joined the police force when he was eighteen.”

“Your father was a cop?”

“For about a year and a half. Then he got tired of it, he said it was . . . let me think . . . pansy work. He quit and joined the military, forget that Frank was just born. He stayed in the military a long while. Military intelligence. When he left, he joined the CIA. My dad is the type of guy you want and need to have in any major crisis. He sees things clearly, always. He never lets his emotions get in the way of any decision. Did I tell you my father called me up to warn me about the plague before it all went down?”

“No, you really haven’t said anything about your family, at all.”

“Well, he did. He called and left this really weird message. He said to remember the contingency plan. Now the contingency plan was, in the event of any national emergency, an emergency where the world has met its end, we would go to the designated place. The reason was, so we could see who survived and who

didn't." Robbie told the story as if he had been waiting to tell it to someone for a very long time.

"You guys actually planned an end-of-the-world strategy?"

"Oh yeah. We waited for it. You have to understand Paul, my mom died when I was four, my dad raised us. It was us four boys and him, we were close. Well, occasionally he got married, but the women never were able to take it. They always packed up and left."

Paul began to laugh. "You're searching for this Frank, what about your other brothers? How do you know they aren't alive?" Paul asked.

"My one brother, Hal, I spoke to the day my father left his message. Hal was really sick, in fact he was on his way to the infirmary. But Jimmy, I never spoke to Jimmy. He was stationed in Norfolk. He's the only one of us that wasn't in the Army. He was a sailor boy. We really didn't hold that against him, we liked to tease him that we did. Anyway, I went to his base. I learned the hard way he died. I found him." Robbie didn't want to get into details, it was pretty bad in Norfolk. He made it to the base, found Jimmy's housing, Jimmy wasn't there. Robbie then found the nearest med-station. He looked under every single blanket. He searched every decaying mound of dead. He sifted through the odors. He checked every single body at the med-station, until he found him. Jimmy lay in a ditch with hundreds of other bodies, all of which were at one time set to flames. He wouldn't have found him if Jimmy hadn't been placed to the side. His body, Jimmy's, was completely burned on the left side. His right, had sunk into the deep mud, giving it the protection from the flames. Robbie took his dog-tags and said good-bye to his brother. Thus, closing another chapter in his book.

"You know Robbie, I don't want to sound like the pessimist, please, I'm not, but it's been a long time, how do you know that your dad and brother are still alive

"Because I feel it." Robbie stopped walking. "I really feel it."

“And when you find them?” Paul questioned. “What then? Do you stay with them, continue on? What if they are so different you no longer fit in?”

“No way. We’re a family. Always will be. Miles, days, years, and heartache can’t break the Slagel family bond. When I find them, I’m certain it will be like we never were apart. And I will find them.”

Robbie continued walking with Paul. It was dark and they would stop before long. The safety in numbers theory kept them moving into the later hours, and needed conversation kept them continuing on their journey with ease.

Beginnings, Montana

“I’ll check it out.” Jonas chuckled as he drove the jeep. He set down his radio and shook his head. It was one of the little quirks about working nights in security. Animals hitting into the perimeter. Though odd, the front gate was not immune. The bigger animals tended to go toward the other perimeters that weren’t so secluded. But the odd signals, off and on, that monitoring received, made Jonas believe one of those large animals finally discovered the front gate.

His suspicions seemed confirmed as he headed into the blackened tunnel. He could see the other end only because the blue sparks of the downed electric fence flew up and out in a steady rhythmic pulse. Stopping the jeep at a safe distance, Jonas grabbed his rifle, and radio. Strapping the weapon over his shoulder he stepped from the jeep. The headlights illuminated the fence which laid half off. He raised the radio to his mouth. “Security, I don’t see an animal. But I’m gonna need mechanics up here ASAP to . . .” Jonas heard the slightest of shuffling behind him. He turned around. The tunnel was so dark. Then he saw them. Moving inward from the walls their figures were caught by the circumference glow of the headlights. Men. Eight of them. The smell of them hit Jonas before he could even see their faces. Lifting the radio again, he brought it to his lips. “Scratch my last request. Send Frank instead.”

A quick turn of the wheel at the speed Frank drove would have sent the jeep flipping over and out of control. Frank didn’t care. Focused and fast he drove to the front tunnel gate. He could

still hear the call for his help. He could still hear in his memory, gunshots as he tried to get in touch with Jonas. Two minutes. It had only been two minutes since he was summoned and Frank begged in his mind it wasn't too long.

He peeled left into the narrow front tunnel of Beginnings, and like Jonas, he saw the flickering of the downed perimeter. But Frank saw something else. Lit in the brightness of Jonas' headlights were the figures of the men. Frank grabbed his radio and spoke coldly as his eye stared ahead in his driving. "Down the front perimeter beam. Secure the drop gate. Lock me in this tunnel." Just as Frank dropped his radio, the shifting electric click echoed in the tunnel, and the sound of the metal gate lowered on the Beginnings end was heard. Blindly, Frank reached for his M-16 which lay on the seat next to him.

His driving speed had picked up and he screeched the jeep to a sudden sideways stop just behind Jonas' jeep. He expected the men he saw to charge him, Frank was ready. He pumped the chamber as he jumped from the jeep and aimed.

"You see." One of the men called out. "You die as easily as us. We'll be back."

Frank fired, the bullet seared into the body of a man sending him flying back into the broken fence. The others took off running from the tunnel and so did Frank. He drove his body forward in a charging race after them and paused only a split second when he saw Jonas laying still by the gate. Jumping over Jonas' body, Frank's boots made a splash in the puddle of blood that formed wide. He flew unafraid outside of the tunnel, stopped, took a firm stance, raised his weapon and began to fire. The figures of the running men headed down the dirt road and to the wooded area. It was night, and hard to see, but Frank stayed focused. He had downed four more of the men before the remaining three ran too far from him. Wanting to go after them and knowing he couldn't, Frank twitched his head in an emotional frustration and went back into the tunnel to see what he feared.

Jonas. He laid there, motionless, eyes staring out.

Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Frank breathed heavily and dropped to his knees by his friend.

The triple tumbling ‘thumps’ on the steps made Ellen stop right before she sat on the sofa. She turned to the stairs to see what caused the noise and she saw Dean standing up. She laughed. “You all right?”

“Oh, my God. You are home,” he said, straightening himself and walking to her.

“Um . . . yeah.” Ellen set down the glass she held. “I told you I would be.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“I meant it this time.” She tried to sit but Dean hurried over and stopped her.

“El. This is great. I’m really surprised.”

“I don’t know why you would be. I live here.”

“Ellen.” Dean grabbed on to both her arms and gently turned her to face him. “Is it my imagination? Tell me if it is, but . . . is something going on? You came back to the lab. You came home. You kissed me twice today.”

“You kept count?”

“You don’t kiss me often.”

“That’s not all my fault.” She stared seriously at him. “You stopped most of the affection in this relationship awhile ago.” Ellen held her hand to Dean’s mouth to stop him from saying anything. “And rightfully so. But I guess, even when we started to try, it became easier for both of us to still . . . keep a distance.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“It’s been a really long time.”

“You know, you can tell me no.” Nervously Dean reached for the end of her hair and played with it. “But it has been a really, really . . .” He paused to laugh. “Really long time. The kids are asleep.”

“They are, are they?”

“Yep.” Dean stepped closer to her as he bit his bottom lip. He let go of her hair and let his fingers move to her neck and trailed down it slowly. “I can handle the rejection.”

“Good.” Ellen smiled and moved her body more into Dean’s. “So, do you think you’d like to try to make a move or are you wanting to force me into rejecting you.”

“Hardly.” Dean chuckled and lowered his lips down to Ellen’s. Barely did he part them and barely did their lips touch when a loud knocking at the door jolted them into separation. Dean cringed. “Shit.” He walked to the door. “This better not be Henry.”

“Why would it be Henry?” Ellen asked.

“He has this problem with our latest joint venture invention.” Dean reached for the door. “And he’s so anal he won’t leave me alone.” Opening the door, Dean was surprised when a serious looking Joe stood there. “Joe?”

“Dean.” Joe took a breath. “You’re needed now at the clinic. We had a breach of security. It’s . . . It’s Jonas.”

Without hesitation, Dean flew from his home.

The momentum of Dean’s run stayed steady across the community, into the clinic, down the halls and to the operating room. He slammed his small body into the double doors to open them and he charged into the room where Frank had brought Jonas.

In his rush into the room, Dean slid on the blood slicked floor as if he stepped on ice. To stop, he caught his balance and used the table in which Jonas lay. His hands gripped down on the edge of the operating table and his eyes transfixed about a barely

recognizable Jonas. “Oh, my God.” Dean whispered as his eyes visually examined the torn open chest of Jonas.

“Dean.” Frank stepped from the corner of the room.

Dean’s eyes lifted in horror. He got a good look of the room. Blood was everywhere. The floor, the table, sheets, and all over Frank.

“You have to help him.” Frank’s voice graved.

“I can’t.” Dean swallowed. “I . . . can’t help him. I’m sorry, Frank.”

“No. Dean.” Frank spoke stronger as he stepped closer. “You have to.”

“I can’t.” Dean spun from the table. “Did you look? Did you really look at him?”

“Yes.”

“No.” Dean snapped back. “You didn’t.” Heavy breaths began to fill Dean’s words. “They . . . they took his heart, Frank.” Dean heard it. A rumbling from Frank’s throat. An angry sadness that Frank tried to control. “Frank.”

Frank closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “He . . . he was my friend.” After a quick swipe of his bloody hand down his own face, Frank, so military like, took a steady stride out of the operating room. He charged down the corridor in a move to leave the clinic. Just as he made it to the main front hall, he stopped when his father walked in.

“Frank.” Joe approached him. “How is . . .”

“He’s dead,” Frank said coldly. “And I know they breached the perimeter, but Dad, we have to stop letting survivors in. The longer they’re out there, the worse they get. We take a chance with everyone we let in now.”

“No, Frank.” Joe gave a firm grip to Frank’s arm. “The ones that did this, we know who they are. And we have to believe they all aren’t like that.”

Frank shook his head and pulled away from his father. “No, Dad you’re wrong. They’re all bad.” He moved backwards with his hurt to the door. “If they aren’t in here. They’re nothing.”

The double glass doors to the clinic flung open, and before Joe could say anything else, Frank was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

May 2nd

Beginnings, Montana

Nasal, whining, annoying. ‘Hello, Mr. Slagel’.

Frank had to wonder if her voice really sounded like that or was it just him. It made him cringe. Made his eyes roll and his body shudder as if he accidentally stuck his finger in a socket. Frank froze in his walk with his father when that voice carried across the street to Joe. He could feel that uncontrollable twitch hit his top lip. Hoping that somehow his imagination kicked in and he was only experiencing a grief induced mental gouging episode, he slowly opened one of his closed eyes. Frank saw. Frank groaned.

“And you, too . . .” Joe paused to look at Frank. “Michelle.”

“Thanks.” The perky red head grinned and waved to an ignoring Frank. She backed up with a bubbly walk, tool box in hand and walked across the street.

Joe snapped his finger in front of Frank who had thrown himself into self suspended animation to spare himself from the brief conversation. “Frank.”

“Gone?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Frank huffed out.

“You need to grow up.”

“You need to wise up.”

Joe stopped walking, glared at his son and continued again toward the clinic. “I’m gonna let that go because you’re pissed about today’s survival run and you’re still having a hard time with Jonas’ death.”

Frank slowly shook his head. “It’s been three days, what’s wrong with me?”

“Well, you just answered that. It’s been three days. That’s not a long time. I know Dean’s been pretty good about you spending

time with Ellen lately. Maybe you need more. Can you get it off of her?”

“Dad.” Frank had almost an embarrassed tone to him. “That’s kind of personal, don’t you think?”

Joe’s mouth opened in disgust. “That is not what I meant. Time, you moron.” He opened the clinic door for his son. “I meant time.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded. “That’s why I wanted to stop here. See if we can squeeze in lunch between her working here and containment.”

“I know her working with Dean again doesn’t sit well with you.”

Frank shook his head. “Doesn’t bother me too much. They haven’t been a real couple for a while so I know it’s only work. That makes it . . .” Frank stopped talking and walking the moment he reached the clinic’s lab. The door was open.

Joe saw the ‘lost’ expression on his son’s face as Frank peered into the lab and saw Dean and Ellen. Giggling emanated from the lab as they stood together working on something at the counter. Dean closely behind Ellen, his one hand on her arm, his chin on her shoulder. He playfully darted his lips at Ellen in between his words, “Frank,” Joe spoke softly. “I’m sorry. But this is what you have to accept when you decide to share the person you care most about.”

Frank’s lost expression left him with an inhale. He turned and gave a quick raise of his eyebrows to his father. “Doesn’t bother me.” He stepped back. “Find me if you need me, I’m doing rounds.”

Joe’s hand lifted and fell in his failed attempt to speak to Frank any further. Frank moved quickly from the clinic. Joe stepped inside the lab.

“Tower come in.” Johnny kept the microphone portion of his headset radio close to his mouth to block out the helicopter noise. He raised his thin hands up to the controls and he maneuvered the stick tilting the chopper right. “This is Prodigy. We’re heading home. ETA thirty minutes and we’re carrying. I repeat, we are carrying. Prep receiving. Over.” He shifted his eyes to George who sat next to him and lowered the microphone from his lips. “How’d I do?”

George gave proud wink and thumbs up. “You’re a pro.”

Biting his lip and flashing an arrogant Slagel smile, Johnny picked up speed in the chopper, and flying almost too well for the experience he had, headed home.

“Containment blood.” Ellen held up the tube as she entered the clinic lab. She laid the tube in front of Dean. “I have to head back over there. That one survivor is really sick.”

“Should he be transferred here?” Dean asked, speaking pre-occupied as he read from a large book.

“Remains to be seen. So, do you mind if I head back over there early to work.”

“Nope. You owe me an hour though.”

“Such a slave driver.” She laid her hand on Dean’s back as a goodbye and started to leave.

“El, wait.” Dean stopped reading and spun to face her.

“What’s up?” Ellen stopped.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure. As long as it’s not about doing CBC’s. I hate doing blood counts. Well, that and urine samples. And while we’re on the subject, I don’t like doing throat cultures, they suck, too. And blood pressures. The patient always seems to talk when you’re

trying to hear. So what did you . . . oh!” Ellen continued to ramble on. “Also, irrigations. Irrigations are the worst if the person has this really gross ear infection. All this black stuff comes . . .”

“Ellen. No.” Dean silenced her. “Listen, we’re slowing down in the clinic. Well, the seven patients will be gone soon. Joe said he was halting the survivor runs for a while. I was thinking. I want to get your opinion on this. I want to think about the future, and the future of the community. Andrea and I are not always going to be around. I want to start training someone to take our place. Not just doctoring, but train them in research and the basis of medicine. I have a perfect person in mind.”

“Oh, Dean,” Ellen spoke in awe. “Oh, Dean, I’m honored.”

“Huh?” Dean shook his head confused. “Excuse me?”

“I’m honored. Do you really think I’d be a good doctor?”

“No. El. No. Not you. Not that . . . uh, you aren’t smart enough. But you . . . not you.” Dean cleared his throat at the instant awkwardness.

“Well if it’s not me why are you talking to me?”

“It’s Johnny. I want to start training Johnny Slagel as the next doctor. He’s smart. He’s bright, he wants to and . . .”

“You’re worried about Frank’s reaction. Especially since he sees Johnny as the next big Slagel security guy.”

“Exactly.” Dean answered with a nod.

“Good luck.” Ellen gave him a quick swat to the arm and turned to leave.

“El, wait.” Dean hurried to her, grabbed hold of her arm and gently pulled her from the door and away from it. He literally stood before the door so she couldn’t make a quick escape. “Johnny and I were talking before he left for this run. We want you to break it to Frank.”

“No. Absolutely not. No, Dean. You guys don’t give Frank enough credit. I’m insulted for him. Johnny’s his kid. He wants the best for his kid. And speaking of Frank.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You’ve no choice.” Ellen pointed behind Dean to Frank who walked in.

“Swell.” Dean shook his head. “I’ve been invaded.” He moved back to his work space.

“El.” Frank walked up to her. “Where is your walkie-talkie?”

“Right here.” She patted the instrument clipped to her belt. “Why?”

“Is it working?” Frank asked.

“Sure. Why?”

Frank snapped once holding out his hand to her. “Give it here.”

Ellen unclipped it from her belt and handed it to him. “What’s the problem?”

“We’ve been calling you.” Frank examined the walkie-talkie. “El, the volume is off.”

“Oh, yeah.” Ellen smiled. “I did that. I was getting really bored with that conversation you and your dad were having. You guys kept going back and forth about the birds that were fried to the fence and getting them off.”

“That’s an important problem.” Frank pressed the button in. “I got her Dad, we’re on our way.” He handed her the radio. “El, always leave this on. Always. Let’s go, we’ve been calling you for a half an hour. Johnny and George found survivors and they’ll be here any minute.”

Ellen took off her lab coat. “Sorry. I’m coming.” She moved to the door. “Dean, I’ll let you know what’s happening.”

Dean yelled out as Ellen flew from the room with Frank. “I need two tubes of blood!”

Ellen waved back in acknowledgment and walked faster to keep up with Frank who stayed ahead of her. “Frank, wait up.”

“El, will you hurry?” He opened the main glass doors. “You know my Dad likes you to be there and ready when the survivors arrive.”

“This is for real?” Ellen walked through the doors. “I thought this was all made up so you could see me.”

“It’s for real. Get in the jeep.” Frank got in the jeep and once Ellen was inside he took off. “It was really frustrating calling you over and over again.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think they’d be back this soon...” Ellen held on to the door handle of the jeep as Frank drove irrationally. “Are you . . . are you mad at me about something else.”

Frank gave a sideways glance at her then continued to drive.

“I guess so.”

“There they are now.” Frank pointed to the sky as the helicopter made its way closer. “Just in time.” He screeched to a halt in front of Joe’s office.

Ellen looked at Frank who stared forward. “O.K. Thanks.” Shaking her head she jumped from the jeep.

“El wait.” Frank called to her, his hand tapping on the steering wheel.

“What?” She turned before entering Joe’s office.

“We . . . we need to talk, can I see you in a little bit when you’re done?”

“Sure.” Ellen answered softly, waved to him and opened the door to the office. Though excited about the survivors, Ellen had things to get ready. Things that sat in a box in the examining room. A little scared Joe was going to yell, she ran in, heading straight to the back. “Sorry, Joe. I didn’t know my radio was off.”

Joe, frustrated, grabbed his keys from his top desk drawer. “Ellen, handle things alone for a minute. I’ll be right back. Henry has a problem.”

“Are you sure I’ll be all right?” she asked, especially since Joe never left her alone with new people.

“Yes. Johnny and George said the two they found are pretty quiet. Calm. Haven’t said a word. You’ll be fine. I’ll be right back. One minute. I promise.” Not wanting to waste any more time, despite how ‘safe’ George and Johnny said the two new ones were, Joe flew from his office.

Feeling somewhat assured, Ellen went into her examining room and immediately to the box on the counter by the sink. She began to pull things out when she heard footsteps from in Joe's office.

"Pap?" Johnny called out.

"Shit." Ellen wasn't ready. "Uh, Johnny," she yelled back to him. "He stepped out."

"What should I do with these two?" His voice was closer to her door.

"Um . . ." Ellen looked amongst her supplies. "Um, send one in here, have the other wait in the waiting room."

"Got it," Johnny said.

Ellen heard the door to the examining room open then close. There was a shuffling of footsteps that stopped, and that told her someone was in the room. But the extraordinary odorless entrance of the person made her stop and turn around. A man stood quietly by the door staring at her. Wondering if perhaps George and Johnny were wrong, Ellen remained calm and motioned her hand over to the examining table. "Please, if you could have a seat over there. I'll be right with you." Ellen walked to the sink and began to wash her hands. "If you could take your shirt off." She wrung out her hands, dried them on a towel, threw her stethoscope over her neck, then tongue depressor and small flashlight in her pocket. She turned to the shirtless man who sat on top of her table. His head was down a bit and his hair dangled like a mask. Almost frightened, he held on to the edges of the table.

The closer Ellen looked and moved to him, the more she saw there was something odd about his body. His hair covered chest was defined, unlike most male survivors, whose bodies were thin, and chests sunken in. "My name is Ellen," she told him.

"I know." He answered.

Nodding with a pleasant smile, Ellen readied herself to speak slow. She always did at first so as to be understood and not to scare new people. "I'm going to examine you to see if you're healthy."

“I’m healthy.”

“I’m sure you are.” She placed her hand on his shoulder. It was firm, not flabby or bony. “After I do this, you’ll go to processing. I’ll explain that all later.” Ellen placed the stethoscope in her ears. “This is going to be cold, but I want to listen to your lungs and heart.” She laid the instrument to his back and stared at his skin. It looked too healthy. Curiosity caused her to run her thumb lightly across his skin’s surface. It was odd. No oily or sandy feeling. The survivor had taken care of himself. Ellen finished listening. “Clear as a bell.” She placed the stethoscope to his chest; she tried to smell as she listened. Where was the smell? The smell all survivors came in with. “Your heart is strong.” She took off her stethoscope, laid it on the table, reached in her pocket and pulled out the small flashlight. She placed her hand on his bearded chin. “Open up.” She shined the light in his mouth. “Incredible. Your teeth are in good shape.”

“Thank you,” he spoke. “Oral hygiene is always important.”

Ellen laughed at him. “I think I like you.”

“You ought to.”

“Really. Is this because you’re my new knight in shining armor?” Ellen lifted his long hair from his face.

“Nope. Just an electronic hero.”

It was a strange comment for Ellen to hear, one that made her tilt her head with an uncomfortable smile. “I . . . I just want to get a good look at your eyes.” She flicked on the penlight again.

Flash!

The beam of light crossed against his blue eyes and Ellen filled with a tremble that took over her entire body. “Oh my, God.” The light toppled from her fingers and her empty hand reached to his face. “Oh my, God.” She backed up trailing her fingers down his face as she did. “Oh my, God. Joe!” Ellen ran from the examining room. “Joe!”

“What’s wrong?” Joe, who had just walked in his office, bolted to her.

Ellen's throat was closed. Her head moved, her lips made a motion, but only hard syllables came out as she waved her shaking hand. "C . . . C . . ." She choked on emotions and coughed to hold them back.

"Ellen?"

Knowing that a sentence formation was useless, she backed into her examining room.

"Ellen, tell me you didn't kill another . . ." Joe walked in, he saw Ellen just pointing across the room. "What did he do?" Joe looked over at the 'alive' male survivor who stood from the table the second Joe faced him. "What about him, Ellen?"

Ellen let out the breath she was holding with a near soft sob. "Joe." She ran to the survivor, reached up and lifted his hair from his face. "Look."

Joe took only a step closer and his stomach dropped along with his heart as he looked closely at the man in front of him. "Holy mother of God." Joe began to shake. "It can't be." His trembling hand reached out to the man, extended fingertips closing in on his face. "It can't be." Joe's fingers touched down upon his cheek. He brought his other hand up to the survivor and he grasped his face, clutching it, bringing it within inches of his own. Joe's stare caught the eyes of the stranger. Then at the moment Joe looked into his eyes, he gasped out and his every emotion spoke from that one breath. "Robbie."

Robbie spoke no words. The years of searching, the years of heartache, seemed like a nightmare long beginning to fade from his memory. With everything he had, he embraced his father. An embrace he had waited so long for.

"My God, you're alive." Joe held his son as if he were only a child. A mere lost little boy who had finally returned home. "Ellen, he's alive."

Ellen spun from the reunion and took her radio from her waist. With closed eyes she spoke into it. "Frank, come to the receiving center. Now."

Joe released his son. “Oh shit . . . Frank. He’s gonna be shocked.” He patted Robbie on the cheek. “I bet you knew as soon as you saw Johnny that you were coming to us.”

“Johnny?” Robbie asked.

“Yeah, Frank’s son. He’s the kid that put you on the chopper. God he’s a spitting image of Frank. You didn’t notice?”

Robbie shook his head. “This is incredible. Talk about having my family back. I didn’t know anything and then . . . I saw Ellen. But she didn’t recognize me at first.” He turned to Ellen. “And still . . . she won’t come near me. El, are you afraid?”

“In a way.” Ellen took a step to him. “I’m afraid if I grab hold of you Robbie, I’m not letting you go.”

“Actually.” Robbie smiled. “I really wouldn’t mind that.”

Ellen shook her head with an emotional laugh and stepped to him. “Electronic hero.” She shrieked as she embraced him and Robbie clung back, lifting her some from her feet.

Joe heard the jeep pull up. “Ellen, you have to tell him first.”

“Why?” She asked as she separated from Robbie.

“It’s too much of a shock. Hurry. Prepare him.”

Nodding, Ellen ran her hand down Robbie’s arm, stepped back, looked one more time at Robbie and hurried from the examining room. Frank was walking in.

“El. What’s up? Did something . . .”

“I have to talk to you.” She grabbed hold of his hand and led him outside.

“What’s going on? Is everything all right?” Frank asked concerned.

Ellen couldn’t speak; she merely hugged Frank tightly and kissed him. “Frank.” She exhaled. “This . . . this is going to be the best day of your life.”

“Unless you tell me Dean left Beginnings, I doubt it.”

“Frank. I’m serious. Listen to what I’m going to tell you. It’s gonna be a shock.” Ellen smiled. “Robbie is alive.”

“Robbie who?”

“Robbie, you big goof. Your brother.”

Frank's face tensed up. "This isn't funny, El."

"This is not a joke." She squeezed his hand. "He's alive. He's inside. They picked him up on the run."

"He can't . . ."

"He is."

Frank looked ahead at the closed door and still holding Ellen's hand for support, he walked in. Robbie stood with Joe in the doorway of the examining room awaiting Frank's entrance. In shock Frank stepped closer, releasing Ellen's hand. At first he said nothing. Then with a sudden wave of enthusiasm, Frank ran to his brother, swept him in his arms and embraced him. He screamed as he did, swinging Robbie around as if he weighed ten pounds. "You . . . You . . ." Frank shrieked loud and long. "You're alive." He set down Robbie, grabbed hold of his face and kissed him on the lips with a hard smack.

Robbie laughed and wiped his mouth jokingly. "I missed you, too."

Frank stumbled and exhaled with a gasp. "I can't breathe. Oh shit." Thrilled, Frank ran his hand rapidly down his own face. "Dad. El. Look. Robbie."

Joe rolled his eyes. "We see Frank."

"Oh my God." Frank had to touch him again. "Oh my God." He stepped back and leaned on his father's desk in order to get a full view of his baby brother. "You're alive. Robbie did you forget the contingency plan?"

"No. Are you kidding?" Robbie replied. "The problem was, I got hung up in Seattle too long. By the time I ended up in Ashtonville, you guys were long gone. But that's another story. We can talk later about it. Right now we're together again."

Frank crossed his arms and smiled. "That we are." He looked at Joe who stood smiling. Frank couldn't recall how long it had been since he saw so much happiness on his father's face. And Ellen. Ellen smiled too. A genuine smile that rarely crossed her face. Standing from his lean on the desk, Frank walked over to behind Ellen. He crossed his arms over the front of her and while

staring with pride and gratefulness at his brother, embraced her.
“Nothing. Nothing could be better than this moment. Robbie’s here. He’s alive.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Ellen was happy as she went into the examining room; she smiled at the excited voices she heard as she shut her door. When she walked in, Paul stood there, wearing only boxer shorts, a towel flung around his shoulder. He looked as surprised as Ellen did.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke. “That young man said no one was in here, and to come in after my shower.”

“No, that’s fine.”

“I’m Paul.” He held out his hand to Ellen. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Ellen shook his hand taken aback by Paul’s politeness. “Nice to meet you too. Have a seat.”

“You know, I just used a toilet. A toilet, imagine that.” He shook his head as he sat. “And it flushed.”

“You’ll have that.” Ellen smiled.

“Not out there you don’t.”

“I guess not.” Ellen pulled up a chair, instead of immediately examining him. “Paul, you’re different,” she spoke bluntly.

“How do you mean? Am I different from you?”

“Not from me. From the others we’ve brought in from out there.”

“I hope so. I know what’s out there. I’m civilized. Or at least I hope I am.” He looked around the examining room. “However, you guys got me beat by a mile.”

Joe sat behind his desk staring proud and mesmerized at Robbie. Joe's notion that miracles ceased to happen was truly put to test because after five years, a son he believed to be dead, was back. He was healthy, still smart, and if it wasn't for all that hair on his face and head, probably still looked the same.

Joe leaned back in his chair, and prepared to tell Robbie something and he hadn't a clue on how he would take it. "Robbie, the way we're set up here is when a survivor is brought to us, there are a series of stages he or she must accomplish before going into the community. I set these rules, I can't break them. Do you know where I'm going with this?"

Robbie nodded his head.

Frank looked at his father in a questioning manner. "Dad, you can't sit here and tell us you're making Robbie go through processing are you?"

"I have to, Frank. How would that look if I immediately let him in?"

"But he's Robbie."

"Robbie or not. I'm sure he understands." Joe looked at Robbie. "Half of the people we pick up don't make it through containment and processing. They never make it to the work skills level. They seem fine when we bring them in, then they show their true colors."

"Dad, Frank, I understand. I've been out there remember? I've been beat-up, almost killed, you name it. People have turned into savages. And I have had them turn on me."

Joe hung his head low at the hell that his youngest son must have endured over the past five years. "Robbie, listen, you may only be in containment for a day or two. We had one woman, I won't mention any names." He looked at Frank. "She was in containment for two days. She moved on to the work skills. She's doing great, and people actually seem to like Mich . . ."

Frank groaned and shook his head. "It's bad enough you have to talk about her. Did you have to say her name?"

Robbie laughed, a confused sort of laugh. “Is this an old flame of yours, Frank?”

Frank grunted loudly. “No! Robbie do yourself a favor, when you meet her . . . run. Stay away from her.”

“Frank, drop it. Let it go,” Joe spoke to him. “We’ve been hearing this forever.”

“Fine.” Frank held up his hand and leaned over to Robbie, whispering his loud voice, and truly believing Joe couldn’t hear. “I’ll warn and tell you all about her when he’s not around.”

Robbie nodded his head in a pacifying manner at the same time Joe rolled his eyes.

Their moment was interrupted by Ellen, who knocked on the archway of the examining room. “I hate to break this up, but Joe, there’s someone you should meet.” She pulled on Paul’s arm to bring him into the office. “Paul, I would like you to meet Joe. Joe, this is Paul.”

Paul, being his usual courteous self, showed Joe his hand. “Sir, it is very nice to meet you.”

Joe rose slightly from his chair to shake Paul’s hand. “Likewise.”

Ellen turned Paul to Frank. “And this is . . .”

“Frank?” Paul was stunned. “Robbie, is this your family?”

Robbie smiled, a smile hard to see through his beard. “Yeah, they are.”

“Son of a bitch.” Paul walked over and put his arm around Robbie. “I’m happy for you. I didn’t think they existed anymore.”

Frank scratched his head. “How did you know I was Frank?”

“I recognized you from the picture that Robbie showed me.” He jolted his arm that rested around Robbie, shaking him a bit.

Ellen moved to Joe. “Joe, I thought you’d take Paul over to containment while I finish up with Robbie. I still have blood to get from him and I want to try to convince him to get rid of some of that hair he hides behind.” She waved her hand to Robbie, signaling him to follow her.

Robbie looked at his arm. “You want my blood?”

“Some of it.” Ellen smiled. “We have this eccentric mad scientist that likes to play with people’s body fluids.” Ellen turned to the examining room. “Follow me. He’s gonna love your sample.”

Robbie apprehensively followed Ellen. “Is he a real scientist or did he just designate himself one?”

“Oh he’s real. He’s very good, too.” Ellen closed the door behind them.

How long did Frank sit after Joe had taken Paul and left? Longer than he should have. His mind was deep in thought swimming in memories he had placed far in the back of his mind. He thought of his brother’s return and how much of a dream it still seemed to be.

Frank waited. He wanted to see Robbie once more, add just a bit of ‘real’ to his return. He grew antsy sitting behind Joe’s desk and decided to seek out his brother. Slowly, and apprehensively he opened the door to the examining room. “El?”

“Hey, Frank.” She smiled as she zipped up a black pouch.

“Where’s my brother?”

Ellen smiled brightly. “Cleaning up. Doesn’t that feel good? You know, saying ‘your brother’.”

Frank exhaled and stepped to her. “Like you wouldn’t believe. No wait, you would believe. I was just thinking out there about all those little trips my dad used to take us all on. How you used to be so overprotective of Robbie.”

Ellen snickered. “That’s because you guys used to beat him up and pick on him.”

Frank flung out his hand. “He was the baby. And now he’s back.”

“He’s back. We’re so lucky. Joe, Joe is so happy.” Ellen spoke in awe. “And you . . . I’m happy for you. This couldn’t have come at a better time. I know nothing can bring back Jonas, but I hope it helps with the pain.”

“It does. I feel really good. And for the first time in a while, I feel like celebrating.” Frank grinned. “Celebrate with me tonight, El.”

“Tonight? Frank, you and I have been together a lot since Jonas died. Maybe tonight isn’t . . .”

“Come on. El. This isn’t just my good news. This is ours. Our family’s good news. Let’s celebrate.”

Ellen shook her head with a smile. “What do you have in mind? Social hall?”

“No. This.” Laying his hand on Ellen’s cheek, Frank slid it back some reaching behind her neck. He pulled Ellen to him as he lowered his head and began to kiss her.

In the midst of a kiss Frank grew more and more into, Ellen pulled back. “Frank.” She touched her lips.

Shocked, Frank’s hand slowly lifted from her and he stepped back. “Why do I feel like I just crossed a line that was never there in twenty years?”

Ellen swallowed and hesitated before answering. She stared at Frank who looked confused. “You . . . you didn’t,” she spoke softly. “It’s me, my head is spinning, you know . . . and uh . . . you took me by surprise. No lines crossed, Frank. Never.”

“You know I stopped by the lab today and . . .” He looked at Ellen. “And . . .” Frank slowed his speech in debate. “. . . and you weren’t there.” He clapped his hands together once and stepped back changing his demeanor to an upbeat one. “So. Tonight. We’re on?”

“We’re on.”

“Yes.” Stepping to Ellen to kiss her quickly, Frank stopped when Joe cleared his throat upon his entrance.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Joe said walking in. “Where’s Robbie?”

Ellen picked up a small box from the counter and laid her black pouch on top of it. “He’s in the back. And I have to go. Dean’s waiting on the blood.”

“Don’t go,” Frank said, stopping her before she left. “Stay for a couple minutes. Just until Robbie comes back out.”

“No I really have to. I want to, but I can’t. I’ll see him in a bit.” As she turned to leave, Robbie emerged from the clean-up area. When she saw him, she nearly dropped what she was holding. “Robbie?”

He had completely transformed. “Different huh?” Robbie rubbed his head. “I used the scissors.” He had cropped his hair down to about an inch from his scalp. His beard was completely gone. A clean, different looking man stood before them. He looked like the Robbie they had all remembered.

Joe smiled when he saw him. “Looks good.” He gave him the thumbs up.

Ellen, still holding her box, walked closer. “Wow.” Astonished, she stared at him. “I totally forgot how good-looking you really are.”

Frank took hold of her arm and pulled her away. “That’s enough, El. I thought you were leaving.”

“No. I can stay.” She stared in awe.

Frank grabbed hold of her shoulders and led her to the door. “You have to go. Dean is waiting on that blood. I’ll drive you over there.”

With a ‘shush’ and a quick fling of her hand at Frank, Ellen set down the box. “No-no. I’ll wait for Joe.” While Frank drew up a look of irritation, Ellen exhaled a sigh like a schoolgirl. She folded her arms, looked to Joe, then returned, with a grin, to staring at Robbie.

Dean wrote down another entry, then closed the cover to the journal he was currently working on. He walked over to the shelves Miguel had built for him, and placed the journal in its proper position on the second shelf. Journals, seventy two of them, perched as monuments of all the experimental medicinal therapies Dean had worked on. Retrieving another, Dean opened it, searched out a page, and began to read. As he blindly made his way back to his seat, he heard the creaking of the opening door. He looked up from his pages, it was Ellen. She smiled broadly as she waltzed in. A vision of happiness. A vision of Ellen seldom seen.

“El?” Dean sat at his work space, still reading as he did so. “You were gone awhile. Everything O.K.?”

“Everything is great.” Ellen leaned on the counter to face him. “I have a surprise for you.”

Dean was fearful of what that could be. Ellen was happy, so the chances of it being something bad were outstanding. “How was the survivor run?”

“It was great.”

There was that word again, Dean thought. Great? Ellen describing something as great was like a Catholic denouncing the Pope, it just didn’t happen. Afraid to ask what was making Ellen so happy, Dean looked up then back to his work.

“Dean? I said I have a surprise.”

“All right.” Dean shut the journal. “Apprehensively . . . I’ll bite.”

Ellen unzipped her black pouch, looked inside, pulled out a tube, and held it up to Dean between her forefinger and thumb with a wide grin.

Dean folded his hands as he looked at the tube. “Wow. Blood. Thanks, El.”

“No. Look at the label.” She placed the tube under his nose.

Dean was startled by the sudden appearance of a tube of blood. He adjusted his glasses, glanced quickly then returned to his reading. “El, you know I can’t read your handwriting.

Especially when you write on non-flat surfaces. What does it say?”

“Robbie Slagel.”

Dean stopped reading, jumped up and grabbed the tube. “Holy shit. Another Slagel lived?” He returned to his shelves and grabbed from the bottom, the biggest journal of them all. This three inch journal wasn’t of medicine, this was his research on the virus and the survivors. “You know, I thought it was probable. But in no way did I believe this was possible.” Dean waved the tube around as he carried the book back to his work space and excitedly turned to the section marked ‘Slagel Family’. “I want to get started on this right away. I may be late, but I’ll be home in time for you to get to class.”

“O.K.” Ellen pushed the black pouch to him. “Here’s the other blood.” Ellen waited for a response. “Dean?” Nothing. “Dean.”

So engrossed in his reading, Dean paid no attention.

Shrugging and giving up, Ellen turned, lifting her hands as she walked out. “All right. Bye.”

Dean lifted his eyes from his work. Ellen was gone. He looked baffled over her sudden exit and rudeness in not saying anything when she left. Figuring she was just overwhelmed like he was with Robbie, Dean returned to his reading forgetting about the other things he desperately needed to work on.

Through the single black door, the only entrance to the huge rectangular building built on the edge of the living sections, Joe brought Robbie. Containment.

“Looks like an army recruitment center.” Robbie spoke as he walked into the entrance room. One desk sat there greeting them. One man, with a gun, sat behind the desk.

The man behind the desk stood up when Joe walked in. “Mr. Slagel.”

“Hi Greg. Robbie this is Greg, he mans this place during the day, another man named Doug is here at night. Greg, I would like you to meet Robbie, my son.”

Greg exhaled and smiled. “Rumors reached us fast about you. Robbie, welcome.” Greg usually did not shake hands. Most survivors weren’t around that long. But Robbie stood before him, he was a Slagel. He’d be around forever. Greg proudly shook his hand.

“Greg here was on our first survival run.” Joe explained to Robbie about the bulky, balding man behind the desk. “He was the first to test, and successfully make it through the entire processing. We could have used him elsewhere, but Frank snatched him up and put him in security. He does good.” He placed his hand on Greg’s shoulder. “We’re happy to have him. Greg, I’ll take Robbie in for the walk through. Could you buzz us please?”

Greg reached under his desk. A soft buzzing unlocked the door directly behind him.

Joe opened the door, let Robbie through first, then followed. “This is the main hallway. This first door here . . .” Joe pointed to his right. “This is the women’s quarters. And here . . .” He indicated to the door across the hall on the left, Joe took him inside. “Men’s quarters.” Bunks lined up neatly on both sides of the walls, a foot locker at the foot of each bunk, and a dresser to the right. Joe led Robbie to the bunk at the end, a sleeping bag and back pack lay on top. It was Robbie’s stuff. “This is yours.” Joe laid his hands on Robbie’s gear. “But once you are out of here, and move on to working skills, you get a place in the community to live. We’ll issue you anything you do not have. We have it all. The only uniforms we have here are in security.”

“Do you think that’s where I’ll go?” Robbie sat on his bunk, shoving his stuff to the side.

“Don’t know. You have a lot of skills we can use.” Joe began to walk. “Come, let’s finish the tour.”

Robbie stood and quietly followed him, like a prisoner following the warden.

Joe led him back into the hallway, explaining procedures and rules as they moved down the hall. He slowed down when they nearly reached the end. He pointed to an open office door. “This room is Ellen’s office. Not very big. But neither is Ellen.” Joe laughed. “Ellen is here every single day. She monitors and works closely with everyone. Very vital in the determination on whether you leave here or not.” He shut her office door and moved onward.

“I thought Ellen was a nurse?”

“She is.”

“Why doesn’t she work at the clinic then?”

“Well, we try to keep Ellen as far away from sick people as we possibly can. She’s not what you would call a very compassionate person. She does work in the mornings at the clinic. Clinical stuff.”

Robbie was a little surprised. “El? Not compassionate? El’s great.”

Joe stopped at the last door. The door that marked the end of the hallway. “Ellen just turned cold after the plague. When her children died. She died. And she never fully came back.” Joe opened the door. “This is the skills area.”

Robbie stepped into the large room, people were off in different sections doing different things. He spotted Paul, who was playing cards with a little boy, he waved. “Looks more like a rec room.”

“Yeah it is. But we call it the skills room because here is where we review your social skills. We also hold the social skills class four or five times a week in here.”

“Social skills?” Robbie laughed. “You teach people social skills. Why? Why not just let the survivors live among you, and if they screw up, then get rid of them.”

“No way. I protect my people. I can’t take a single chance on anyone getting hurt. Violent tendencies tend to turn up in here, trust me. This is where we weed the majority out.”

It was a prison in so many ways. Folding his arms close to his body, Robbie felt out of place. A coldness seeped to him from the inside of his body. He eyed the room and searched out for an empty chair off to the side. Once his father left, that would be where he went. To sit there. Alone. The way he often preferred.

“Don’t get too used to this place.” Joe told him.

“Why’s that?”

“You won’t be here long. You’re different than the others. You’ll be out real soon.”

“However long it takes.”

“Good boy.” Joe put his arm around him. “It’s good to have you with me. I need you here.”

Robbie nodded slowly and smiled politely. It really didn’t feel good to be there, but he couldn’t tell that to his father. It did, however, feel good to be with his family. That was all that mattered. That’s all he wanted. He had gotten what he searched for.

CHAPTER SIX

Andrea Winters paced around her small office at the clinic. Her hands in her lab coat, her shoulders rigid. A stunned look set on her face, she was speechless. She walked a few steps, stopped to look at Dean who was seated in her office, opened her mouth, and nothing would come out.

“Andrea?” Dean spoke. “You’re not saying much.”

Andrea’s mouth opened. “Wow.” She went to her desk and sat down across from Dean. “Wow.”

“Amazing isn’t it?”

“Joe’s son. Alive?” She folded her hands on her desk top.

“Yep. Unbelievable.” Dean sat back.

“What about his other two, could they be?”

“Scientifically, I’d say no. That would be way too obscure. But so are the Slagels.” Dean paused to chuckle. “And this really adds another notch of proof in my theory belt that the immunity gene is male gender hereditary.”

Andrea rubbed her hand across her face. “I bet all of them are ecstatic. Joe, Frank, Ellen.”

“You know it. I haven’t spoken to them. But I’ll bet they’ll be hanging around containment a lot more now.”

“No.” Andrea looked at him as if he were weird for saying that. “Tell me Joe did not put his son in containment.”

“He did.”

Andrea closed her eyes with a cringe. All she could picture was Joe’s screaming, long lost son, banging on the containment door after being shoved and locked in. “Sweet Jesus, that man is odd.”

Dean stood from his chair. “He’s Joe. Mr. Rules. And . . . I have to be going. I want to finish up so Ellen isn’t late for her class tonight.” Dean walked to the door.

“Dean.” Andrea called as she rose and moved his way. “How is working with Ellen after the break?”

Dean turned and faced her. “Great.”

Andrea looked horrified. “Great?”

Waving a finger in front of her face, Dean smiled. “No. Don’t you worry. I am fully cautious. Despite what people think, I don’t run around with blinders on . . . well, all the time. Not this time. Things are going at a good, slow pace, in the right direction, and my eyes are fully open.”

“What about Frank?” Andrea asked the inevitable question.

“Frank . . . Frank is a problem. I know. And I know I tried to pretend he wasn’t. If I would have faced it last year head on, maybe I wouldn’t have looked like such the fool. Maybe we wouldn’t have had that distance between me and El for so long. But now . . . she’s back. In the lab and . . .” Dean drew up a quirky grin. “Let’s just say, things are transpiring that haven’t transpired in way too long. I have to go.” He laid his hand on Andrea’s arm. “Thanks for your concern.” Dean winked as he stepped back.

Andrea reached for Dean’s hand, but he slid it from her and moved away too fast. She considered herself a God-fearing, Christian woman with a strong faith. But at that moment, Andrea wished she had the belief Dean did. She had to wonder with a sense of foreboding if Ellen was really making her choice and moving back toward Dean, or if Ellen had become a great magician. Performing illusions of grandeur and hiding her dilemma a whole lot better.

Henry heard the news. Robbie Slagel was alive and well. He had amnesia though, didn’t recognize his family. Of course, Henry found that part of the story hard to believe. News spread fast through the community, never the same news in the last ears to

hear it, as it was when it started. But the smart ones in the community had learned to sift through it and find the truth. The truth: Robbie was alive. Henry didn't know Robbie, nor had he heard much about him. But he was excited none-the-less. The 'originals' of the community were like a family. And if Frank's brother had come home, then so did Henry's.

Henry headed off to containment to meet Robbie. He excitedly left his training session with Michelle. He found it extremely difficult assuring Michelle that the chances of Robbie being another Frank were slim to none. Certainly God wouldn't create two dense, mean, and sometimes-ruthless Slagel children. Henry hoped.

Henry checked for Joe at the receiving center, he wasn't there. It was the beginning of the month, Joe was probably down at storage doing inventory, a task he trusted only to himself and George.

Cheerful, he entered containment and checked in with Greg. What was Robbie like? Henry pictured him in his mind. Robbie wouldn't be as bulky as Frank, he couldn't be, he had been outside for five years. He also didn't expect Robbie to look anything like Frank. That theory was based on the names only. The name Frank was rough and hard. When growing up, it was a name you could threaten the big bully with. 'Hey, if you don't leave me alone, I'll get Frank to kick your ass.' However, trying to say the same sentence using the name Robbie just didn't have the same effect. So to Henry, Robbie was quieter, milder, more laid back. Henry was almost right on the nose with his self thought description.

He made his way to the end of the containment hall and spotted Ellen sitting on the floor playing with a little boy. "El! Hey!" He called across the room, holding his hand high.

Ellen looked up and waved. The boy she was playing with scooted behind her back, seemingly afraid of Henry. "Don't be frightened," she spoke to the ten year old. "It's only Mr. Henry. He won't hurt you. Remember him?"

The little boy spoke no words, he stayed behind Ellen, even as she rose to her feet to speak with her visitor.

“Hi, Henry. How come you’re here?”

“You can’t guess?” Henry looked around the room. He didn’t spot any survivors he didn’t recognize. With the exception of the new black man, and with reasonable deduction Henry knew he wasn’t Robbie. “Where is he?”

“He’s sleeping. Passed out as soon as he ate. Like the food was drugged or something.”

“The Thanksgiving Day syndrome.”

“The what?” Ellen asked.

“Thanksgiving Day syndrome.” Henry explained. “Remember Thanksgiving? Remember how much you would eat and how tired you would get? They have the same thing. They barely ate out there. So when they come here, we give them a full meal, sending their digestive systems into overkill. That in turn wears them down. I would expect that.”

Ellen giggled. “That was a good one.”

“Thanks.” Henry placed his hands in his pockets. “Well, I guess I’ll get lots of time to meet Robbie. Mind if I stop by tonight for class?”

“No, not at all. Mind if I drag you to help? It’s an interactive one.” Ellen spoke enthused.

“Sure. You know me. Mr. Helpful. I’ll see you then.” A little disappointed that he didn’t get to meet Robbie as he planned, Henry left the skills room. He walked down the quiet hall and toward the main door. But something was different. As he passed the men’s quarters he saw through the ajar door, a man sitting on his bunk. The only one in there and it had to be Robbie. Henry smiled and got a twinge of nervousness as if he were getting ready to meet some big celebrity. He cleared his throat trying to get the attention of the stranger who kept his back to him. “Excuse me. Robbie?” Henry’s words sounded off pleasantness.

Robbie turned his head slowly and looked over his shoulder.

“Hi.” Henry lifted his hand in a wave. Then just when he went to take a step in, Robbie stood up, walked over to the door where Henry stood, and closed it on him.

Frank watched her. Standing in the archway of the skills room leaning on it, his arm resting above him, his chin on his wrist as his fingers fiddled with his goatee. He watched her. A gaze in his eye, a far off gaze, almost as if he was remembering the past rather than watching the present. Ellen laid on her stomach in the center of the floor, two children next to her watching intently as she read them some huge book. Her hair dangled over her hand which propped up her head. She smiled at the children, a real smile and that in turn, made Frank smile. For all the times she had made him angry through the years he had known her, Frank couldn’t recall a time when she didn’t make him feel better. No matter what the circumstances.

He felt a hand on his back. It startled him but not enough to completely distract him. Barely taking his eyes off of Ellen, Frank looked to see who was next to him. “Dad.”

Joe watched Frank staring out. “Isn’t this about the time you charge in and scare the hell out of the survivors?”

“Not today.”

“Not today?” Joe gave a quick twitch of his head n confusion and again saw Frank’s stare on Ellen. “Frank? What’s going on? Everything O.K.?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded slowly. “I just . . . Dad? Did you ever, because it made you feel good, just want to stare at someone you care about?”

“No.” Joe answered, gave a pat to Frank and stepped into the skills room. He stopped and looked back. Frank’s demeanor and

stare hadn't changed. He shook his head at the unusual 'sap' comment that came from his son and approached Ellen. He kept his voice low so as not to frighten the children with her. "How's it going?"

"Oh, hey, Joe. Good." Ellen looked up to him. "We're just looking at pictures." She lifted herself from the floor with a grunt. As she did she saw Frank through the corner of her eye. "What's up with him? Is he mad or something? Shouldn't he be charging in here about now?"

"He says . . . not today." Joe didn't turn around to look at Frank.

"Is he sick?"

"That's pretty much an open ended question, wouldn't you say?"

Ellen laughed. "Are you looking for Robbie?"

"Yes and no. See Robbie. See if you need help." Joe took in the peacefulness of the room. The calm quiet that screamed serenity. "But, it looks like all is under control. I'm gonna use your office, if you don't mind. Catch up on paperwork before our class tonight."

"Sure." Ellen nodded.

"See you later, sweetheart." Joe kissed her on the cheek as he left.

Ellen mouthed the words 'sweetheart' while a confused look perched upon her face. 'Sweetheart?' She moved her lips again.

"Oh." Joe snapped his finger and quickly turned around.

Here it comes. She thought. He wants something.

"Ellen, I'd like for you and I to sit and talk. Have a, you know, father-daughter type chat."

Chat? Ellen grew concerned.

"It'll be nice. So, today, while the survivors are having their meal, let's you and I go into your office, grab a cup of coffee and have a heart to heart. Sound good?" Joe reached over and lightly tapped her on her cheek.

"What did I do?"

Joe didn't answer, he just smiled.

Ellen shook her head. She never tried to second guess what Joe wanted to talk to her about. She learned that the hard way when she first eloped with Pete. Joe called her to have a serious 'heart-to-heart'. And Ellen, thinking he was going to give her a nice wedding present check, got the hell shocked out of her by Joe, when he dragged her to a good attorney to correct her drunken, quickie, Vegas wedding. A kiss to her cheek during her mid-memory chuckle made her jump. She jolted in a turn. "Frank?"

"I'm heading out." He pointed backwards. "Just wanted to say goodbye."

"You never said hello."

"Oh." He scratched his head. "Sorry."

"You O.K.?"

"Me?" Frank smiled. "I couldn't be better. But I wanna finish up so I can have more time with you tonight." He gave her another kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

"Frank?" Ellen waited for him to stop in his walk out. "That's . . . that was odd for you to just blurt out."

"It was? Yeah, it was. I guess I wanna make sure you know that."

"I do."

"Good." He winked, smiled and turned back around and walked out. He figured on his way out, he'd check just one more time to see if Robbie was awake yet. Passing the men's quarters, he opened the closed door. Robbie was sitting on his bunk. "Robbie?"

Robbie turned his head. As soon as he saw that it was Frank, his expression changed from solemn to happy. "Frank, come on in."

"Why aren't you with the others?" He walked over and sat next to him.

"I don't know. I'm not comfortable around them. I wasn't when I was out there. They give me the creeps."

“Tell me about it.” Frank rested his hand on Robbie’s knee. “It won’t be long. You know that? All you have to do is pass a few of Ellen and Dad’s corny little tests. Show to them you’re not like the others and you’ll be out.”

Robbie looked very seriously. “Will I pass them?”

“Please.” Frank scoffed. “They’re a piece of cake.”

“So you’ve taken them?”

“No, but I seen them.”

“I don’t know, Frank.” Robbie stood and began to pace. “I feel awkward. I’m also afraid that if I screw up, I’ll be out of here. I looked too hard for you guys to have that happen.”

“Robbie, you won’t screw up. How could you? You’re not like the others. You aren’t bad.”

“How about when I do get out of here? Will I fit in? Am I going to sink right into this little sheltered world all of you have created? How about with you and Dad? Am I gonna mesh or clash with you guys . . .”

“Whoa, hold it.” Frank stood, he raised his hands. “You have to stop worrying about this. You’re back. That’s what counts.” He embraced his brother. “I thought you were dead. You’re not. This means we all have a second chance with each other. There’s gonna be some adjustments, granted, but we’re a family, nothing can keep us apart.”

Robbie pulled back. “I’m glad to be here, Frank.”

“I’m glad you’re here, too.”

Momentarily, Robbie felt reassured. His big brother’s words gave him a sense of security, but they didn’t remove all doubt. He knew it had a lot to do with the fact that he had spent so many years out in the wild. Surviving, killing, living. While his family stayed protected, sheltered, and safe. Frank was so confident that Robbie would fit right in. But how could he? Robbie knew without admitting it, he had become a product of a new ravished society. There was worry in his mind if the Slagel bond was strong enough to bridge the differences that the world had created between them. He fought the little bit of resentment that crept in him the second

he took a warm shower in Beginnings, and had to keep reminding himself it wasn't his family's fault that they had, and he didn't. For years he searched with his heart and soul. For years he knew he would find his family. But in all his visions of reunion, Robbie never expected to find his family in a world such as Beginnings. And that frightened him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Ellen!” Joe’s voice carried out of Ellen’s office into the hall. He didn’t need to yell, Joe’s voice was always stern enough.

Ellen cringed. Busted. She tried with all of her might to sneak into the skills room without notice. Ellen stepped back, tilting her head back into her doorway. She smiled at Joe. “I’m going to get things ready for class tonight, Joe. I’ll be right back.”

Joe, with one eye closed, motioned his head and waved at the same time. “Come on.”

Ellen rubbed her eyes. “Sure.” She walked in. Joe was sitting at her desk. She took a seat across from him. “What’s up?”

Joe slid a cup of coffee across the desk to her. “I told you I wanted to sit and talk with you. I even got you coffee.”

“How nice.”

“Take the coffee, Ellen. We are just going to sit back and talk.” Joe held his cup and leaned back in the chair, giving the appearance that he was relaxed.

Apprehensively, Ellen took the cup.

“Ellen, sit back.”

Ellen sat back. “What are we talking about?”

“Things. How are things going?”

“Joe, everything’s fine. Is that it?”

“You are hurting my feelings, Ellen. I just want to talk about you . . . and possibly Dean and . . . Frank.”

“No.” Ellen stood up with emotions. “No, Joe. I can’t believe you want to talk to me about this again.”

“Ellen, sit.”

“I will not listen to another one of your mind control lectures, Joe.”

“Ellen!” Joe snapped. “Sit down!”

Ellen did.

Joe wiped his hand across his forehead in a calming sweep. “This . . . this is not a lecture. This is my opinion which I would

like for you to listen.” He watched Ellen silently lift her hand in a ‘go on’ manner. “Ellen, ever since I’ve known you, you have never done things right.”

Ellen shook her head. “Gee thanks.”

“I know. You don’t want anyone to get hurt. You’re confused. But I don’t think you see where you should be. I think that you should end it . . .”

“Joe, we discussed this.”

“With Dean.”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “We did not discuss that.”

“I just think . . .”

“What are you trying to do, make me insane?” Ellen’s voice rose. “One day end it with Frank, the other end it with Dean.”

“I never said end it with Frank. I said do the right thing.”

“You never said to end it with Dean, either. Joe!” Ellen’s hands flew out as she stood. “This is not like you! You believe in marriage or serious relationships. Look how many you had. And this goes against everything you stand for. Why the sudden change?”

“Because Robbie has come back.” Joe stood up. “Our Robbie. You don’t take that as a sign? I do. Why, when family after family was wiped out, did we all live? I’ll tell you. We’re supposed to be together, all of us.”

“We are together. We are a family.”

“You and Frank are not.”

“We’re together all the time. What are you talking about? We get along great.”

“But it should be etched in stone, if you know what I mean.”

Ellen burst into laughter in moved to the door.

“I watched him Ellen, I watched him stare at you today with the same look he used to have when he was eighteen.”

“I’m not talking about this.” She kept walking, still chuckling.

“How, how can you laugh? I thought you loved Frank.”

Ellen stopped cold. Airy and emotional she turned back around. “What?” She lost her breath for a moment. “I do love Frank. How can I not? We lost our innocence to each other. But he’s the one that chose not to be a couple after the plague. He’s the one that backed off. He is the one that turned me down when I so desperately wanted a baby. If we aren’t together, it was not my doing.”

“What about now? He needs you now.”

“Frank needs sex.” Ellen turned to leave.

Joe grabbed hold of her arm. “Just a minute. You think that’s all you are to my son? Someone to get off on? You don’t think you are his best friend in the world. That he’s not grateful everyday for you.”

Ellen had to laugh. “Listen to you. Have you been reading Andrea’s romance novels? That is not Frank. O.K.? The grass is always greener to Frank. He wants what he can’t have. When confronted with it, he backs off. Trust me. He had his chances and he chose not to take them. For six months Dean backed off from me. Didn’t touch me, barely spoke, slept on the couch. Frank knew this. And all that Frank would say to me was, that I’d better get home before Dean got suspicious.”

“Ellen . . .”

“No, Joe. I’ve been your son’s whore for almost twenty-years. That’s the painful truth.”

“If you felt that used, why did you stay with him?” Joe asked.

“Because I needed him in my life. I still do. And back then, I took him anyway I could. But now, now . . . it’s just the way it has to be. There’s no other choice, whether he wants it or not, it’s the way it has to be.”

Closer Joe stepped to Ellen in their silence and laid his hand upon her cheek and his lips to her forehead. He knew how wrong she was, but decided to end their talk. Pushing it further would force Ellen’s eyes closed tighter instead of opening them like he intended to do.

Johnny hunched over holding his long cue stick in his hand, eye-ballng what shot he would take as he and Denny worked at their daily game of pool. “Nine ball.” Johnny tapped the stick on the table. “Corner pocket.”

“No way.” Denny bent down to look at the shot. “You’ll never do it. Better call your bank shots.”

“Nine ball corner pocket. No banks.” Johnny positioned himself, angling his stick, he revved it back in preparation for his shot.

“No way.” Denny began to snicker.

“Den.” Johnny stood up, clanking his cue stick on the floor. “I’m trying to concentrate on this shot. Will you shut up?”

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“Thank you.” Johnny aimed again, he pulled back and shot.

“You missed.” Denny laughed.

“I know I missed. Why do you do that to me all the time? That’s cheating. You psych me out.”

“Do not.” Denny looked for a shot. “Hey, Johnny. It’s pretty cool with your uncle coming back. I heard he didn’t know anyone, and when he saw Joe it all came back to him, and that he was all wild, and he stayed because he’s your uncle.”

“Denny, do you believe everything you hear? God you are so gullible. My uncle was fine when we picked him up. Come to think about it, a little too fine. Too quiet.” Johnny shuddered. “It was eerie. Anyhow, I didn’t even recognize him.” Johnny began to tap his stick, he grew tired of waiting on Denny. “Den, are you gonna take your shot or what. I have to go.”

“Where?” Denny shot and missed.

“I have an early date with Dina.” Johnny smiled. “Come to think about it . . .” Johnny put down his stick. “I better be going.”

“Why do you have to hang out with all those ladies for?”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that.” Johnny shook his head. “You’ll find out. In another year or so.”

“No way.” Denny curled his lip.

“What do you mean no way?”

“Have you looked at them women?” Denny shook his head. “They’re really old. They’re like, twenty.”

“Look who’s talking about hanging out with old. You hang out with George. Now he’s old.”

“George is great. He was the president you know. Whatever that means. Your Pap said to respect that. Besides, he tells great stories.”

“Den, I have to go.” Johnny hated to interrupt Denny, he really was Denny’s only friend. “We’ll play tomorrow I promise. Three games.”

“O.K., I’ll see if George wants to play me.” Denny was disappointed that Johnny was leaving. “What do you do with these women that is so fun anyway? They never come in here and play pool or darts.”

Johnny knew Denny didn’t understand. “You ask me that all the time.”

“You never answer me.”

“I’m not allowed to answer you. Andrea said she’d kill me. She wants to keep you innocent.”

“Can I come with you?”

“No, Den, not tonight.” Johnny picked up his empty water glass and carried it with him as he walked away. He set it on the bar, waved to ‘Sam’ the mannequin, and walked from the social hall.

Denny watched his friend leave, disappointed, he finished the game himself. He spent most of his time alone, he was used to that. Other than Johnny, there wasn’t anyone he could spend any length of time with. He always seemed to get in the way. Too

young for the grown-ups to talk to. Too old for the kids to play with. It didn't bother him though, not much ever bothered Denny.

Paul placed down his pencil, and stared at the off-white sheet of paper called, The Beginnings Questionnaire. He sighed, tapped it some on the table he and Robbie sat at, then looked for Joe. He saw him. Joe was off to the side speaking to two men. Paul recognized the one from the flight in, that was George. The other he didn't know, but he soon would. Henry.

Nervously Paul stood, taking his questionnaire with him as he made his approach toward Joe. "Excuse me, Mr. Slagel?"

Joe stopped speaking when Paul neared him. "Yes, Paul, what is it?"

Paul handed him the questionnaire. "Here you go."

"Paul." Joe didn't reach for it. "If you're having difficulties let's you and I go over and work on it. Some people have trouble with our questionnaire."

"Oh, no." Paul insisted he take it. "I'm finished with it."

"You're finished?" Joe was shocked. "I just gave it to you."

"I know, I know. I always took tests fast in school."

Joe took the paper and quickly reviewed it, it was completed. Paul had finished filling out the questionnaire faster than Joe had seen anyone. "I'll pass this on to Ellen. Whenever she gets back." Joe turned back, holding the paper with an astonished look on his face. He walked over to Henry and George.

"Joe?" George spoke up. "What's wrong?"

Joe handed George the completed questionnaire. "That new guy Paul filled this out in about five minutes. I have never seen that done. Robbie is still working on his."

George read over it. “You know, Joe, you oughta sit down and talk to that man some time. You may find him quite interesting.”

“Ellen said she sat with him for a good hour. He’s intelligent, bright, mannered. She also said that we should make immediate living arrangements in the community for him.”

“Is she sure?” George asked. “You know how she sometimes jumps the gun, not too often, but she has. Like that one woman she let out and we ousted her for raiding the food.”

“You can’t blame Ellen. The woman seemed fine.” Joe looked around for Ellen. “Where in the hell is she?” All that was there of Ellen, was a wheeled cart with a cover over it.

Henry cleared his throat and pointed. Ellen made a hurried entrance into the skills room. As she passed the survivors, she tried to get the ones who were standing to sit.

“Sorry I’m late. I was playing with the twins.” She walked around them, grabbed her cart and wheeled it up to the front of the room next to the podium. “Henry, can you get me a chair please?”

“Sure.” Henry darted away for one, collected one, and sat it next to Ellen.

“Thanks.” She smiled and positioned the chair. “Wait a minute.” She looked at George who was standing there also. “Why are you here too, George?”

“Thought I’d help.”

Ellen crinkled her nose at him. “You’re never here any other time. Are you another Robbie curiosity seeker?”

George ignored her remark, even though she was, in a sense correct.

Ellen strategically set everything,. Still she was careful not to uncover her big surprise. She raised her voice to get the attention of everyone in the room. “All right guys, we’re gonna start. Joe, is it all right if we start?”

Joe just nodded.

“Great.” Ellen waited for the voices to subside. “Tonight is going to be an interactive social skills class. Tonight’s theme is

trust. Trust is something, that no matter who you are, it just isn't easy. But understandably, out in that world, you can lose so much. We here in Beginnings, especially the 'originals' the ones that have been here since the start, have a strong bond and trust. And I want to demonstrate that to you, so you can get it back. People still trust. Now I'd like to ask either Joe, Henry, or George, to help me out. Oh yeah, don't get too used to seeing Henry and George around here. They only came to gawk tonight." She turned behind her to look at the three men. She waited for her volunteer.

Henry stepped forward. "I'm game, Ellen."

"Good. Everyone this is Henry. Henry, have a seat."

Henry sat down in the chair.

Ellen placed her hands on his shoulders as she stood behind him. "Henry, do you trust me?"

"Yes. Very much." Henry smiled and spoke loudly. He was enthused about participating in Ellen's little parlor trick.

"Good." Ellen removed the cover from the wheeled cart. When she did, Joe and George saw what it was, and immediately tried not to laugh. Ellen picked up an object and showed it to her audience. "Now, what I'm holding in my hand is a straight edge razor." She moved around the very shiny object. "It's sharp, as you know."

Henry's eyes bulged. He was afraid to look. She couldn't be serious.

"Henry is going to show all of you how much he trusts me by letting me shave him. As you can see . . ." She lifted his chin and held the object close to his neck. "One false move, one sneeze, and Henry is history."

Henry's eyes widened more. The reflection of the light off the razor shone across his face. He was terrified. He trusted Ellen. But did he trust her with a straight edge razor? As soon as Henry knew the answer to that one, he jumped from the chair and booked.

Frank finished with his rounds sooner than he thought. And when John Matoose, arguing with his wife Jenny, showed up early, Frank left without hesitation. He knew Ellen still had a while to go with her class at containment, but Frank really wanted to see how Robbie did on his first test. He stopped in on his way home. The halls were empty and laughter from the skills room carried to Frank making him head straight there. He stopped when he entered. His quest to know what everyone was laughing at ended when he saw Dean in a chair and Ellen behind him, his head rested back on her and Dean was covered with shaving cream.

Frank was not amused.

He stood arms crossed as Ellen finished up on Dean and handed him a towel. That set fine with Frank until Dean playfully grabbed a handful of shaving cream, placed it on Ellen's face and smeared it around with his lips. Dean stepped back from Ellen and tossed her towel, and while laughing, turned around to walk from the skills room. In his route out, he glanced at Frank in his pass, basking in the glory of Frank's apparent unhappiness.

Frank didn't respond, he merely walked into the skills room up to Ellen. She stood talking with Joe and George. "El." He called to her in a loud whisper.

Ellen jumped. "You scared me." She turned to him. When she saw him, she seemed surprised. "Frank. What are you doing here?"

Frank took the towel from her hand. He lifted her chin with his forefinger and thumb, and began to wipe her face as if she were a child. "I just stopped by to ask how Robbie did on his test. Then I'm gone." He continued wiping.

Joe couldn't take it. He interrupted their conversation briefly by snatching the towel from Frank's hand. "Frank, you look really silly standing in the middle of the room wiping off her face."

"But she had . . ."

"No." Joe shook his head at him. He didn't need to say more. Giving back the towel, he shook his head and walked away.

Ellen snickered at Joe's disapproval of his son's less than manly behavior. She was rather enjoying it. It was so unlike Frank. "I didn't look at Robbie's test yet. It's on my desk. I'm sure he did fine."

"I'm sure." Speaking with edge, Frank pulled her off to the side. "I saw your little demonstration. It was kind of a personal. Don't you think?"

"What? Shaving someone?"

"Yes."

"How is shaving someone personal?" Ellen asked.

"Come on El. He looked like he was enjoying it. Did you see where he had his head?"

"Where he had his . . ." Ellen started to laugh as she looked down to her chest. "I have news for you Frank, Dean's head's been there many times and it wasn't just to shave him."

Surprising Ellen, Frank tossed the towel at her, pointed and stepped back. "Then why don't you just finish up here and go home to Dean."

"Frank." Ellen was shocked when he stormed off. She chased him into the hall. "Stop. I mean it."

Frank slowed down then stopped. He turned around. "What?"

"I was joking around because you were really acting jealous." She stepped to him.

"I was jealous. All right? It . . ." He slid his hand down his face. "It bothers me. I shouldn't let it, I'm sorry." He lowered his head.

"No, I'm sorry." Ellen spoke soft. "Still not want to see me tonight? I'm mean if you want to me to go home with . . ."

"No." Frank sprang his head up. "No. If you do, then I'd lay in bed and stew all night because you're with . . ." Frank grumbled when he saw through the corner of his eye that Dean had approached. "Dean." Frank huffed. "What!"

Dean shook his head and took hold of Ellen's arm. "Something is wrong with you. Come on, El, I'll help a little more before I have to leave." Leading Ellen to the skills room, Dean laid

his hand on Ellen's back and peered over his shoulder to look once more at Frank.

Frank flipped him off. He decided to leave, then remembered why he was at containment. Robbie's test. And knowing what the questions and answers were, and knowing that he could see for himself how Robbie did, Frank went to Ellen's office.

He turned on the light. On top of Ellen's desk were the first tests. Paul's and Robbie's. Frank smiled and lifted up Robbie's. The smile fell from his face. "No." He closed his eyes. "Robbie, what is this." Shaking his head, Frank reached over and shut the door. He took the test, sat at Ellen's desk, and grabbed a pencil. Test before him, Frank began to erase and change the answers.

Ellen was finished, and in what she considered a remarkable early time. She scurried about trying to get her office in order before she left containment for the night. Stacking her things neatly on the desk, she flew to the door and reached for the light. She jumped and shrieked when Robbie was there. "Robbie." She grabbed her chest laughing.

"I'm sorry. You're leaving huh?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "We'll talk tomorrow."

"If you need to talk, we'll talk now." Ellen grabbed his hand and brought him back in the office. "Have a seat." She motioned her hand to a chair then sat on the desk before him. "You were quiet all night. Not the um . . . Robbie I remember."

"I'm a lot different." Robbie swallowed. "El, I'm worried about a couple things. One, my test."

“Your questionnaire?” Ellen scoffed. “Robbie, you did fine. Perfect. See.” She leaned back and grabbed the test and handed it to him.

Robbie reviewed it. “Did my Dad see this?”

“Yes. I gave it to him right away. And he knew you’d pull it off.” Ellen winked.

“I don’t know what to say . . .” He handed it back. “Thanks, El.”

Ellen shrugged. “Sure. It’s my job. The other problem?”

“Being in here.”

Ellen nodded slowly. “I understand, Robbie. But please understand my position. I had to earn the Council’s trust in order to be able to make decisions to release people. As much as I love you, I can’t let you out until I’m certain.” Ellen paused. “Please don’t hate me.”

“No El. See.” Robbie grabbed her hand. “I’m worried. No, I’m scared. I don’t want to screw up out there. I don’t want you to let me out early because of who I am. I’ve . . . I’ve been out there a long time. I’ve done . . .”

“Robbie.” Ellen compassionately silenced him. “Please don’t worry. You can stay in here as long as you want. You let me know when you’re ready. I’ll talk to Joe.”

“Telling you I’m not ready, I can do. Telling my father I’m not ready is something I can’t do. I can’t let him know I’m afraid to live in his world.”

“Robbie, do you think Joe wouldn’t understand. He would.” Ellen said. “He wouldn’t think any less of you because there is no reason to think less of you. You were out there a long time.”

“El.” Robbie’s blue eyes pleaded. “Isn’t there anything you can do? Please, I’m begging you to help me. You make the decisions, they listen to you. What if it’s you who says I’m not ready. What if . . .”

Ellen exhaled to silence him. “You want me to be the heavy.”

“I just want your help.” Robbie said sadly as he scooted his chair closer to Ellen and dropped his head to her knees. His hands

gripped onto her as if he were so lost. His forehead rubbed back and forth against her legs. “I don’t want to lose what I looked so long for.”

Ellen’s hand went to Robbie hair, her fingers moved through it in a slow comforting sweep. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I’ll help you. And I promise you, Robbie, I promise you. No matter what, I will not let you fail.”

The air was dry and cool typical for late spring in the community. Henry watched from his bedroom window for the containment center lights to go out. When he saw that they did, it was his sign that all was clear, and he could go meet George at the social hall.

Henry and George got together once a week to play darts. George was the dart king, as he called himself. He was unbeatable, but still fun to play. The only time that George was beaten at darts, was a year before when he broke his dart throwing hand, and everyone felt they had to challenge him. Denny was the only one who could beat the crippled ex-president of the United States.

Shoulders hunched up, hands in his pockets, Henry tried to look inconspicuous. He didn’t want to run into Joe or Ellen, he felt sort of foolish for running out. The hall was empty when Henry walked in, all except for ‘Sam’ and George. George stood by the dart machine, a drink for Henry already waiting.

“George, you ready for me?” Henry pulled his darts from his back pocket and showed them to George.

“Yes, been ready.” George opened his black case and pulled out his darts. “Dean survived.”

“Excuse me?” Henry asked. “What did Dean survive?”

“Dean survived. After you ran out, he volunteered to be shaved. Not a nick on his face.”

“I trust Ellen, George. I do. If I had a heart attack, or was sick . . . no, scratch the sick part . . . but if I had an accident, I’d trust her. But to put a straight edge razor within millimeters of my jugular vein. I have to draw the line.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t have done it either. You came to help out. You couldn’t. What do they say? It’s the thought that counts.”

“It won’t work, the guilt trip.” Henry knew it would, he just wanted George to leave him alone about it. “Besides, I really didn’t want to help out with those classes. You know as well as I do Joe and Ellen have the schedule set one way. Make a suggestion, do something out of order, and they’re in your shit. Then they wonder why no one wants to help them. Anyway, I just wanted to talk to Robbie.”

“Did you get a chance too?”

“Yeah.” Henry’s voice was less than enthusiastic. “Let’s start our game.”

“Wait a second.” George reached out to stop Henry, who was pulling his darts from their little pouch. “Now this afternoon you were excited about Robbie. What’s going on? Your attitude stinks.”

“George, I prefer not to say anything. Let’s just play.”

“Bad first impression?” George was not giving up that easily.

“George, he’s Joe’s son.”

“Don’t you think I know that? You should have seen the array of knives we found in his belongings when we checked his stuff. Some of them blood stained.”

Henry, who was not looking at George, suddenly looked up.
“What is your impression of Robbie Slagel?”

“I think Robbie is like any other survivor we’ve picked up. He’s scared, he’s maladjusted, and he needs time. The only problem is, we expect him not to be that way because he’s Joe’s son. We have to remember, yes he’s a Slagel, but he’s been out there forever.”

“Maybe that’s what’s bothering me. I expected more. And . . . there’s something about his eyes.” Henry fiddled nervously with his darts. “What do you think Joe’s gonna do?”

“I know Joe, and so do you. Joe wants his son out, yes. But, he’s not gonna let him out of containment until he thinks he’s ready. We are the Council. Joe will think with his head instead of his heart. He always does. Besides, Ellen will have to give her recommendation, and she can be tough.”

“And wrong, and she has been.”

George shrugged. “We can’t lay that on her. We make the final decision. We have Andrea back it up if we’re in doubt. Why are you so worried about this, my friend? You’ve never been this worried about a survivor.”

“Forget it. I’m not going to worry about it anymore. Let’s just you and I play our weekly slaughter game.”

“Never know, tonight you might win.”

Henry smiled. He knew he wouldn’t, but he’d try anyhow. The game would be especially a slaughter. Henry’s mind was not completely on the game, but on Robbie. Henry felt guilty for the feelings he had. He expected to be taken by Robbie straight away, but wasn’t. He expected to like Robbie right off the bat, but didn’t. The thing that ate away at him the most, was that he wasn’t giving Robbie the benefit of doubt that he gave every other survivor that they picked up. Ousted or not, Henry believed in them, and theorized reasons for their behavior. So why wouldn’t he do that for Robbie?

The whiskey splashed as Frank pulled the bottle from his mouth and set it on his night stand. Lying on his bed, his nude body covered with a sheet, he tasted the whiskey on his bottom lip

as he listened to the shower water running. He smiled at the memory of their evening and he laughed to himself at Ellen's ridicule of his attempt at tenderness. Growing antsy and really wanting to talk to Ellen, Frank flung the covers to the side and sat up. He reached down to the floor for his boxer shorts and stepped into them in his stride across and out of the bedroom.

He knocked once before entering the bathroom and closing the door behind him. He put the lid down on the commode and sat. "It's me."

"I figured as much," Ellen spoke loudly over the running water.

"You didn't say how your talk with my Dad went today. What did you do wrong?"

"Nothing. Get this. He wants us to etch our relationship in stone."

"Marriage? Oh." Frank tapped his bare feet on the bathroom floor. "O.K., when?"

Ellen stuck her head out of the shower curtain. "That's not funny, Frank. Don't let your father hear you joke around like that, he might believe you. Besides, he'll forget about the marriage thing once Robbie leaves containment."

"Then that won't be too long. Robbie's getting out when? Tomorrow?"

"I don't know when Robbie's getting out."

"What do you mean? You make the recommendations."

"I know I do. He's not ready yet. I'll let you know when I think he will be."

"When, a day, two days?"

"He just arrived today, Frank, give him a chance."

Frank grew defensive, it was apparent in his tone of voice. "So what, El, that Paul guy arrived today too. You already recommended he gets out tomorrow."

"That Paul guy has been living in a civilized community. Robbie has not." Ellen peeked from the curtain again. "Can we drop this please?"

“What’s wrong with my brother? Tell me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“Then he can get out,” Frank argued.

“I’m not discussing this anymore. I’m not.”

Frank grew angrier. “Why?”

“Frank, drop it.”

Frank wasn’t finished with Ellen, but he knew she wouldn’t say another thing about it. She was stubborn. Frank stood up. Pissed-off, he began to leave the bathroom, stopped, flushed the toilet and then stormed out.

Ellen felt the water go from perfect to scalding. She tried to reach around the stream of water to turn it off, careful not to get burned. She stepped from the tub, dried herself and got dressed.

Figuring Frank had cooled down some, Ellen walked into his bedroom, releasing her hair from the clip as she made her way to the dresser. She grabbed the brush and began to brush out her hair. She looked over at Frank who sat on the bed, knees bent up, and playing with his revolver. “Are we done arguing, Frank?”

Frank didn’t answer.

“You can’t really be mad at me. Are you?”

Frank lifted his eyes to briefly look at her. “I think you’re forgetting who he is.”

“I think you’re assuming because of who he is, that he’s ready.” Ellen placed down the brush and sat on the side of the bed. “You’re really mad about this?” She shook her head and reached down for her shoes. “How long will you be mad at me so I can avoid you?”

“How long will Robbie be in containment unnecessarily?”

Ellen slipped on her shoes. “I guess I won’t be seeing you for awhile then.” She stood from the bed, trying to control her anger. “I refuse to fight with you over this, Frank. If this is your attitude, then stay mad at me, I don’t care. I don’t tell you how to run security, don’t tell me how to do my job.” She stormed from the bedroom without saying goodbye.

The whole way back to her house, her disagreement with Frank stayed on her mind. They had argued in the past, but for only a few minutes. And in all the years they had known each other, they never left one another mad. The Robbie argument bred a first.

Dean was surprised when he saw Ellen walk in. He looked down at his watch. “It’s not even ten. No hanging out at the hall late?”

Ellen shook her head, and walked into the living room.

“I’m glad you’re home.” Dean followed. “The kids are asleep. I’m heading to the lab. I want to do some work. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, you go ahead.”

“Thanks.” Dean looked around for his jacket, and spotted it thrown over a dining room chair. “I’m glad I’m getting an early jump on it tonight. Maybe I’ll be home by two or three.” He grabbed his jean jacket, as he put it on, his noticed Ellen’s far-off look. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh nothing. I just have something on my mind.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Dean moved closer to her.

“No. Go to the lab.”

Dean adjusted the collar on his coat. “Is that a ‘I want you to go to the lab’ answer? Or is it an ‘I want you to get the truth out of me because I’m a female’ answer?”

Ellen smiled at him. “I want you to go to the lab, Dean. I just have Robbie on my mind. Don’t worry about it.”

“So it was a little of both. What’s going on with Robbie?”

“I don’t think he’s ready to leave containment yet. I know I’m going to get heat on it.”

“Looks like you already have. Are you arguing with Frank about this?”

“Fighting with him about this.”

“You mean arguing. You and Frank don’t fight.”

“We are now.”

Dean tried to hide the smile that was nearing out. “Well, for what it’s worth I don’t blame your decision. Robbie’s going to go through every adjustment and emotional change that any other survivor we bring in goes through. The only difference is, he’s Joe’s son. We have to forget about that. There’s nothing wrong with Robbie, he’s as normal as we can expect from a survivor, but he’s just not where everyone thinks he is.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed her on the cheek. “I won’t be too late.” He walked to the front door. “See you in a little bit.”

Ellen nodded and smiled sadly when Dean left. Finding the living room too quiet, Ellen chalked up ‘a drink’ as to what she needed. She went to the cabinet to pour herself some of that scotch Johnny brought her back from the last run. As she reached for the bottle, she heard a tapping at the door. Thinking it was Joe, she walked to the door and opened it. Frank stood there, his arm leaning on the doorway, his expression, humbled. “Frank? What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry.” He held out his hand. “Buddies?”

“No.” Ellen shut the door on him, then quickly re-opened it, to a surprised looking Frank. “Did you believe me?”

“No.” He walked in. “I rescind my apology.”

“No you don’t.”

“No, I don’t.” He leaned down to her and kissed her. “I won’t argue or fight with you about it. It’s not worth it. Even though I don’t agree with you, that’s your job, not mine.”

Ellen heard his words, but she also knew Frank. After a few days, if Robbie was still in containment, then the argument would return. Ellen let Frank believe that she thought he’d keep true to his word. Frank was as stubborn as she was. The one fault that they both had in common, would be a deadly one for them while Robbie stayed in containment. Neither of them ever wanted to be wrong about something, and in the Robbie situation, one of them would be.

CHAPTER NINE

May 8th

“Paul!” Joe called loudly across the tractor noise to Paul who was lifting bundles of hay. He waved his hand in a ‘come here’ motion to the young man who seemed to fit into Beginnings so perfectly. “Need you for a few minutes.”

Paul wiped his forehead with his gloved hand, took the gloves off, and informed Miguel he’d be right back. “Yes Mr. Slagel.” He approached Joe who stood by an idling jeep.

“Feel like taking a ride into town with me?”

“Sure. Why?”

“There’s some things I want to discuss with you. Hop in.” Joe slid into the drivers seat and waited for Paul to join him. He turned the jeep around and sped off. “So how are things going?”

“Good. Real good. These past five days have been smooth. My house is a little quiet, but I guess that will change when Robbie lives with me..”

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Actually, I have a couple favors to ask of you. Now they’re only favors so don’t think you have to do them.”

“What are they?” Paul asked.

“Well, I know I need you out in the fields, but I’d really like to utilize some of those talents you listed. One, at the school, we have a lot of kids in Beginnings. They’re the survivors we never pass up. They could use that musical instruction.”

“No problem, I’d enjoy that. I don’t know how much patience I’d have, but I’ll learn.”

“Good. Second . . .” Joe smiled. “Yeah, there’s more favors. Interested in providing the hall with some live music once a week? Maybe you and Robbie can get together, he’s played since he was a kid.”

“I’d love it. That’s what I like to do most.”

Joe slowed the jeep down as he pulled up to the main street of town. He pulled over and parked it. “Can you get enough material together for tomorrow night? We’re having a party for Robbie.”

“He’s getting out? That’s great. I couldn’t figure out why he was in there so long.”

Joe huffed. “Me either. None of us could. Ellen insisted he stay. Let me tell, you this past week has been hell. But hey, I gave her the position because I respect her judgment.” He stepped from the jeep.

“So she’s finally giving in?”

Joe slowed down as they approached a small silver building at the end of the block. He looked at Paul and took a deep breath.

“Ellen doesn’t know?”

“Well, let’s just say we got tired of waiting and went over her head. She’ll find out shortly.” Joe paused as he opened the door for Paul. A spine chilling fear struck him when he realized how shortly it really would be before Ellen found out she had lost.

Ellen basked in the oddity of the really great day she was having. She moved to containment after stopping to see her children at the school. She was still on a ‘high’ after the fun, furless rabbit experiment she did with Dean. Great days were few and far between for Ellen, so she was on-guard. The fact that she was on time for every place she had to be, was a sure sign that things were headed toward an avalanche. And the sight of Frank, confirmed that.

Frank stood as if he was waiting for her outside of containment. Leaning against the wall, blocking the door, arms folded, that snide look on his face. She had to wonder, was it going to be round 751? Another confrontation with Frank was not

what she wanted. Every day it was the same routine. The day started out fine, and then somewhere, somehow, Frank would bring up Robbie. No matter what the topic of conversation, Frank made it fit into a Robbie one. ‘El, I scratched my finger . . . when is Robbie getting out of containment?’ Robbie was a closed subject to Ellen. He had to be. She had made a promise to Robbie. A promise that would be impossible for Ellen to keep if she kept arguing with Frank. So she decided after four days of fighting, making up, and fighting again, avoidance of Frank would be fundamentally necessary. At least until the Robbie crisis was over.

Ellen paused as she drew closer to the containment center. Frank was blocking the doorway. He was smiling. That pissed her off. He was going to say something, she just knew it. She took a deep breath and headed straight to the door. “Frank. Move.”

Frank smiled at her, and did not say a word. He placed his hands behind her neck and pulled her to him and kissed her. “I miss you.”

“Yeah-yeah, right. Move.”

“El, please. Let’s not do this. You haven’t even sat down and talked with me in the past two days. I’m going through withdrawal here.”

“When the Robbie situation is over, then we can go back to normal. Move.” Ellen tried to get past him. Frank didn’t budge.

“El, I promise you, I promise I will not argue with you over Robbie ever again.” He held up his right hand. “Please stop this.”

Ellen knew Frank never broke a promise. But she also knew Frank hated to lose an argument and he was making a promise that would be impossible to keep. Something was going on. She knew it, but didn’t want to get into it. “I can’t be around you, Frank. Let’s just wait it out. Besides, you have no idea what it’s like to have everyone in town harp on you constantly, everyone. I have had no support this week. The only person who hasn’t judged me is Dean. When I told him you and I . . .”

“You told Dean we’ve been fighting? Oh that’s just great. No wonder he’s being supportive. I would be too if I were in his position. What’s he doing? Being the . . .”

“Frank!” Ellen silenced him. “You promise not to argue about Robbie, so does this mean everything else is fair game?”

“Fine, I won’t argue.” Frank drew closer to her. “I give up, you win. Be nice to me again.” Frank tilted his head with a quirky smile. “El, you’re looking at me really funny.”

Ellen folded her arms. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m just here to make up.”

“No, we’ve made up lots of times this week. You were never like this.”

“Can I see you tonight?”

“You have changed the subject.”

“I did not.”

“You did too.” Ellen tried to get by him. “Can I go to work now please?”

“Now you changed the subject.”

“Frank you’re getting on my nerves. Move!” Ellen waited for him to step off to the side. “Thank you.” Ellen opened the door to go in.

“El are we friend again? El . . . El . . . El . . . are we friends again . . . El.”

“Frank!” Ellen took a breath and calmed herself. “I know you better than anyone. I’m not buying it. Either you’re acting like the babbling idiot right now because you truly missed me, or you know something I don’t. I’m opting for you know something I don’t.”

“If I did. What does that mean for us tonight?”

“I knew it!” Ellen stormed into containment.

“El.” Frank followed her in.

Ellen faced him quickly, before Greg buzzed her in. “I will deal with you later. I promise that.” Angry, and annoyed, Ellen knew in her gut what was going on. Frank, all of the sudden giving in, waiting for her, making promises he’d find hard to keep. Her

instincts told her she had been crossed, and she knew she was right the moment she spotted Andrea at the far end of the containment hall. With the security door still held open by her, she looked over her shoulder at Frank. Anger, not hurt, lit up her face. “Why couldn’t you be straight with me? Huh Frank?”

Frank’s head hung low, he looked at her through the tops of his eyes. “I’m sorry, El. I wasn’t allowed to tell you.”

“Who all knows about this?”

Frank didn’t answer.

“I’m the only one who didn’t know this? For how long?”

“Just this morning.”

“Well, screw you.” Ellen let the door slam behind her. Trying to keep herself in control, she walked toward Andrea who appeared to be waiting on her. Ellen expected the situation; she knew it would come eventually. She knew she couldn’t hold off the forces from Robbie very long. But that wasn’t what bothered her. It was the fact that it was a big conspiracy. In her storm down the hall she began to feel bad. She didn’t feel bad for herself, she felt bad for Robbie. She let him down. Robbie still wasn’t ready to leave. He was going to have to, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“Ellen, I can see that you’re upset.” Andrea tried to reason with her, but Ellen gathered reading material into stacks on her desk. “I understand why.” Andrea knew she was ignored, but then she became annoyed at Ellen’s banging of the papers she collated. “You cannot be that angry, Ellen. This is not the first time I was brought in here to double check on someone you refused to release or wanted to release.”

“That’s correct.” Ellen dropped what she was holding, letting it fall to the desk. “However, it is the first time you came in here

without my knowledge. That's what pisses me off. That's why I'm fired-up. That with the fact that everyone knew but me.”

“For that I apologize, I really do. Not telling you was wrong. Joe said he had his reasons and he'll tell you when he comes in this afternoon.”

“I can't wait to hear it.”

“Ellen.” Andrea moved closer to her. “I have apologized to you. I am sincere in that. But I have to tell you, I saw nothing, nothing wrong with Robbie. Which brings me to a question that has been popping up on everyone's mind.” Andrea, somewhat apprehensive, folded her arms tightly to herself. “Now don't get too upset. This question is not entirely unfounded. But, I've seen Robbie. He's the best looking guy I have ever seen in my life. Are you sure that perhaps there isn't an attraction there, maybe you kept him here for personal reasons?”

“What?! You can't be serious about this?” Ellen waited for a response, she didn't get one. “You are serious.” Almost in a dramatic disgust Ellen snarled her face. “I'm not even going to justify that with an answer.”

“The question was brought up.” Andrea shrugged. “By who, I don't know. Forget about it, all right? Look, I know you're mad. If you need to vent, vent on me. I can take it.”

“I'm not going to vent on you, Andrea. There are certain people in this community I don't lose it on. You are one of them. However . . . there are those who I do vent on. So in order to save a few survivors from an unnecessary Ellen lashing . . .” She sniffed, twitched her head and spoke in a high tone as she turned. “Excuse me.” Nose in the air, and mind full of speeches she was going to give, Ellen left the office.

Andrea could have stopped her, but saw no reason to, since she herself had been spared.

Ellen walked out of containment. As she did she noticed Frank perched out front like he was on detail. She growled as she walked briskly past him, down the sidewalk, and straight to her

destination with Frank following her. “Don’t you have a job or something?”

“I’m working.” Frank kept up with her. “I’m in security. My job is to divert any possible dangerous situations from occurring. With the mood you’re in right now, who knows what could happen.”

Ellen stopped cold in her tracks, taking Frank by surprise and causing him to walk right past her.

Frank noticed she was no longer beside him. He looked back, Ellen wasn’t smiling at his joke. “Come on El, lighten up. I’m kidding you.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“Well, get in the mood.”

Ellen rolled her eyes at him and began to walk again. “Frank, just leave me alone. I told you I’d deal with you later.”

“Fine. Tonight?”

“Yes, Frank, yes.” Ellen approached the door to the clinic.

“Will you be in a better mood later?”

“Probably not.” She opened the door.

Frank wasn’t giving up, he was bound and determined to irritate Ellen until she smiled. “El, just so I’m mentally prepared for you. On a scale of one to ten, how mad are you?”

Ellen turned once again to face him. There was only one way to get her anger across to Frank, and a number just wasn’t going to do it. “Michelle.” Ellen sarcastically smiled. “Michelle, Michelle, Michelle!”

Frank’s body jolted with the words like he had just been hit with rapid gun fire. “Uh!”

“Michelle is wonderful.” Ellen took one step closer. “Michelle is nice.”

“Stop!”

“Michelle didn’t take the van, you gave it to her and forgot about it.”

“Enough, enough, I get the point.” Frank backed up. He scrunched his face in a painful look and pressed his finger tightly

to his closed eye. “Now see, you’ve gone and gave me a Michelle-grain. Thank you very much.”

Ellen was not going to smile at him. Even when he peaked out from behind his hand to see if he had her. “Frank!” Ellen snapped. “Go to work.” Saying no more, Ellen went back up to the clinic doorway. She opened the doors and stood there for a second to let her rage return, let her blood pressure rise, and when it did, she stormed into the clinic for her brief, but painful assault on . . .

“Dean!” Ellen growled out as she flung open the laboratory door.

Dean sat across the lab, a rabbit lay in front of him. It laid on its back, its little paws spread eagle. He looked up at her from his mini bunny autopsy. “Hey El.”

“Don’t you hey El me!” Ellen’s voice was, cold, harsh, and deep. “Did you know?” She scolded, putting one hand on her hip.

“Know what?” Dean knew that he blurted out a dumb question. But it was his best response.

“This morning. Did you know about Robbie?”

Dean returned to look at his rabbit. He debated, play dumb, or be honest. He opted for neither. Ignore her, and hope the moment that was just about to transpire, would be over soon.

“You did! You son-of-a-bitch! You sat here with me this morning and you knew. You looked me in the eye, talked to me. You listened to me bitch about how everyone was on me, and you said nothing??”

“El, I couldn’t say anything, I’m sorry. Don’t be mad.”

“Don’t be mad?” Ellen’s height increased along with her voice as her anger brought her to her tipped toes. “Don’t be mad? Fuck you.” She flung her arms with her grunt of frustration, and in one swift turn, she stormed from the lab as quickly as she entered, then raged from the clinic.

Stepping outside, Ellen let a sigh of ‘feel good’ hit her at the same time as the sun. Walking back to containment that feeling left her when she saw Henry and he was smiling at her.

“Hi Ellen.” Henry walked up to her.

“Kiss my ass, Henry!”

“O.K.. What did I do to deserve that?” Henry was calm and logical, as usual.

“Like you don’t know.”

“No, I don’t. Feel like telling me?”

“Robbie.”

“O.K. Robbie . . . Oh.” Henry caught on. “They must have reached a decision.”

“You don’t know about this, Henry? I find that hard to believe.” Ellen wanted to argue, but Henry just wasn’t cooperating.

“Really I don’t. I left the council meeting at four in the morning. I had electronics work to finish. I just got up. I told them last night, whatever they decide to do.”

“But you knew they were bringing someone in. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Henry scratched his head. “Funny, El. I don’t recall seeing you at all today.”

“Why all the secrecy with the others?” Ellen asked.

“It wasn’t really supposed to be this big secret. Look . . .” Henry led her to the steps of the clinic and made her sit next to him. “You have to understand, you have Joe, he wanted Robbie out, but he didn’t want to make the decision. Everyone had something they wanted Robbie for. Frank, he was on council’s back every day and so, George, he had enough. He brought in Andrea to make the decision.”

“But how come I didn’t find out?”

“People can be a little frightened of you.” Henry leaned back, just in case Ellen lashed out. “It’s true, you scare people. Maybe they were just afraid to tell you they were going over your head. Or, what if you were right, we all know how badly you gloat. Anyway, in their defense. Their hearts were in the right place, and you really couldn’t give a logical reason why Robbie had to stay. Then there was the rumor why he was staying.”

Ellen shook her head. “That is entirely untrue, Henry. I have no interest in Robbie, or lust for him.”

“I didn’t hear that one. That’s a good one. I was talking about the one where you needed him for scientific experiments with Dean.”

Ellen laughed. She had too. Henry was so serious about his explanations. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, Henry.” She stood up.

“Hey, no problem. I’d be the same way.” Henry stood also.

“I better get back to work. Thanks, you’ve calmed me down about this.”

“Anytime.” Henry said his goodbye. He knew he had accomplished the near impossible. But of course he was Henry, he did fix things. He patted himself on the back, pictured himself being called ‘Saint Henry’, then walked proudly in to the clinic knowing he had saved another poor soul from experiencing what he almost received in full force.

Even from across the room, Ellen could see Robbie’s hands shaking as he occupied himself with the ‘safe’ survivors, the two children. He sat at a table playing cards with them, trying to look relaxed, but Ellen knew him for too many years. His rapidly blinking eyes told her his mind was elsewhere.

“Hey.” She whispered as she knelt down by his legs. “Robbie.” She laid her hand on his forearm. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes closed briefly as he turned his head and peered down to her. “No.” He gave an innocent smile. “It’s O.K.”

“Feel like talking?”

Robbie nodded, then motioned his head to the kids. “Maybe later though? We have to finish our game.”

Ellen smiled as her agreement, but just as she went to stand she heard the call of her name and her hand gripped Robbie's arm.

"Ellen," Joe's crass call carried across the skills room.

She lifted her eyes to Robbie, gripping his arm. "I'm ignoring him."

Again, Joe called. "Ellen."

"My Dad?" Robbie snickered. "Watch." Robbie softened his voice and imitated his father. "Ellen, goddamn it I'm talking to you."

"Ellen, goddamn it I'm talking to you." Joe neared her.

Ellen laughed, stood up then changed her happy expression to a bold one. She marched across the skills room right by Joe. "I am not speaking to you."

"Oh really?" Joe followed her.

"Really." Ellen moved to her office.

"Hold it right there, Missy."

Ellen stopped. "Missy?" She turned around. "Missy? Did you just call me Missy?" She shook her head and went into her office.

"What the hell difference does it make what I call you."

"How about naive? How about dumb? How about someone that everyone can push around. How about . . ."

"How about I leave." Joe tossed his hands up. "I can see you and I are not talking about this rationally and I refuse to bow down and kiss your ass like everyone else." He saw her gasp. "Yeah, open that mouth a little wider in surprise, Ellen. I'm not Frank, I'm not Dean and I'm not everyone else. I'm your father. I'm not gonna beg you to take my apology. You don't want to talk to me. Don't. You can't ignore me forever."

Ellen couldn't speak when Joe walked out. Stunned, her mouth moved and she stepped to the door to be greeted by a snickering Robbie. "Do . . . do you . . ." She pointed to a leaving Joe.

"Dad." Robbie said going into her office with her.

"Game over with the kids?"

"Yep."

“You know . . .” Ellen leaned on her desk as Robbie stood before her, “I should have you come back and help. They respond to you.”

“I’d like that. I’ll comeback every day.”

“But they don’t have to be your excuse to stop by.” Ellen watched him exhale and sway his head to the side. “Robbie.” She lifted his chin. “You’re going to be just fine.”

“El, you’re the only one who knows about what I was like out there. You know whenever I was with a group of people too long I . . .”

“No.” Ellen laid her fingers on his lips. “No. I’ve been thinking about this. You will do fine. This is different. Wanna know why?” She waited for him to nod and then she held out her hand palms up. “Because when you feel like you’re slipping, when need to reach out. Any time, for any reason, you just grab on. I won’t let go.”

Without saying anything, Robbie grabbed on to her hand then he pulled Ellen into him. And just like she said, she held onto him, and she didn’t let go.

The clanking of the dishes and the sound of forks could be heard through the thin walls of Ellen’s office. It was the whistle to her, the end of the day signal that it was time to go home. Dinner was served to the survivors and Ellen would leave. She took time to clean-up her office, straighten it up to look presentable. Ellen leaned over the long end of the desk and blew from it the ashes from Joe’s cigarettes.

Running her hand over her desk, she heard someone approach. By the way they did, Ellen knew they were trying to be sneaky about it. Trying to walk softly, even though the she could

hear keys jingling. Ellen knew exactly who it was. What was he up to? Why was he trying to be so quiet? Did he actually think she could not feel him standing so close in the doorway, not three feet from the edge of the desk where she stood. Ellen pretended she didn't hear him, he'd fall for that. She wasn't turning around at all. She kept on straightening up her desk.

A wild flower appeared under her nose, it bounced up and down in front of her. The hand holding on to the long stem, not visible. Revenge, sweet revenge, Ellen thought. Such the perfect moment. Ellen smiled, that corner of the mouth smile. "I told you I was still mad." Ellen tried not to laugh. "But the flower is a very sweet jester. Thank you . . . Dean." The flower dropped and fell to the desk.

"You should really know which of your men you are speaking to before you call out a name." Frank spoke angrily.

"Oh Frank, I'm kidding." Ellen turned quickly around. "I knew it was you."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did. I heard you coming down the hall. God, you have like a thousand keys. I can hear you a mile away. Especially when you're trying to be quiet. Sound travels Frank, remember that. Why are you here?"

"I just . . . I just need to know. Are we O.K. El?"

"We're O.K. Frank." She finally lifted the flower. "We're O.K."

CHAPTER TEN

Robbie slept. It was not a peaceful sleep, nor restful. The night seemed to drag on for him. He was pacing the floor well after everyone else had fallen fast asleep. He tried exercising, nothing helped. Robbie was anxious, frightened, and excited about leaving containment at first light. Like a prisoner being released. Robbie was going to be free.

What next? He had been told what would happen, but he had not been prepared. Would they expect more than he could give? Would they expect less? Was he making much too much over living in the community? He was told he would room with Paul. Paul was good. Paul could help him. Paul helped him on his sleepless night, of course he didn't know it. Robbie would pace, sit down, get up, and look at the monstrous watch Paul gave him, for the time. Finally, after many hours, Robbie felt like he could sleep. He lay down, stared at the ceiling for awhile, then he slumbered.

Robbie dreamt. Henry was in the dream, and so was George. They stood above him, as he sat on the ground trying to repair something. Henry and George laughed, a slow motion, deep laugh. Why were they laughing? Was he doing it wrong?

Then they began to get angry. When Robbie looked up at them they weren't smiling anymore. Henry and George began shouting at him, and he couldn't understand what they were saying. It was gurgled. Robbie was confused, he held up the object to them. They paid no mind. Robbie pleaded, "I don't understand. Help me with this. Stop yelling, stop yelling." Robbie dropped the object and covered his ears, rocking back and forth, blocking out their voices. Then without a warning, a cover came down over him. Thump-thump. The pain shot into Robbie's side as he felt them kick and hit him. "No!" Robbie pulled out his knife. "No!" With surviving instincts, he sliced his way out of the blanket and emerged to confront them. He grabbed hold of Henry, yanked him

close and braced his head. Against his chest, he could feel Henry's beating heart through his back as the tip of his nose breathed heavily on Robbie's forearm. Suddenly, reaching further around Henry, in a blind fury, he jolted Henry's head to the left releasing a loud 'crack.'

George began to back up, his eyes fearful as they stared back at Robbie. Robbie couldn't let him get away. He took his knife and flung it toward George. Spinning end over end, the knife landed point first, point blank in the center of George's throat. Robbie dropped Henry's limp body to the ground. He breathed heavily at all the blood surrounding him. He knew he was dreaming, he had to wake up. He had to.

He struggled and struggled to burst back to reality from the depths of the horrific dream. A horrific dream he had many times before. Different people, same outcome.

Kicking, and huffing, and flinging his blanket across the room, Robbie awakened. He jumped from his bunk. Fearful of what he'd find, he looked around. His heart raced, his head spun as he looked at those who slept close to him. They were fine, they were sleeping, they were still alive. He thanked God.

Robbie couldn't go back to sleep, he wouldn't. He huddled onto the floor, brought his knees close to his chest, wrapped himself in his blanket, and prayed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

May 9th

Robbie stood before the steamed up mirror in the shower room. He slowly wiped his hand across it, removing the steam in a streak. He looked at himself. He took a long hard look. He did not see the strong man before him that everyone else did. He saw a scared man. He was strong when he took the world, searching with his heart for his family. He beat the elements. He devoured those who tried to take him down. But as he stood there, wearing the loosely fitted jeans he was issued, he did not see that man of a week ago. He saw that boy, the same one who was afraid to go to high school, afraid of the military, afraid of living in the shadows of three older brothers who all did their family proud. Was it the same situation ? It was. He was following yet another brothers footsteps. Could he live in them, could he do better? Would he?

Robbie grabbed the tee shirt that Ellen left for him. They had laundered all of his clothes and gave him new ones. A new start, in a new world.

Fixing his hair, Robbie looked one more time in the mirror before leaving the showering room. He exited into the sleeping quarters, the room was empty. His gear, packed for him the night before, sat on top of his bunk. Robbie grabbed it, walked slowly out and turned to his left, to the door that led to his freedom. He saw the button on the wall, the intercom he was told to use. With a trembling hand he pressed in that button and spoke softly. “I’m ready.”

The door buzzed, and Robbie turned the knob and opened it. His father stood with Greg waiting on him.

“Robbie.” Joe reached out his hand, took Robbie’s bag, and with his other arm, placed it around his shoulder. “Welcome out.”

“Thanks.” Robbie looked around. “Where’s Ellen?”

“Probably getting her kids ready for school. I’m sure you’ll see her later. Come on.” Joe opened the door. “Welcome to Beginnings.”

Robbie stepped out into the cool morning. The streets were quiet. He didn't even remember the community looking like what he was seeing. It reminded him so much of the military bases he lived on. Barrack type buildings. Row houses off in the distance. It wasn't that bad. It was like he'd been there before, lived there once. A wave of calm came over him.

"I'm gonna walk you to your new home first. Then Paul has the honors of showing you around today. That's pretty much all you'll do today. Get to know the place."

Robbie listened with a half ear. He was more in awe as they walked from what appeared to be the edge of the heart of town. "Then where will I be going?" He asked.

"We've given a lot of thought to that. We think you'll be the new utility man. Mechanics mainly, but put you in the security, especially since you have flight experience." Joe stopped. They had reached the last house in the second row. "Here we are. Home sweet home." Joe immediately approached the door and opened it. "You gonna come in?"

"Yes." Robbie took one more look around. Studying where he was. The last thing he wanted was to get lost his first day or two in the community. What an idiot he'd look like. He was feeling better. Listening to his father speak to him with such trust. He would venture out and learn all about Beginnings. Yet, Robbie was sure that no matter how much he thought he knew about it, there would always be something new he'd learn. He walked with confidence into his new home. He was gonna make it. And if ever he felt unsure of that, he knew he had someone he could turn to. He was not alone anymore in an uncertain world. He'd never be alone again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

They sat in the center of the social hall. Two tables joined together, drinks sprawled out across the table. Food, sat smack dab in the middle, half eaten. They laughed and talked loudly, the ‘originals’, as they gathered to welcome Robbie. Robbie was getting a welcome that no other had received, but of course he was family. It was a relaxed mood, not an unusual one. The ‘originals’ gathered often, like a family for Sunday supper.

Except for Dean, he didn’t attend the gatherings all that much. He preferred to stay home with the kids. He used them as his excuse, so as not to subject himself to Frank’s arrogance, and know-it-all-about-Ellen attitude. But for the Robbie welcoming, he joined them. Giving in to Andrea’s pleas, and letting Denny do babysitting detail so the grown-ups could hang out

Dean was enjoying himself in a quiet sort of way. Leaning in toward the table, sipping his water. Never alcohol, Dean had to be constantly ready for any emergency. He especially didn’t drink the alcohol they made. He tried it once, and couldn’t remember anything he did for three hours. Of course, Ellen and Frank said he was walking around town naked. He didn’t believe them. Or at least he wanted not to believe them.

He listened to everyone ramble on, and laughing. He would get annoyed with them when Paul was playing something nice in the background, and they got too loud. But he didn’t say anything, he just watched. He watched Ellen look pissed-off, her usual appearance, and occasionally crack a half smile. He watched Andrea and Joe break off into their own conversations that had nothing to do with anything. They’d argue briefly, then return to what everyone else was talking about. John Matoose stared at his wife Jenny mostly. It actually got kind of sickening, how in love they were. John would reach over, constantly touching Jenny. Henry and George listened to Frank be the big shot. Like always, Frank rocked back on the hind legs of his chair as he talked. He

never could set the chair on the ground. Dean wished often Frank would tip right over.

Then there was Robbie. Robbie was quiet also. He was listening and watching everyone. Dean could tell by looking at him, Robbie's mind was at work. Studying everyone, watching them, taking it all in. He had that look on his face, as if he didn't want to miss anything. If that was the case, Dean felt sorry for him. With all the babbling going on, Robbie's head was probably spinning.

Joe clapped loudly, obnoxiously loud, with that ear piercing whistle he always did. "The boy's good." He referred to Paul as Paul finished the Frank Sinatra song Joe had requested early on. "Isn't he good?" Joe asked of everyone at the table. "The only thing is, the guy could probably use some help up there. He's gonna wear down doing all that singing. Ellen!"

Ellen snapped to attention. "What?"

Joe motioned his glass. "Go up and sing for us."

Ellen shook her head. "Yeah right. Besides the fact that I sing badly, I'm terrible with crowds. I couldn't imagine performing in front of anyone."

Frank's loud "Ha!" caught the attention of everyone. "Come on, El. That's not true." Frank rocked back, his hand clutching the drink between his legs. "You were great back in college when you were a stripper."

With a loud gasping, "What?" Everyone turned to Ellen.

Ellen's eyes widened, she stared harshly at Frank. "Oh my, God, I can't believe you just said that."

Frank crinkled his eyes so baffled at her. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

Ellen covered her face.

George laughed the hardest, he couldn't help it. George never laughed that hard at anything. "Ellen, did you really strip?"

Frank answered for her. "Oh sure she did."

"Shut up, Frank!" Ellen yelled from beneath her hands.

Frank ignored her. “Back in college. She’d do bachelor parties . . .”

“Frank!”

Frank continued. “She worked at this hotel in town. I was her body guard, she made really good money. It was fun . . . Oh!” He brought his hand to his head and began to laugh. “You guys have to hear this one. Once, Ellen decided to try tassels. She used the wrong body glue. We were up all night with nail polish remover. It was hysterical.”

With even more embarrassment, Ellen’s head plopped to the table.

Andrea noticed Dean at that moment. “Dean. Is this bothering you?”

Dean wasn’t laughing. He just stared blankly at his water. His thumbs on his cheeks, his fingers sprawled across his forehead. “I’m trying Andrea.” His head moved side by side in disbelief. “I’m really trying to get this mental picture of Ellen dancing around naked in front of a bunch of hooting guys. I can’t do it. I just can’t do it.”

Andrea smiled and ran her hand across his back. She looked at Joe. “Joe, this must be a shock to you.”

“Nah.” Joe said. “I knew about it. I asked Frank where he was getting the money and he told me.”

Robbie had enough, it was time to step in. He stood up from his chair and walked behind Ellen. He held his hand down to her. “El, it’s been a really long time since I danced. Can I have this dance?”

Ellen sighed in relief. “Thank you, Robbie, yes.” She grabbed his hand and stood up.

Robbie led Ellen away from the table, and away from the loud laughter. He placed his arm around her waist and held his left hand up. “It’s been awhile. Be patient.”

Ellen placed her hand in his. “No problem. Thank you for the rescue.”

While everyone still laughed at Ellen's past, Andrea took notice of Robbie and Ellen on the dance floor. "Uh oh. We may have a problem."

Everyone stopped laughing and looked.

Frank's chair slammed down to all four legs when he saw Robbie, not so much dancing but holding Ellen. The huge grin on Frank's face was gone.

Andrea shook her head. "We may have that problem again, Joe. You know the same one you had? Survivor syndrome."

Joe remembered, but cringed when he thought about it.

Andrea continued. "It looks like it's happening again. I remember when Trish latched on to you, thought you were some sort of God. She loved you. It was pretty funny though how she kept showing up naked everywhere for you." She looked out to the dance floor.

Frank was not amused. His fingers played with the dampness on his glass as his eyes stayed fixed on that dance floor. He saw what the others did. Robbie and Ellen dancing close. But what he didn't see was Robbie wasn't dancing with Ellen. In the midst of an overwhelming welcoming party, Robbie was stealing that moment to grip onto the emotional security blanket he found in Ellen.

"Oh, yeah." Frank's raspy voice whispered in a commentating way. "He's Frank Slagel. Sensing danger at every corner."

Joe raised an eyebrow as he peered above his cards to George across the table.

“Ignore him,” George said.

Joe grunted.

Frank continued in his low key speaking. “The hulking master of strategy cannot be spotted . . .”

Joe’s eyes fluttered as he reached for a card.

“Ignore him,” George reiterated.

“But then . . .” Frank’s voice raised with enthusiasm. “Out from the brush, he spots his target. Oh no.”

Joe cringed when he heard the squirting of water then Robbie and Henry’s shrieking from Frank’s playing with the water sprayer of the sink . . . again. “Frank!” Joe slammed his hand on the table. “Grow up and go home.”

“Dad.” Frank put the sprayer down. “I’m just having fun.”

“Yeah, well, go home.” Joe laid down his card.

“All right. Robbie.” Frank tossed his brother a towel. “Walk with me?”

“Yeah.” He wiped off his face and tossed the towel to Henry. “I’m tired. Night Dad.” Robbie walked over to Joe and kissed him on the cheek.

“Night.” Joe smiled and listened to his sons leave. “Your turn, George.”

“Joe.” Henry called out. “Frank got water all over the floor.”

“Clean it up.” Joe laid down a card.

“But, Joe.” Henry gasped. “I didn’t make the . . .”

“You were playing around too, Henry.” Joe scolded as he played cards. “Clean it up.”

“Oh my God, Joe.” Henry whined. “You are such a tyrant. And a typical parent. Your kids never do anything wrong. Huh?”

Joe shook his head as he grabbed onto the two of spades. “Did we put that man on Council on purpose?” He laid the two down. “Gin.”

Their out-of-breath laughter echoed in the silent sleeping living section of the community. Frank and Robbie slowed in their

race as they reached the row of houses where Robbie lived. Frank grinned when he came to a stop. “It was great night.”

“Yeah it was.”

“Hey. If I don’t see you beforehand, good luck tomorrow your first day.” Frank gave a swat to Robbie’s arm. “Night.”

Robbie nodded and noticed the direction Frank walked. “Frank? Where you going? I thought you lived that way.” Robbie pointed to the opposite direction. “Of course, I might be wrong.” He scratched his head. “Everything looks alike.”

Frank smiled almost embarrassed. “Nah, I do live that way. I . . . kind of like to walk by El’s. My way of saying goodnight.”

“It has to bother you that she lives with Dean.”

Frank shrugged. “No. I can’t let it. Besides, last year . . . let’s just say they stopped being a real couple. And Dean, he works a lot of nights at the lab. Their living together is just a formality.”

“Do you believe that?”

Frank nodded slowly and tossed up his hands as he walked backwards. “I have to. Or else . . . I’ll drive myself crazy.” Frank waved once more to Robbie and moved on.

The tickling on her back awoke Ellen from her deep slumber. She had to wonder if it was some sort of weird seduction that Dean was trying but quickly realized the more she came to, it wasn’t a tickle, but a darting pressure. Lying on her stomach Ellen opened her eyes and saw her bedroom light was on. Turning her head she squinted to look.

Dean gave an innocent smile as he peered over the rims of his round glasses. “Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“What . . . what are you doing?”

“I had a great thought.” Dean lifted up a tablet from her. “And your back was the best hard flat surface.”

“I was your desk?” Ellen plopped her head back down.
“Dean, your scientific eccentricities are gonna drive me nuts.”

“Sorry.” He smiled.

“And your immunity to cold. Can you shut the window? I’m freezing.”

“Sure.” Chuckling because Ellen failed to realize he had lowered the blankets for easier writing, Dean kissed the small of her back and covered her. He sat up, crawled over her body and darted to the window. The air was cold as it seeped through the window straight through his boxer shorts. Parting the drapes only momentarily, Dean closed the window then went back to bed, waiting for Ellen to fall back to sleep.

Frank didn’t take the quick glimpse of Dean closing the bedroom window as a shot of reality. He couldn’t. He had to envision in his mind, Ellen elsewhere in the house. As blind as it made him feel, or as dumb, that’s what Frank had to do or else, like he told Robbie, he would drive himself nuts. Things were on their way to changing, Frank knew that. It would just take time. Less the peaceful feeling he thought he would get from a pass by Ellen’s house, he looked once more up to the bedroom window, then Frank walked home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

May 10th

Robbie woke up early after his first night in his new home. He didn’t sleep well, but it was not due to nightmares. The bed was hard, a strange hardness that was worse than any ground he had ever slept on. Robbie didn’t realize people began working so early in the community. He was shocked to see Henry when he decided to take a walk around. Henry was heading off to work, ‘lots to do’, he had told Robbie. It was Robbie’s first real day, he would see the office then head off to the first area of the

compound they felt he should learn. Surprisingly, that was medical at the clinic. He didn't mind working with Dean and learning all the equipment used. He also knew by being at the clinic, he would see Ellen. Ellen made Robbie feel normal.

Robbie joined Henry in the barely daylight hours, in entering what appeared to be a tool shed, but was actually the main office of the mechanical division.

"Meet Michelle." Henry introduced the red head to Robbie upon their entrance to the mechanical division.

Michelle turned around in her chair to face Robbie, her mouth dropped open. "Are you sure you're a Slagel?"

"Born and bred." Robbie replied.

"That's what I was afraid of. You know your brother doesn't like me too much."

"You don't say." Robbie said snide.

"I'm sure you heard his, 'I borrowed the van' line. I did. He keeps forgetting how mean he was to me."

"Frank, mean? No." Robbie was sarcastic. Perhaps he wasn't giving her the chance he should due to Frank's warnings. Or perhaps he was genuinely afraid that Frank would kick his ass if he found out he was sitting with Michelle, and being nice to her.

Michelle felt as if she had struck out, she rolled her eyes and gave up. "Whatever, I see the attitude runs in the family." She turned her back to him and resumed her work.

"Sorry Michelle, maybe my attitude should be a little better if I'm gonna be working in this division."

Michelle turned back around at him and smiled. "Thank you for saying that. Maybe I jumped to conclusions about you being a typical Slagel."

"In some aspects I am, so don't let your mind wander too far off the Slagel track. I don't want to catch you off guard."

Enough idle chat, Henry thought, it was time to continue on. "O.K., come on Robbie, I'll give you the low down on our little office here."

Robbie turned from Michelle and gave Henry his complete attention. “Give it to me.”

“This is where we come every morning to check what’s on the schedule to fix. We have over here. . .” Henry walked over to another door. “Manuals, on just about everything. If it’s in the community, chances are we have related material on how to fix it. Usually we can figure it out ourselves. Also in here is where we do the menial work. Like right now, Michelle is making batteries, we go through them like water. Frank kills the batteries in his radio, kills them, but when he asks, he gets first priority. His radio is of most importance, if we need him, it has to be working.”

“So what happens if say, my dad needs help, but his batteries aren’t working because we gave them to Frank?”

“We do a daily check on all the waist radios, it doesn’t happen.” Henry’s voice held a tint of annoyance. He felt like he didn’t even have to answer that question. “Besides, Frank is the only one who leaves his on twenty-four hours a day. Even when he’s sleeping, it’s on just in case. Now . . .” Henry moved from the door. “Come with me, I’ll explain how requisitions work here, and I want to show you the array of tools and equipment we’ve collected. I also want to see what you are familiar with before I head you down to be with Dean for the day.”

“Sounds good.” Robbie followed Henry, saying one more goodbye to Michelle before leaving the office area. Henry didn’t seem as if he wanted to show Robbie any of it. He was much more than serious with Robbie, and had a tone of bitterness to him. Robbie wondered if maybe Henry was just not a morning or a nice person, or at least to Robbie he wasn’t. Robbie chalked up Henry’s attitude to paranoia. Henry didn’t strike him as the type to be mean. He was always pleasant with everyone. Shaking off the bad vibes he was receiving, as newness and nerves, Robbie, tense, followed Henry about.

Johnny knocked once on the doorway to Joe's office, he snuck his head in the door to see if Joe was there. "Hey, Pap."

Joe lowered his glasses and looked up to Johnny from his paper work. "Hi Johnny, what's up?"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." Joe continued his work.

"What are you doing?" Johnny sat down across from his grandfather.

"Chicken rations. Damn coops are getting over run. We have eggs coming out our asses. We have more chickens than we know what to do with, and something has to be done. At least some living creatures in the community are re-producing." Joe looked up at him. "And my sarcastic comment is not geared toward you."

"No, not me Pap. I have no desire for a baby."

"Good. However, if people in the town don't start conceiving, we may be in trouble. Of course, that's not a topic for conversation now, that's saved for next week's town meeting."

"You're having a town meeting to tell people to have sex?"

"No. To talk about building population . . . Frank junior." Joe shook his head. "What do you want? Why are you here at nine in the morning, aren't you supposed to be in the field?"

Johnny took a deep breath, he was nervous and his stomach flipped. "You run things here Pap, so I have to come to you about this. And you know what, you do a great job, a great job. . ."

"What do you want?"

"Well, you have me in the fields, and working with Dad in security."

"O.K. so? What's the problem?"

"Pap, do you think I'm smart?"

"I think you're very smart. Why?" Joe was interested in where the conversation was going.

"Doctor Dean thinks I'm smart too. In fact, he thinks I'm very smart. So smart that . . . that he wants to train me to be the next generation's doctor."

“You and Dean have discussed this? Why didn’t Dean come to me with this?”

“At first we thought we should speak to Dad, you know, because he wants me in security really bad. We didn’t see you having a problem with it. But I’ve chickened out telling Dad.”

“We’ve trained you to fly Johnny. We’ve trained you to shoot.”

“I know. But Dean wants to train me to save lives. He wants me in the lab, in the clinic, he has books for me to learn from. He says that he’s more into research and Andrea into doctoring, he wants me to do both. This is something I want Pap.”

Joe rubbed his chin as he stared at Johnny. He was silent for a very long time before he spoke. “A doctor is a very important thing Johnny. So, how can I say no . . .”

“Yes!” Johnny grabbed the arm of the chair in excitement.

“Wait. Before you get your ass in a tizzy. You’ll be in the learning phase, so . . . I still want you to fly when needed, security when needed and you will give me three morning hours in the field before you study with Dean.”

“No problem.” Johnny agreed.

“And you’ll have to tell your dad you won’t be doing security anymore.”

“That’s a problem.”

“Why?”

“Dad’s gonna be mad, he’ll be disappointed. Can you tell him?”

“Christ Johnny.” Joe grabbed a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. “You can’t be afraid of your father.”

“Pap please. You do it, unless you’re afraid of him.”

“I’m not afraid of Frank. It’s just that he has such a goddamn hard head. And to make matters worse, you’ll be spending time with Dean, your father has never liked him, ever.” Joe saw the sad pleading eyes of his grandson. He huffed. “Fine, I’ll tell him. But you owe me big time.”

“Thanks, Pap.” Johnny jumped up from his chair, ran around the desk and kissed Joe on the cheek. “You’re so fair. That’s why you run this place.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Joe waved him away. “Now get your ass back to work. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Thanks.” Johnny ran from the office. A tremendous burden had been lifted from him. Unfortunately, he placed it on his grandfather’s shoulders.

Ellen worked at her desk. She filled out the stupid reports for Joe on what she did, whom she tested and so forth. She signed the letter recommending Chuck, another male survivor, to be released in the morning. She didn’t foresee any problems with that. Miguel was waiting on the six-foot, twenty-five year old. Miguel had plans already to beef him up. Chuck was fine, he was adjusted after the average two week stay.

Ellen placed the letter to the side when she heard a soft tapping on her door. She looked up. She saw those pretty green eyes first, then the bright smile of Denny.

“Hi, El. Mom said you wanted me.”

“Come on in, Den. Sit down.”

“Thanks. Wow this place is cool, I was never in here, you know.” Denny sat down.

“I know. I have something to ask of you. A favor.”

“Sure I’ll do it.”

“Don’t you want to know what it is?” Ellen asked.

“Sure.”

Ellen laughed at him. Denny was so cute and such the perfect kid. “Denny, you know we have two kids in here. Well, the grown up survivors are moving toward getting out, there’s lots I have to

do with them and I can't give the kids my complete attention. They need that to help them adjust as well until we find them homes here. So, I was sort of hoping I could get you to come in here a couple hours a day to help and teach those kids.”

“Oh, wow. Oh cool. Hey, O.K., do we start now?” Denny was excited. Not many people asked for his help.

“This is great.” Ellen grinned. “Come with me, I'll introduce you.” She walked from behind her desk, Denny followed. “Now, Den, they get quiet and scared. I don't want that to stop you from talking, or playing with them. Just keep going, no matter if they say a word or not.”

“I'm used to that. People do that to me all the time.”

Smiling, Ellen led him to the two children who scurried back some. “Hey guys.” She knelt before the two boys on the floor. “This is Denny. He's a big kid like yourselves. He's gonna be your new pal.”

Denny snorted and hunched his shoulders with an embarrassed wave. “Hi.”

Standing, Ellen ran her hand over Denny's hair. “Get to know each other. I'll check back in a few minutes.” As she turned to walk away, she heard it.

“El!” Frank's voice vavoomed across the room along with his heavy tromps. Any peacefulness in the skills room was immediately lost when the survivors who were still adjusting, went flying for cover.

“God.” Ellen cringed and closed off one ear. “Frank. Go away.”

“El.” He stormed closer to her.

“This is getting ridiculous.” She brushed by him to go back to her office. “Actually it's getting old you coming in and scaring the survivors.”

“Like I care if they get scared.” He followed her to her office. “This is important.”

“When isn't it.”

“El.” He snapped, walked in her office behind her and slammed the door. “I’m pissed here. I need to talk to you.”

“O.K.” Ellen tossed her hands up. “You have me trapped and you have my attention. Shoot. No don’t.” She ducked. “Kidding.”

Frank bit his bottom lips and twitched his head. “Johnny . . . did . . . did you know he’s leaving security to be a doctor?”

Ellen’s eyes widened and she gasped loudly. “And this makes you mad?”

“El, I . . .”

“Oh!” She flung her hand at him. “And to think I gave you more credit. To think I thought you would want this to . . .”

“El, I . . .”

“. . . happen. We want the best for our kids. You want your son risking his life everyday instead of . . .”

“El! Shut up!”

“Don’t tell me to shut up.”

Frank growled. “It has nothing to do with him being a doctor. Of course I want him to be better than me. It has everything to do . . . with Dean.”

Ellen was shocked. “Dean?”

“Yeah.” Frank tossed out his hand. “Dean.” He lowered his head and softened his voice. “I’m really serious here. He’s gonna be spending all kinds of time with him. I know this sounds stupid, but he has you. I don’t want him to have my son, too.” He peered down at her with his dark eyes.

“You’re right. That’s stupid.”

Frank inhaled in shock.

“No, Frank, it’s stupid.” Ellen moved to her door. “Dean’s not taking Johnny from you. If you lose him, it would be because you pushed and pushed until you pushed him away.” Ellen opened the door.

Frank reached out and stopped her. He held gently to her arm. “Is that why I don’t have you. Because I pushed you away.”

From his fingers to his eyes, Ellen's stare went. She removed his grip. "Yeah. It is." She swallowed the after effects of her hard words and walked out.

Frank just stared at the empty space in the doorway.

"So, Henry tells me you were one of the top scientists in the country, pre-plague." Robbie walked slowly around Dean's lab taking everything in, while Dean worked assiduously at his work space.

"So they say."

"Did you work on the plague? Did you try to cure it?"

"Yes I did and I failed, obviously. It moved too fast. Within three days it was over. Of course you know that." Dean kept working while he carried on his conversation with Robbie.

"Then maybe one day you could try to figure out why we all survived."

"I did."

"And?"

Dean looked up at him. "If you're looking for a brief, one line answer, forget it."

"I'm curious, I want to know." Robbie pulled a stool over toward Dean and sat. "Never mind, you're probably so tired of explaining this over and over to people."

"You really want to know?"

"I wouldn't ask."

Dean grinned. Finally, someone took interest. His adrenaline pumped as he excitedly spewed into his explanation. "First of all it wasn't a freakish thing that we survived the plague. All of us were predestined from birth, genetically, to live. We all have DNA, right? O.K., well in order for a virus to break you down and kill you, it settles into your DNA. There's a strand, the fourth strand,

that a lot of viruses settle into. All of us, who survived that is, have a mutated fourth strand of DNA. I'm not boring you am I? Cause this is just about the part that people began dozing off. That was after a few nameless people yelled 'we're mutants Dean, thanks a lot' . . . they didn't care."

"I care. I'm finding this interesting. How long did you work on this?"

"Years. I finished it about a year ago. I started right after the plague."

"This fourth strand, or whatever, you said it was mutated, did we catch something prior to this to cause that?"

"No. It was genetically hereditary."

"Hereditary? Why didn't more people survive?" Robbie asked.

"Because it was hereditary, and male gender only. Before you get confused, let me explain to you that a father can carry the gene that causes the mutation, and pass it on to a daughter. He may not be immune, but the daughter is. She in turn can not pass it on to her children. The ability to be immune can be determined only by the male. If a father is immune, then the chances that him having a son or two immune is great."

"What about children being born now? How do they survive it?"

"Chances are two immune parents will produce an immune child. But it is still conceivable that the child could be born without the mutated gene. Therefore, it wouldn't have the immunities of its parents, and the child would die once exposed to the virus. But the chances of that happening are slim. The answer is in the sperm. In all of the sperm I tested, there is a mutation within the sperm. All the sperm from the surviving males have the same mutation."

"You mentioned that if a father survived, he could have more than one surviving son. Did you mention this to my father?"

"Oh yeah." Dean stood up and walked over to his book shelf. He pulled from it the book that contained all of that information.

He took it over to Robbie and opened it up. “This is your family’s section. Now the Slagel DNA mutation was the strongest I had seen in any sample. Also, in the sperm sample from Joe, the mutation was also great. Unfortunately Johnny was too young at the time to ask for one, and Frank flat out refused to give a sample. He said, and his exact words were, ‘science or no science, no way am I jerkin’-off in any fuckin cup’. So I didn’t push it, it was strictly on a volunteer basis. Anyhow, I brought up the possibility to Joe, that perhaps one more of his sons may be alive, this was based on the strong mutation factor. But his response to that was that he had devised a contingency plan for his family, and if any of you had survived, you would have shown up in Ashtonville.”

“I did show up in Ashtonville, a little too late.” Robbie turned away from the book. His voice dropped, and it was apparent he was upset. “He didn’t care Dean, did he? Why didn’t he want to check to see if anyone was alive? I did. I searched out my brother Jimmy until I saw proof of his death. You were with my father, why wasn’t he determined to find us? Why was he so convinced that we had died, that he moved on?”

“You have to understand Robbie. When I approached Joe with this, my information was not conclusive. And, the biggest thing aside from the contingency plan, was the fact that Frank had survived. All of us, including me, believed Joe to have been blessed. What were the odds of him having another son who survived? They were slim. In defense of your Dad, if he believed, even only a tiny bit, that one more of you were alive, he would have found you. Guaranteed.”

“But he didn’t even try.”

“No he didn’t. But we were in Ashtonville for months. He firmly believed that if any of you were alive, you would have followed the plan he beat into your heads.”

“I guess I’m thinking wrong.” Still upset, Robbie stood and resumed pacing around. “I shouldn’t blame my father.”

“I won’t let you blame your father.” Dean closed the book, walked over to the shelf, and replaced it in its position. “I respect

your father more than anyone. He took George's Garfield plan, led us here and got it in motion. None of us would be where we are if it wasn't for him. And now, you're here. That's what's important. You made it."

Robbie just nodded, holding back his sarcastic comment of 'yeah, after five years'. But he said nothing, no one could possibly know how he felt. And Dean in one action so much as said it all to Robbie. In the midst of talking about his father, Dean closed that book, therefore signifying the questioning what and whys, was indeed a closed subject. A subject that would never be fully closed in Robbie's mind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

May 16th

The social hall was jam-packed with everyone in the community. Children ran about in no particular fashion, screaming, yelling, sliding across the smooth floor. Robbie was the last one to enter. He was on time, yet no one seemed ready to start the meeting. He looked forward to the meeting, the first one he was attending in the two weeks he had been in Beginnings.

Robbie glanced around. Joe stood behind his podium, a drink in his hand and looked to be rambling on and on to George. Then he spotted Ellen. She sat ready in a folded chair for the meeting. Frank was nowhere to be seen. Ellen alone? It was an oddity. Hoping she could fill him in on the way the meetings went, Robbie snuck up behind her and whispered in her ear. “Hey El.”

Ellen jolted, then turned her head around to him. “It’s a family thing, scaring people. Hi Robbie.”

“Can I sit with you?”

“Sure.” She patted the chair to her right.

“Thanks.” Robbie sat next to her. “I take it I didn’t miss much.”

“No, nothing at all.”

“I heard about your new job.”

“Sign up starts tomorrow. The doctor will be in.” Ellen knew that once the survivor runs stopped that she would be assigned somewhere else. Never, did she imagine that they would give her the title they did. Community Counselor. “Won’t I just be great at that job?”

“Yes you will.”

Ellen shook her head. “Look at Joe and George. I know they’re over there talking about me. Look at them laughing.”

“No they’re not.” Robbie did notice them looking over continuously, but he didn’t want to tell Ellen that.

Joe laughed and looked at Ellen again. “She’s gonna know we’re talking about her.”

“Oh so what. How did she take the news of her job?” George asked.

“Fine. Shocked I think. I told her, with very few survivors in containment, and the ones from the clinic getting in and out of there fast, she’ll have nothing to do. But you know what George, none of the ‘originals’ may ever go to her, but the survivors love her. Why, I don’t know. They trust her. So we did make a good choice.”

“Yeah.” George observed Ellen and Robbie. “Robbie’s certainly latched on to her. Survivor syndrome?”

“I don’t see that. Robbie’s always latched on to her. Since he was eleven. I’d be more apt to say ‘Brother envy’ syndrome?”

So impressed, George’s face showed it as he pointed at Joe. “Good one. I like that.”

“Was good, huh?” Joe looked down at his watch. “Shit, look at the time. We better get started. Get their attention and I’ll find Dean.”

Dean wasn’t too hard to find. He walked into the hall, and sat down immediately on the other side of Ellen. He was reviewing his notes on what he was going to say at the meeting, when Joe snatched him up and pulled him away.

Joe took his position before the podium. “Let’s get this thing started.” He waded through the ruffling of papers, shuffling of feet and squealing of chairs until he had the attention of everyone. “First thing before I hand it over to Dean for the delicate portion of the meeting. I just wanted to make the announcement for those of you who haven’t heard, Ellen will now be community counselor.” Joe said trying to hide the smile on his face. “For those of you with problems, any problems, you can see her. This is a new job in Beginnings and it’s her position. So Ellen will be there to help you solve . . .” Joe stopped speaking. He heard laughing. Laughing that was trying to be muffled. He looked up to see who

was causing the disturbance. It was Frank. Frank was making his way into the meeting, finding his seat next to Ellen.

“Sorry.” Frank held up his hand as he sat down. “Sorry.”

“Are you finished?” Joe directed his comment to Frank. “Thank you. Now I’m going to hand this meeting over to Dean. He will explain why we are here. And he’s gonna try to do it in laymen terms. Dean.”

Dean stammered his way to the podium to replace Joe. He did an aggravated double take look to Frank who tossed his head back in disgust. “Thanks.” Dean fiddled with his notes. “Joe wanted me to discuss with you today about . . . conception. Meaning having babies.” He winced at the loud sarcastic moans that emanated from the crowd. “O.K., well, this may be directed more to the women we have. We . . . we know there’s only sixteen of you, and it’s a lot to ask. But, the only increase Beginnings has had in population is the bringing in of survivors. We have one baby on the way. This uh, this community was built to grow. We aren’t . . . so . . .” Nervously, Dean ran his hand through his hair. “We want to ask the women think about conceiving. The world died out, but not completely. We can help out . . . in the clinic, if conventional means aren’t wanted to be taken for conception. We, I, we, understand the apprehensiveness some of you women have toward men. I’m boring you aren’t I?”

“Yes.” Frank barked out and looked to Ellen when she smacked him “What? He is.”

Dean cringed. “I think I made my point. I’m just gonna step back now.”

George walked sideways through the awkward dead silence and stood next to the podium. “Thanks Dean.” He cleared his throat then spoke upbeat to wake everyone. “O.K., well! To recap what some of you probably didn’t grasp in Dean’s typical ‘lack of luster’ medicinal speech is . . . We need to repopulate. We have to give this serious thought. You have to. What it boils down to is it’s out of the men’s hands. It’s in the women’s. This is what we have

to do if we want the world to continue on. If we don't, there will be no generations to come. It has to start now."

With George's words, Joe concluded the meeting. After informing everyone that if they had concerns or questions, please feel free to ask, Joe walked over to the bar and fixed himself a stiff drink.

Robbie was pleasantly surprised at the length of the meeting. He expected, knowing his father, that he would be subjected to a one or two hour lecture. He wasn't. "So Ellen, this is it? This is the big monthly meeting?"

"Yep. Very short and sweet. Every once in awhile Joe gets really long winded. But then we start coughing and shuffling around and he gets the message."

"That's good." Robbie took notice of his brother on the other side of Ellen. Frank leaned back in his chair, feet extended, and looked miserable. "Frank, why did you come at all? You were here for like five minutes."

"To see Ellen and keep her company. But you were here so she didn't need me."

Before Robbie could inquire about Frank's smart remark, Dean walked up and stood before Ellen. That caught Frank's attention.

"El, I'm rounding up the kids. Are you gonna be long?" Dean asked.

"No. Not at all. I'm right behind you."

"Good, cause I wanted to talk to you for a little before we started working on our project."

"No problem. I'll see you in a bit."

Dean turned from them. He looked frantic as he tried to gather up the two four year olds who ran in different directions when he approached them.

Ellen brought her hands down to her knees with a slap. "Well, I'm outta' here. See you guys tomorrow."

“Wait.” Frank stopped her as she began to rise from her seat.
“Tomorrow?”

“Yes Frank, tomorrow. You know the thing that happens after the sun rises?”

“You said you’d stop by tonight.”

“Oh that’s right. All right, I’ll be by after I finish up with Dean.”

“What exactly do you have to do with Dean?” Frank questioned.

Before she answered, Ellen turned her head to Robbie, winked, then faced Frank. “I didn’t want to say anything to you, but, I’ve been giving a lot of thought to what Joe is trying to tell everyone. You know, reproduce. I figured I could pump one more out to help the cause. So, I asked Dean to hook me up.”

Frank abruptly stood and walked away from her.

Robbie watched Frank leave the social hall. “El, I don’t think he knows you were kidding.”

“I don’t think so either. Tell Dean I’ll meet him at home. Excuse me.” Ellen, annoyed and focused to find Frank, made her way across the social hall and outside. Frank was nowhere to be seen and as she walked to the living section, she could hear in the distance, a door slamming. An angry ‘slam’ that told her it had to be Frank. Growing more frustrated with the thought of Frank’s unwarranted reaction, Ellen went to his home.

Without knocking, she walked in. Johnny was seated on the couch reading. “Did your dad just come in here?” She asked as she closed the door.

“Upstairs.”

“Thanks.” Ellen moved to the stairs. “Frank?” she yelled up and received no answer. Figuring, ‘the hell with it’, she stormed up the stairs and into Frank’s room. He sat on the edge of his bed and only stared up at her. “What is your problem?” she asked strongly. “I was kidding about having a baby. Why . . . why did you get so mad?”

“Because that comment pissed me off.” Frank stood up, walked over to the bedroom door and shut it. He extended his arm and leaned against the closed door. A look of disgust on his face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think that would bother you,” Ellen said.

“It did.”

“Why?”

Frank waved his finger at her, he opened his mouth to talk, but nothing came out. Frustrated, he looked the other way.

“Frank, what is it?”

Frank took a deep breath. “I don’t want you sleeping with him anymore.” He pointed at her as he walked past her.

“What?” Ellen was taken aback.

Frank stopped in a spin to her. “Can I be anymore clear, El?” He brought his hand to his temple. “Stop it with Dean. And I’m not just talking about sex. I’m talking about sleeping, kissing, hugging. Whatever. Anything intimate, I want it to stop.”

“Excuse me, Frank, but you have no right to . . .”

“I have every right!” Frank blasted.

“I live with him!”

“I don’t care!”

Ellen took a step to Frank. “Listen to me and listen to me good.”

“No. El. You listen to me.” Frank pointed heavily at her. “You say I have no right. Bullshit. I have every right. Where was he a year ago? Where’s he been? Buried in a fuckin lab instead with you.” Frank’s words were emotionally strong. “He pulled back from you when he found out about us. In my mind and in my heart he gave you up. Now all of the sudden he’s ready to be a couple again and you go running back.”

Ellen nearly laughed. “So you think he’s stealing me from you?”

“Yes.”

“Wrong!” Ellen’s hand flew out. “You never had me, Frank. If you wanted me, why didn’t you say so?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Oh . . . oh.” Ellen grunted with lack of words. “Don’t put this on me.”

“Why not?” Frank’s face grew red with each word. “I may never said I wanted you in my life, but at least I told you I loved you. I couldn’t even count how many times I’ve told you that in my life. But when, El, when was the last time you told me?” He stared at her silent expression as he softened his voice. “And I’m not talking about the ‘oh you know I love you’ lines. Or even you telling someone. When . . . when’s the last time you told me?”

“I . . . I . . . don’t . . .” Ellen closed her eyes and looked away.

“I’ll tell you.” Frank made her look at him. “Nearly five years ago when you told me how sorry you were. You were pregnant to Dean. The first, last and only time in our entire lives that you ever told me you loved me, was the day you broke my heart.”

Ellen’s eyes slowly met Frank’s in a moment of saddened quiet. Her voice cracked. “Choices . . . choices were made then.”

“And choices can be made now,” Frank spoke deeply and slow. “I want you in my life.”

“You have me in your life.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Without Dean attached.”

“I’m sorry, Frank. This is the way it has to be. Take it or leave it.”

“I think . . .” Frank walked over to the bedroom door. After a moment’s hesitation he opened it and turned to Ellen. “I think . . . I’ll leave it.”

Ellen’s heart pounded with his actions, trying not to show emotions, she walked to the door. She stopped in its openness. “I feel . . .”

“No. No you don’t.” Frank silenced her as he spoke near whisper. “That’s your problem. You don’t feel. You stopped knowing how five years ago.”

Nodding, just nodding one time with a glaze of cold across her eyes, Ellen walked out.

Frank closed the door.

Strumming the guitar and picking the notes became easier to Robbie as he knew it would. All it took was getting back into it and picking it up. It was relaxing, and that's what he did with Paul in the empty social hall after everyone had left.

They played songs both of them vaguely remembered. Old songs. Easy one. Ones that made them laugh when they made errors and sing in harmony when they were on a roll.

Henry paused in his entrance into the hall so as not to be heard. He listened to Robbie's and Paul's faster and harder rendition of something from the fifties. They chuckled in synch when they finished and Henry took it as his clue that it was all right to interrupt. Clapping and smiling he approached the only two in the hall. "Robbie."

Robbie looked at Paul first then over his shoulder to Henry. "Yeah." Putting the pick in his mouth, he adjusted the tuning on his guitar.

"I'm glad I found you." Henry pulled out a notebook from his pocket. "I was reviewing the requisitions that are needed to be done tomorrow and I saw that you didn't finish a few from today. With the work load, what would be the chances of maybe doing some tonight or earlier tomorrow before . . ."

"Henry." Robbie pulled the pick from his mouth. "What time is it?"

Henry looked at his watch. "It's ten p.m., why?"

"Do . . . do we not have a start and stop work time in this community?" Robbie asked.

"Oh, sure, but . . ."

"But . . . I'm not working. Not now. I'm playing."

Henry blinked thinking he was misunderstanding Robbie. "I know that. It's just that the upkeep on the community is important so I try to stay on top of it always."

“Good for you.” Robbie stood up and walked around the chair. “But if work is strong on your mind at ten at night . . .” He placed his face close to Henry’s. “Maybe you need to find a life.” With a flick raise of his eyebrows Robbie walked to the bar.

In the midst of Paul’s immediate return to playing, Henry’s nostrils flared and his expression snapped as he watched Robbie walk away. He stared for a moment, waiting. And when he realized he was therefore ignored, Henry, without wanting to get angry, left the social hall.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

May 27th

With a fierce ‘slam’ Henry closed the door and huffed his way from the mechanical divisions building. Trying to shake off the frustration he felt, he had to walk. One more minute was all, and he would have totally lost it on Robbie. Everything Robbie said, irked him. Everything Robbie did, gnawed at his gut. It was like the moment Robbie walked into the room, warning flags went up and Henry could just not articulate why. He was never like that before with anyone. Fair and even tempered were qualities that got him on council.

Henry paced around, first in circles, then toward town. He needed some help on how he could handle himself better and for that, he really wanted to speak to Joe or George.

Joe was the first one Henry saw. He was locking a door as he came out of a storage building. Fair or unfair to burden Joe with gripes about his own son, Henry called out to him. “Joe!”

“Hey, Henry. What’s going on?” Joe jingled the keys and shoved them in his pocket.

“You have a minute? I need to talk.”

“Is it an emergency?”

“No, more of a problem, personal.”

“Oh, then you’re gonna have to go see Ellen, she’s the councilor now, the big problem solver.” Joe smiled, he had been waiting on the moment when he got to say that to one of the ‘originals’.

“Oh no, Joe, I couldn’t, I’d feel funny . . . just give me a minute.”

“Henry. I don’t have a minute. Besides, that’s Ellen’s new job. She has six people left in containment now. Go talk to her, if you’re not satisfied, seek me out.”

Henry could not believe Joe was serious. Ellen help him solve a problem? Ellen help anyone for that matter? Joe pointed to the containment center for the benefit of Henry as he walked away

from him. Hesitant, Henry gathered his thoughts and walked there. After buzzing himself in, Greg was on his break, he took the hallway slowly, fearful that Ellen would be sitting at her desk just waiting for someone. She was. Henry turned into her office, Ellen sat there. “El? Do you, oh God, do . . . do you have a minute to talk?”

“Oh!” Ellen smiled widely. “Henry do you have a problem? This is so great. Come in, I never expected you to come to me. Sit down.”

“Swell.” Henry walked in slowly. Ellen wasn’t making it any easier on him. She was actually gloating. He sat in the chair and shuffled from side to side trying to get comfortable.

“Henry?”

“I’m having a problem with Robbie. I’ve been yelling at him for things. I did it again today.”

“What kind of yelling?”

“I don’t know. Yelling.” Henry shrugged. “Not exactly Frank type. But certainly near Joe type.”

“That’s not too bad. What are you yelling at him for?”

“He keeps doing things in the wrong order. I tell him how they’re supposed to be done, but he doesn’t do it that way.”

“Is he getting the final results you want?” Ellen asked.

“Yes. But he’s doing it in the wrong sequence.”

“As long as he gets it done right, what difference does it make?”

“None I guess. I don’t know, I just can’t put my finger on it. Do you know I started to really like Michelle and now she won’t even look at me? She only has eyes for Robbie.”

“That’s because he’s so cute.”

Henry rolled his eyes at her and slumped in his chair. “If you’re trying to make me feel better El, you’re not doing it very well. Did you know that since Joe gave his, have-a-baby-talk, Robbie’s been propositioned four times?”

“I heard. But he turned them down. Maybe he’s gay and that will solve your problem with him.”

“What problem? I don’t know what the problem is.”

“Jealousy. You know, the problem you have with Robbie’s effect on women.” Ellen folded her hands before her. Her diagnosis was complete.

“I don’t have a problem with Robbie’s effect on women.”

“Yes you do, Henry, what do you think this whole conversation has been about?”

“I was talking about the way he does things. You brought up the women factor.”

“I did not, you brought it up. You mentioned Michelle.”

Henry stood up in frustration. “I mentioned Michelle, yes. You brought up the other women.”

“No, I said he was cute. You brought up the other women. So you obviously have a problem with it. That’s your problem.”

“I don’t have a problem with Robbie and other women!” Henry yelled.

“Henry, if you were going to get upset when I gave you my advice, you shouldn’t have asked for it.”

“I didn’t ask for your advice, I came in here to talk to you. You changed the subject to fit what you wanted to talk about.”

“No I did not, that’s not what I’m here for. I’m here to listen. Perhaps I’m not the one you should be asking help from.”

“Perhaps not.” Henry felt worse than he did when he walked in. At that moment, he was still trying to determine what had transpired. He rambled and muttered to himself as he stormed from her office.

Ellen looked up when she heard a Henry shriek of frustration from out in the hall. It rumbled and growled. Chalking it up to his not liking her advice, she returned to her work.

“El?” Robbie knocked once on the doorway of her office, then stepped inside. “What’s wrong with Henry?” He pointed back.

“Oh. He asked for my advice and didn’t like it.”

“Henry’s uptight.” Robbie sat down in the chair across from her desk. He noticed Ellen’s locked stared on him. “What’s wrong?”

“Why did you . . .”

“El!” Denny’s screams precluded his slamming footsteps that neared her office. He screeched to a frantic halt in her doorway. “El . . . El . . . help.”

Ellen jumped up from her seat. “What’s wrong?”

“Clark, that one guy . . .” Denny caught his breath. “Little Buddy, he took his book and he . . . he threw him . . .”

“Shit.” Robbie jumped up and flew from the office.

Denny looked mortified. “He’s going nuts in there, El.”

Ellen raced around her desk and opened the top drawer, as she did she grabbed her radio. “Frank. Frank come in. Trouble at containment.” She set down the radio, pulled a syringe and vial from her top drawer. Quickly she plunged the syringe in, retracted the fluid, pulled out the needle, set down the vial and tapped out the bubbles as she ran from her office.

Two fleeing survivors, one of which was holding the eight year old boy, knocked into Ellen as she fled to the skills room. She could hear the crash of furniture and the screaming of Buddy, a boy who was ten. Racing in the skills room, the place was in disarray. Furniture sprawled about, Denny huddling with a bleeding Buddy in a corner.

Robbie braced Clark around the neck, trying to hold back the raging thin young man who was out of control. Not halfway in Ellen’s stride, syringe in hand, another survivor charged from across the room and dove onto to Robbie’s back. One arm still holding Clark, Robbie shot back his other elbow high nailing that survivor square in the face. The survivor spun around and dropped to the floor.

Ellen’s uncapped the syringe and raced over to Robbie. “Hold him still!”

“I’m trying.” Robbie grunted, then cringed in a painful silent scream when Clark seared his teeth deep into the flesh of Robbie’s forearm.

“One second.” Ellen drew closer, eyes peeled to where she could land the injection. Two steps to them, needle ready, Clark lifted up his body, and with all his weight, reared out his leg kicking his boot into Ellen’s face and sending her flying to the floor.

Robbie released Clark at the same time that the syringe flew from Ellen’s hand, rolled on the floor and stopped at the boot of Frank who had just stormed in.

With the strength and action only he had, Frank picked up the syringe, bolted to Clark, gripped him by the throat, slammed him into the wall, and injected him. He held him there until Clark’s eyes rolled behind his head, and his body slumped. Just as he dropped, Frank hoisted him up and over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He grabbed his radio from his belt. “I need medical at containment. We have . . .” Frank took a breath. “Three injured. George, get a bird ready. We’re taking one out.” He began his move across the skills room. “Denny, help them until I get back.”

“Wait!” Robbie stood up from Ellen and raced to Frank. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Frank marched down the hall.

“You’re ousting him? Frank.” Robbie hurried to catch him. “Frank.”

“You’re bleeding. El’s bleeding. Take care of that.” Frank began to punch his code in the door.

“Frank, you can’t toss him out. He’s not even nineteen.”

“Doesn’t matter.” The door buzzed and Frank opened it.

“What! He lost it. It’s normal. We all lose it at times.”

Frank turned sternly to his brother. “Not in Beginnings you don’t. There are no second chances.” Saying no more, Clark on his shoulder, Frank left containment.

Robbie was speechless. His heart raced fast and his breath so shallow he didn't notice the pain in his bleeding arm. He stood in the security doorway shocked and then he saw Ellen walking up the hall.

"Robbie." She wiped the blood from her nose. "Are you all right?"

"Why, El? Why did you have to call Frank? Huh?"

"What?" Ellen was confused "Robbie. That's procedure. It's . . ." "

"Wrong." Robbie stated strongly. "It's so wrong. One mistake, call Frank and he just charges in and yanks them out. Problem solved?"

"It's the way we do things. I know it doesn't seem right."

"No! It's not." Robbie's strong words physically jolted Ellen. "It's so easy for you to say that. So easy for him to come in like the big fuckin hero and take them out. Wanna know why. He's never been out there! And neither have you! You don't know what it's like! Maybe if you did, none of this would be so . . . procedure." After slamming his hand in his anger off the metal door, Robbie stormed out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dean didn't know what to say. He always thought he did, but when he started to speak, what was in his mind never sounded quite as good when it slipped through his lips. Grabbing Andrea to watch the twins, Dean went to where he knew he'd find Ellen. Right where she returned to after he treated her many hours before. Containment. It grew harder for her the longer the survivor was in containment. Dean knew that and he also knew Ellen rarely showed it. In the quiet of the dim containment hall, Dean could hear the squeaking of Ellen's chair from her office. Just as he suspected, she stared blankly out, rocking back and forth.

"Hey," he called out softly stepping in her office. "I thought of singing but . . ."

"Thank God," she whispered and raised her eyes to him.

"How's the nose?" He walked to her desk and sat on the edge.

"Huge. I feel like Marcia Brady."

Dean chuckled. "It's not that bad."

Ellen looked up to him. "Dean."

"All right. It's big, but . . ." He held his index finger up. "Only where I stitched the nostril. That swelling will go down tomorrow." He leaned his face closer. "I did tiny 'Dean' stitches." He dropped his voice to an airy one. "Only a hint of a scar." He stole a quick kiss. "Come home. I know you're down, but come home. I . . . I want to talk to you about something. It's pretty important."

"It's not bad is it?" Ellen asked.

"I hope not." Dean smiled. "Please?" He held out his hand.

Ellen reached up and touched his fingers. "It's just a bad time of year."

"I know." He brought her hand to his lips. "And I know there are some things you feel you can't . . . you can't share with me." He saw her shake her head 'no'. "El, come on. With V-Day

coming up, maybe, whatever . . . God, I'm gonna kick myself for saying this, but maybe you should put aside whatever little disagreement you and Frank have, and do your V-day prep . . .”

“No.” Ellen gripped his hand and stood up. “I've ran to Frank too long and too much. Let's go home.”

“Can . . .” Robbie interrupted in the office. “Can I just bring her home, Dean? I really need to talk to El.” He stepped inside.

Dean's eyes moved from Ellen to Robbie. “I'm O.K. with that. El?”

Ellen nodded.

Slipping his hand from Ellen, Dean kissed her on the cheek. “Not too long. O.K.?” Kissing her again, he left.

“So.” Ellen walked back to her desk.

“So.” Robbie followed. “What's uh . . . V-Day?”

“Virus day. The day the plague began.”

Robbie swallowed his pride and looked humbled. “I'm sorry about today.”

“No, don't be.”

“No, El. I was wrong for yelling at you. It's not your fault. I get scared. You know.”

“I don't like it either, Robbie. I don't. But I learned that there's nothing I can do.” Ellen slowly shook her head. “Don't think this doesn't bother me. It does. Clark was in here for three weeks almost four. That's a long time. I didn't expect this. Just like I didn't expect Jason.” Ellen sat down.

“Who's Jason?”

With a slight shrug and a saddened look, Ellen exhaled. “He was a kid. Fifteen maybe. Quiet. So quiet. About four days before you got here, he snapped. He was taken out. I didn't blame him, there were others involved older men who could have convinced him. But . . .” She tossed her hands up. “Didn't matter. It bothered me. He was a kid and a kid who looked so much like my son Josh.” Ellen smiled. “I used to call him Josh. I think about Jason all the time. Is he alive. Is he fine? He . . . he's just a kid.”

“If you only knew.” Robbie grabbed her hand.

“I’ll never know.” Ellen’s head lowered.

Frank knew the routine. Unless Ellen absolutely didn’t like someone in containment she clammed up when they were ousted. She would dismiss it to everyone as frustration over all the work she put into the survivor. Frank always pretended to buy that excuse, and found another way to make her feel better. He felt it his job, a job he loved. Ellen had been in his life for so long he didn’t know how to not to think of her, despite what she believed of his intentions. And his intentions were, fighting or no fighting, together or not, Ellen needed their routine. And with V-Day approaching, Frank wanted to do something for her. Something to make her feel better, anything that would at least get them talking for the day that signified the start to the end of their lives. Walking into containment, Frank rummaged through his mind on what he could say. But stopping in the hall outside of Ellen’s office, hearing her and Robbie’s conversation, enlightened him. It wasn’t words, it was actions he was meant to take. Without seeing Ellen that night, he left. He knew what he had to do.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

May 28th

“Son of a bitch.” Joe slammed his fist on his desk, puffed frantically at his cigarette and stared at the radio. “Come on Frank, check in.”

Robbie noticed the look of concern of his father’s face, also on Henry’s and George’s for that matter. All four in the room watched the radio as if it were going to jump up and dance. “How long now, Dad?”

“Twenty minutes.” Joe began to tap his fingernails on the desk, from forefinger to pinky in a fast arpeggio manner.

“Dad, I don’t understand, you said you guys pull a check on this camp once a week.”

“Usually from the air. Frank wanted to get a closer look.”

“Who are these people?”

Joe looked up at Henry and George almost as if for approval to tell Robbie. “They’re people we ousted. We dropped them off, and somehow some of them banned together and stayed in this small town about forty miles from here.”

“From the look on all of your faces, these people aren’t friendly to you. Doesn’t this concern you with them being so close?”

“They haven’t moved yet. They can’t get here except by foot. And all of them weren’t in the community long enough to find out where we are. If by some chance they found us, you know how secure this area is, they’d never get in.”

Robbie leaned back in his seat. “If they wanted in, you know they’d find a way.”

Joe only glanced up to Robbie a stern look.

“Why did Frank go anyway?”

“To feel better. I don’t know, that’s what he said. When Frank gets something in his mind, there’s no stopping him.” The static from the radio grew louder, everyone turned to face it.

“Frank here.” Frank’s voice came through, not as loud and clear as hoped for.

“Frank.” Joe grabbed the mike. “What’s going on?”

“I’m heading back now. Too many to sneak in. They picked up a few more it looks like. How, I don’t know, we’re in the middle of fuckin’ Montana.”

“Just get back here. Double time.” Joe commanded.

“Got it. See you in . . .” Three loud gun shots rang through in the background. “I have gun fire here!”

“Frank, don’t worry about firing back. Just head home.”

“That’s what I’m doing . . . fuck, there shooting arrows at me.” The sound of a revving engine reached the level of Frank’s calm but disgusted voice. “Looks like three, maybe four of them to my . . .” The radio became silent.

“Frank!” Joe called to him. “Frank, come in. Frank.” There was no response. “We lost a signal. Henry do something.”

Henry began to examine the radio, he flicked the station to another channel, and looked at the readouts as he did. “Receiver’s fine. It has to be on Frank’s end.”

Joe gripped the microphone. “Frank, do you read me?”

Nothing.

George reached for the keys for the helicopter. “I’ll get some men together, we’ll fly there now.”

“No!” Joe raised his hand stopping him. “If they have him, the noise from the bird will alert them. Let’s give him time.”

Robbie jumped to his feet. “What? Time? I’ll go, let me go. I’ll take a jeep, tell me where this place is at.”

“No!” Joe spoke loudly. “Give him time. I know Frank. He’ll be all right.”

“I know what it’s like out there. I know what they can do to him.”

“And I know my son. Frank is all right.” Joe looked at his watch. “Let’s give him an hour. If he’s not back, we’ll head out.”

Robbie sat back down, he was in total disagreement with his father. How could Joe leave Frank out there like that? He wanted

to just leave, but he knew he couldn't even get out of the community without someone, somewhere pushing a button. "Dad, if you send out for him. I want to go."

Joe just raised his eyes to his son, and didn't comment to him.

The hour was moving slow. The silence in the room was near deafening. The tension could be felt, as Joe looked from his watch to the clock on the wall every few minutes. He tried to hide his uneasiness. He tried to hide the fact that he was beginning to worry. Forty-five minutes, and still nothing. They had alerted John Matoose who stood watch on the tower. No word from John. No word from Frank.

Robbie jumped up, he couldn't take anymore. "That's it. He's been gone long enough. He should be back, or at least in scope view. Let's go, Dad. We're wasting time."

Before Joe could say anything, Ellen walked calmly into Joe's office. "O.K. Joe, I have a break, I really should get to cleaning out that . . ." She hesitated at the door, holding it open while she stood in surprise at the somber faces in the room. "What's going on?"

Joe walked from behind his desk and approached her. "Ellen, Frank went beyond the wall to go check that nearby survivor camp."

"Alone?" She asked.

"Alone and by jeep. He wanted to see if . . . Jason was there. Johnny said he thought he spotted him by air."

Ellen slowly looked around taking in the somber expressions on the faces in the room. "Joe? Is he all right?"

Joe took a deep breath. "At last contact with him, there was gunfire, and some sort of attack on his jeep. We don't know. We lost contact."

"Dad, look." Robbie stepped forward. "We have to move on this. And now."

Joe looked at the radio again. No sound emerged from it. He paused before waiting to give the order. Doing so was admitting

that Frank had been ambushed. “All right. Let’s do it. Henry gather up Dan, and Greg. Robbie will go with them . . .”

A loud crackle, a hiss, and John Matoose’s voice over the radio. “I see him he’s approaching the tunnel gate.”

A sense of relief hit the room. Joe clenched his fist in excitement.

“Security is letting him in. He looks fine. Should be your way in a minute.”

As if someone opened the door and released the enormous pressure, everyone in the room relaxed. A loud sigh emerged from all of them.

Ellen turned to the door and waited. She listened for the jeep. She heard.

Frank’s jeep stopped, the way he always stopped it, fast and noisy. The sound of his clomping footsteps approached and the door opened. “Fuckin’ savages.” Frank walked into the room, and tossed his walkie-talkie on the desk. It was in several pieces. “They arrowed my radio.” In his anger he didn’t notice everyone in the room. He did however, notice Ellen. “Hey, El. What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here?” Ellen stepped to him. “What the hell were you doing Frank?” She asked with edge.

Frank was stunned by her reaction. “Um . . . something.”

“Something?” Ellen questioned.

“I was trying to do something nice for you. Make you feel better.”

“What? Like dying? You asshole. Yeah. You know what? That would have done it.” Spinning on her heels, Ellen said no more and stormed out.

Frank, confused, scratched his head watching her leave. He turned back to his father. “Did you guys tell her something bad about me?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Yeah, Frank we had a Frank bashing party while you were gone.”

“Oh.” Frank nodded then noticed Henry checking out his broken radio. “Henry? Can you fix it?”

Henry, with the you-got-to-be-kidding-me look upon his face, held up the pieces, a stone arrow head plopped on the desk. “Sure, Frank. I’ll get right on it.”

“Good.” Frank bobbed his head. “All right. I’m finishing rounds.” He clapped his hands together once with an attitude that so much as said he didn’t comprehend the tension he made transpire.

“Frank.” Joe called out as Frank reached for the door. “Um . . . did you spot the kid at all?”

Frank snapped his finger with a grin. “Oh. Yeah. I did.” He opened the door.

“And?” Joe asked.

“And what?”

“And how is he?” Joe’s voice showed a little more irritation.

“Who?”

“Jason!” Joe snapped. “You saw him, is he all right?”

“God, Dad yell at me! Yes. He’s fine. All you had to do was ask.” Opening up the door, shaking his head in disbelief at his father, Frank left.

Joe tossed his hands up and looked to the others in the room. “And we trust our lives to him.”

The annoying high tuned music blared loudly after the dart sailed into the bulls-eye. Robbie grinned arrogantly, picking up his drink on the way to the dart board to retrieve his dart. “Game over.” He took a sip as he turned around and raised his eyebrows to Paul.

“Luck. Just luck.” Paul shook his head. “Got time for another?”

“No way.” Robbie downed his drink and set the empty glass on the bar. “I’m pulling a solo at containment tonight. My uh, Dad’s tired.” Robbie smiled.

“Solo?” Paul asked. “Alone.”

“Well. That’s what solo means.” Another chuckle escaped Robbie and he looked at his watch. “I have to go. So you have to take my place and play whose next.” Robbie looked around the semi-crowded hall. “Whoever that is.” He approached Paul and handed him the darts.

“Shall I tell Michelle where you’re at if she asks again?” Paul laughed sarcastically.

Robbie cringed. “You’re so funny aren’t you?”

“Have fun at containment. With . . .”

“Don’t.” Robbie pointed and shook his head with a smile. “That’s not why I’m going.”

“No. He’s right.” Larry, a thin odd looking man interjected as he approached his turn at the dart board. “He’s going to containment because he gets special treatment.”

Robbie stopped cold in his tracks. He turned around and stepped back. “Excuse me?”

“I thought I was clear.” Larry reached over the bar for the bottle and poured a drink. “I mean, I’ve been part of security for a year now. Never worked containment.” He shrugged. “I don’t get special treatment. Look where you’re off to.”

Paul saw the look on Robbie’s face, a slight shade of red building, and with a nervous chuckle, Paul stepped his body in front of Larry. “Take it easy, Larry. Robbie’s helping out his Dad, man. Why you getting in his shit?”

“Because Robbie Slagel struts around here like he’s better than anyone else. When the truth is.” Larry tilted his head back and gulped a shot of whiskey. “When the truth is, he isn’t. What’s funny is. He may be a Slagel but . . . he’s not an original. And we don’t treat him like one of us. So really, he’s neither here nor

there.” Larry dropped his voice to a instigating whisper. “He’s a nobody.”

The rustling of Robbie’s charge forth, sent warning signals off to Paul and he jumped in Robbie’s path, bodily holding him back. “He’s not worth it.” He stared Robbie in the eyes. “He’s not . . . worth it. Go. Go to containment. Go.” Paul motioned his head.

Robbie glared once at Larry and reached around Paul’s body. He lifted the bottle of whiskey and slammed it hard on the bar. “Have another drink, Larry. The community needs a drunk walking a beat tonight.”

“Go.” Paul softly spoke. “Go.” Feeling Robbie’s tense body back up, Paul sighed in relief and stood there waiting until Robbie had left. He turned back and gave a cold stare at Larry. Foregoing his dart game, Paul opted for a quiet corner where he could pick out his frustration on his guitar.

“Go on, Dean, I’m listening.” Ellen reached across the dinner table for one more small helping. “But make it fast I have to get to containment. Alex, honey, sit in your chair.”

Dean shifted his eyes to his daughter who chose to kneel awkwardly on her chair. “As I was saying. We have this history.”

“Who?”

“Us.” Dean stood from his seat and fixed his daughter. “Stay seated.” He moved over to Ellen. “And I’ve been doing a lot of serious . . .” Dean cringed at Alexandra’s whine. “Billy, leave her alone . . . thinking about us.”

Ellen shook her head. “Is this a bad talk?” She shoved a bite of food in her mouth. “Because I don’t want to . . . Billy.” Ellen scolded. “Eat, don’t play.”

Billy peered up from his noodles that were spread in a line across his plate. “I hate the little ones. Why do you make the little ones?”

“It’s a conspiracy. Dean, grab her. She’s gonna fall.” Ellen instructed.

Again Dean walked over to Alexandra. He lifted her, talking as he did. “This isn’t a bad talk. I hope not. I need to ask you something . . .” He set Alexandra down. “ . . . very important.” A thump and scream caught Dean’s attention when he missed the chair he put his daughter in. “Shit.”

“Way to go, Dean.” Ellen hurried over to help.

“She’s fine.” Dean checked her out as Ellen crouched down across from him on the floor.

“She’s crying. Alex, are you all right?” Ellen helped her up.

“This, El, this is what life is about.”

“A screaming child?” Ellen snickered.

“No. This. Chaos. Family. Us. Marry me.”

“What?” Ellen stood after situating Alexandra back at the table. “I can’t believe you just proposed over noodle casserole. And when I’m late.” She walked from the dining area. “I have to go. Ask me later.”

“Actually.” Dean followed her. “I proposed over a fallen child. But . . .” He jumped around the couch and dove to the door to stop her. “I know I talked about it before. But I never asked. El.” He grabbed her arm and reached in his front pocket of his jeans. “Henry and I made this. We melted down my Dad’s ring.” He grabbed her hand and placed on her finger, the molded gold band with two small diamonds. “Marry me. I know now in my heart, things can be forgiven and forgotten.”

Ellen stared down at the ring. “Life is ironic, isn’t it?” she whispered.

“El? Answer?”

“Dean.” Ellen, near laughter, shook her head. “Could you have least picked a better moment. God, your dad’s ring, this is sentimental and I’m rushing here. You’re a diehard romantic.”

“All right.” Dean held out his hand. “Here, I’ll ask later. Give me the ring back”

Ellen tried to pull the ring from her finger, it wouldn’t budge. “Shit. It’s stuck.”

Dean snickered. “Now, so are you.”

Ellen grunted. “I’m not giving you an answer.”

“Are you saying yes?”

“No.”

“You’re turning me down?” Dean asked.

“No! Dean!” Ellen tried once more to remove the ring. She failed. “Bye.” She kissed him quickly. “We’ll talk later.” Still struggling to remove the ring, Ellen paused to open the door. She looked back at Dean and smiled. “Thanks.”

Believing it really didn’t go all that bad, Dean stared in thought after Ellen had left. Then he heard another ‘thump’ and Alexandra’s scream and Dean was whisked from his slight blissful moment into chaotic family mode again.

Clipboard in one hand, flashlight in the other, Larry walked his beat in the area of perimeter thirty. A small hilly area located a mile east of the fields. It was Larry’s division. One he watched for wandering survivors or animals that strayed there. He walked perimeter twenty-three to thirty, six nights a week. It was the same thing for him, checking out each sector of the perimeter fence. Kneeling, examining the beam, make a notation on his security rounds sheet, stand up and move on. He neared sector three, taking it slow on the sloped terrain. As he approached the portion where the beam was located he felt the slight pressure against his shin and then he heard the subtle crack. Looking up and around, Larry barely heard the whipping sound when he felt the tightness wrap around his ankle in a strangling manner. It startled him, causing

the flashlight to tumble from his hands. Before he could reach down for it, his leg swept out from under him and Larry stumbled back. He shrieked short and once and then he shrieked no more. Sizzling in the dark night, sparks emerging intermittently with the flames from his body, Larry fried against the perimeter fence.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

May 29th

Waiting in Dean's lab, Joe brought his cup of coffee to his lips at the same time his eyes daggered through the steam at Henry. "Make the implication one more time Henry, and I'm kicking your skinny ass."

"I'm not implying, Joe." Henry defended.

Joe shifted his eyes to George who sat in a chair arms folded, eyes closed. "George?"

George snapped awake. "Implying."

Henry waved his hand at George. "You're sleeping, what do you know. Joe, I just want to make you aware that's all."

"I'm aware." Joe sipped his coffee.

"The talk." Henry continued. "This is what people are saying."

"Screw what people are saying," Joe replied.

"You can't take that attitude, Joe." Henry said. "How's it going to look? Robbie is your son."

George's loud yawn interrupted the conversation. With a stretch, he stood up. "Henry. Joe's son or not, doesn't matter. Doesn't matter if you have people in the social hall who saw the confrontation. I have one child and three men in containment who know Robbie was there all night. I also have a guard who never saw him leave until five this morning . . . after Larry's body was found."

"Escape hatch." Henry stated.

Laughing, George shook his head "Now you're reaching."

Henry rolled his eyes. "It's not reaching, George. You know the maintenance tunnels run under the entire community. And one of the seven entrances is the hatch in containment."

"Why are you so hell bent on condemning my son?" Joe asked.

“I’m not, Joe. I just want you to be ready for questions that’s all. We have a man who died at his post for no reason.”

The dropping of a folder caught all of their attention, and Dean stood before the folder by the counter. “Not for no reason Henry. Rephrase that last statement.” Dean said. “You had a very drunk man who died on a rocky perimeter. Drunk.” He flipped open the folder. “Point two six alcohol level. End of story. No visible marks of trauma or struggle. He couldn’t have been tackled; whoever would have tackled him would have gone right into that beam as well.”

Joe tossed up his hands. “End of story. Let’s go George. Thanks, Dean.”

Dean nodded as Joe and George left, then raised his eyes to Henry who still stood there baffled. “Henry?”

“Doesn’t make sense.” Henry swayed his head slowly. “It just doesn’t.”

“What doesn’t make sense Henry, is why you insist on thinking Robbie is so bad. No one else sees it.” Dean tried to reason. “He’s quiet, that’s all. He didn’t start that fight at the social hall, everyone said Larry did. As your friend, well, sort of friend, rather, invention partner. As that, I have to tell you to get over this. All right? You are gonna end up severing ties with people you don’t want to.”

Henry didn’t respond. He shifted his views to Dean, then with the same lost look on his face, walked quietly out of the lab.

Undeniably it was one of two things that awoke Ellen from her deep sleep on her sofa. The overwhelming smell of fresh brewed coffee or the cough. But one thing was for sure, the deep cough was the thing that caused her to sit straight up and jump from the couch in total confusion.

“Morning.” Frank spoke, walking from her kitchen.

Ellen blinked and rubbed her eyes. “What . . . what are you . . . doing here?”

“It’s almost nine. I saw Jenny and she was worried because the twins didn’t make it to school and . . .” Frank spun as Ellen ran past him to the kitchen. “Don’t worry I made coffee. I know how you are.” He scratched his head and walked to the kitchen. He heard water running. “El, about yesterday and the past . . .” He stopped in the kitchen doorway when he saw her splashing her face with water as she leaned over the sink. “Are you sick?”

Ellen shook her head. “I got up too fast.” Face wet, eyes closed she reached for a towel. “What were you saying?”

“Well, today’s V-Day. It’s always been . . . our day. I wanted to talk to you . . . about . . .” Frank watched her slide the towel down her face and saw, as she did, the ring on her finger. Frank instinctively reached out and grabbed her left hand. “What’s this?”

Ellen looked. “Oh. Dean gave it to me when he proposed and I can’t . . .”

Frank harshly dropped her hand. “Sorry I even tried to talk to you.” He turned and walked away. “Have a nice fuckin life with Dean.”

Ellen still wasn’t awake. She heard him heavily leave and slam the front door closed. After a moment of trying to figure out what had just transpired, Ellen took advantage of the fresh coffee before she woke her children for school.

Henry stood outside the social hall. He could hear the sounds of guitar strumming and singing coming from within. It was the last place he thought to look for Robbie. He had looked everywhere and struck out. Trying to keep himself calm, he walked inside. Robbie and Paul both sat in chairs, holding their

guitars while Miguel sat across from them, smiling, nodding and writing things down.

“Robbie.” Henry called to him. “Robbie.”

Robbie didn’t answer, he just sat with his back to Henry.

“Robbie.”

Paul stopped playing his guitar. He looked at Robbie, and motioned his head to Henry who was standing there.

Miguel stood up, his brawny body seemed to tower over the table as he held a hint of embarrassment. “Henry, hey. Mr. Slagel said it would be fine to use the hall. I’m writing a song for Andrea. Would you like to hear?”

Henry shook his head and walked in further. “Some other time. I’m not here because the hall is open. I’m looking for Robbie.”

Robbie turned once to look at Henry, then faced Paul again. “I’m taking a break.”

“You can take a break later.” Henry told him. “Those wires on the generator door need put back. You left them hanging out.” There was a tone to Henry’s voice that conveyed his attempt to stay in control.

Robbie picked his guitar slowly. “I had to walk away from it, John was breathing down my neck. Right now I’m working on Miguel’s song..”

“Work on your work first.” Henry began to walk to him. “You have to work, it’s your job. This is the second time this week you walked away because someone was watching you do something. Tough Robbie, handle it.”

Robbie, taking Henry, Paul and Miguel by surprise, jumped from his chair, tossed it to the side, and stood toe to toe with Henry. “What is your problem with me?”

Henry stared him down, looking into Robbie’s eyes. “I don’t have the problem. You do, with authority. Things run a certain way here. You can’t seem to grasp that.”

“I grasp it. You just won’t cut me a goddamn break.” Robbie stormed past, brushing him in the shoulder only to be grabbed by the arm and snatched back by Henry.

Miguel sprang forward using his body to stop the two men who both squared off at the same time, fists raised to each other with a deadlock stare. “No.” His deep accented voice resonated. “You hear me . . .” He looked at both men and shoved them back. “No.”

Henry released Robbie and stepped back. “You both seen him. Is it me?” He threw his hands up and waited for a response. He received only stares. “Is it?”

Paul’s head lowered as his hands touched upon his strings. Miguel sat back down and Robbie walked out.

Henry dropped his hands.

“I’m touched.” Dean said sarcastically as his thumb brushed over the diamond of Ellen’s ring. “You’re still wearing it.”

“Ha-ha-ha.” Ellen pulled on it. “It won’t come off.”

“Quit trying.” Dean laid her hands on the lab counter. “Why are your fingers so swollen anyhow?”

“They aren’t. You made the wrong size ring.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “I went into your memorabilia box and stole your graduation ring.”

Ellen grunted. “There you have it. That was multitudes of children ago, Dean.” She tried to take it off. “You’re a scientist. Can’t you remove it.”

“What are you kidding me?” Dean scoffed. “Right. What’s your answer?”

“Dean.” Ellen’s demeanor switched to a serious one. “If . . . if . . . I wanted to say yes.” She watched Dean smile as he bit his

bottom lip. “I couldn’t.” She shook her head. “Not until we talk about something that could change your . . .”

“Help me.” A voice called out from the hallway of the clinic, followed by a thump. Both Ellen and Dean looked at each other and sprang from their seats. Bolting into the hall, they spotted a woman at the end. She was lying on the floor in a tight fetal position, a small pool of blood forming underneath her.

“Dina.” Ellen said in shock when she saw it was Johnny’s girlfriend.

“Shit.” Dean rushed to Dina first, kneeling down to the whimpering and crying woman. “Ellen help me get her to the examining room.”

Helping Dean lift her to her feet, they noticed the steady trickling of blood coming from between her legs. Too big for them to carry, they practically dragged her to the examining room.

“Get her on the table, Dean. I’ll find Andrea.” Ellen hurried out.

Struggling some, Dean helped Dina to the table and immediately began to undress her.

Ellen came sliding in. “Andrea’s on her way.” She stood at the side of the young woman and brushed the hair from her eyes. “I think she’s miscarrying. I’ve never seen one this bad.”

“Me either.” Dean finished undressing and covering Dina while Ellen calmed her.

“Hey.” Ellen wiped her forehead. “Want me to get Johnny?”
Dina shook her head. “He doesn’t want the . . .”

“What’s going on?” Andrea asked as she bolted in the room, immediately grabbing gloves, and placing them on.

“Miscarrying.” Dean answered.

Andrea pulled the stirrups from the ends of the table. “We’ll try to help you.” She grabbed Dina’s legs and placed them in the stirrups. “There’s so much blood.” She lifted the sheet to examine her. “Ellen, start an IV. Dean get that synthetic hormone you’ve been working on, we’ll need it for the hemorrhaging.” She threw the sheet over Dina’s knees. The adrenaline of the moment

disappeared. The urgent care Andrea fought to give, dissipated, when all the years in the medical field, snapped forefront the knowledge that she needed. “Stop!” She dropped the sheet. In the quiet of the room, Andrea angrily took off her gloves and tossed them to the floor. With cold eyes she walked to the head of the examining table. “Did you do this alone?”

Dina’s eyes weld with tears.

“Answer me.” Andrea demanded.

Shocked, Dean and Ellen paused in what they were doing and looked at each other.

“Answer me!” Andrea demanded again.

“Yes.” Dina cried harder.

Andrea stepped back. “You can die for all I care.” With more anger than she had ever shown, Andrea began to leave the room.

“Wait!” Dean stopped her. “What the hell are you doing?”

Andrea shook her head. “I’m walking away from her Doctor, and I suggest you do the same. With the need for life that we have around here, she decided to kill the one that was given to her. I’ve seen it hundreds of times. Butcher jobs, coat hangers or knitting needles. Whatever, however, she gave herself an abortion.”

Ellen dropped the IV, the glass bottle crashed to the floor.
“Are you sure?”

“Positive. She just admitted it.” Andrea folded her arms, turned and left the room.

“No.” Dean called out. “Andrea don’t.”

Ellen looked one more time at Dina and began to follow Andrea’s footsteps.

“Ellen, no.” Dean ran to her and grabbed her arm with his bloody hand. “Help me. I can’t do this alone.”

“Sorry, Dean.” Ellen pulled his hand away.

“You’re a nurse. You can’t walk away too.”

“The fight for life in this community is too great.”

“Then why are you walking away from her life?”

“Murder is against the rules here. She’s as good as gone, whether she lives or not. I’m sorry, I can’t.” Ellen turned and left the room also.

Dean panicked. He was alone. Dina laid on the table, legs spread, feet in stirrups, and a pool of blood on the floor. He had wasted enough time arguing for her life. He couldn’t chase down Ellen or Andrea, there was no time. He had to do something. He just didn’t know what. As he stood there center of the room, his shirt and pants covered with blood, and the room looking like it was the scene of a massacre, he wanted to scream. he wanted to cry. Dean pulled himself together and worked within the realms of the best of his knowledge and common sense to help her anyway he could. He had to try, whether she was right or wrong in what she did. It wasn’t for Dean to judge her, it was for Dean to save her.

George shook his head as he paced around the hanger office. He’d stop, look at Henry, then pace some more. “Henry, I’m telling you.”

“No George, I’m telling you.” Henry leaned with his arm against the file cabinet. “We were so close to going at it. Have you spoke to Miguel?”

“Yes I did. He confirmed you and Robbie were almost going at it . . .”

“See.”

“No. Not ‘See’, Henry. Miguel also confirmed you searched Robbie out. Robbie was taking a break. The man worked containment all night for us, or did you forget that?”

“I didn’t forget, George. He can always sleep later.”

George grunted loudly through frustration as he sat down behind his desk. “You’re an asshole.” He pointed his finger at him.

“George . . . Henry!” Joe’s voice carried through the hanger. “George, Henry.” His voice came closer, and by the sound of the footsteps he was not alone. “Hey.” He walked into the office with Ellen. “Gentlemen we have a situation on our hands.”

Henry, whose hand rested on his forehead, turned slowly to them. As he did, his eyes widened when he saw the blood all over Ellen. “Oh my God, Ellen. What happened?” He raced to her.

“I’m all right. It’s not me.” She assured him.

George rose from behind his desk slowly. he knew by the look on Joe’s face, something was seriously wrong. “Joe, what’s the situation?”

“A bad one. I need you guys to come with me to take care of it.”

George looked around the office, as if searching. “I’ll get my radio, we’ll get Frank and we’ll head . . .”

“No.” Joe stopped him. “It’s under wraps from Frank for the time being.”

“Under wraps from Frank?” George was surprised. “What kind of situation is this?”

“A new one.” Joe answered. “One we never had. It’s an abortion. A woman here was pregnant and aborted her own baby. She botched it, that’s how we found out.”

Henry slowly lifted the bottom of Ellen’s shirt. “Oh man, that’s why we’re keeping it from Frank. It was his baby, wasn’t it?”

“No!” Ellen smacked his hand off of her clothing. “It wasn’t Frank’s baby.”

Henry looked puzzled. “Whose?”

Joe took a deep breath. “Johnny’s. Now before we go to the clinic there’s some things we need to discuss. A decision needs to be made.”

Dean sat quietly in the examining room with Dina. Her heart monitor beeped slowly. He had cleaned himself up, and sat with his arms bent over his knees. He knew as heard the sounds of footsteps that something was up. He peered through the door. Andrea and Joe walked down the hall. Ellen, Henry, and George were behind them. Dean turned from them, he knew what was coming.

Joe stood in the doorway, with his sternest voice he spoke. “How is she?”

“I’ve almost got her stabilized.” Dean answered.

“Well let me know when she is and she’s gone.” Joe turned and began to walk away.

“What?!” Dean sprang up and chased them into the hall. “You’re not serious are you? If we send her out before she’s well, she will die out there.”

Joe stared at him, his eyes glared. “She should have thought of that before she did this to herself.”

“No.” Dean grabbed a hold of Joe. “I cannot believe you are going to oust her.”

Andrea stepped in, removing Dean’s hand. “I can’t believe you are taking her side on this. Let alone the fact that you saved her.”

“And you, Andrea.” Dean ran his fingers through his hair. “You are supposed to dedicate your life to helping people. You walked away from her. You stand here ready to condemn her for taking a life that hasn’t even been born, when you did that? Why?”

“Because of what I’ve seen.” Andrea showed passion. “Before the plague I would never have walked away from her. But I’ve seen the slaughter of the innocents, so have you. I watched children die. Children who didn’t have a choice in the matter. Dina had a choice and she chose to kill the gift of life. Life Dean. Don’t you remember what that is? Life now should be treated as special. Not disregarded. If we are given the opportunity to bring a new

life into this world, then we have to grasp it, we have to cherish it, not kill it.”

“Then by what you’re saying, we have to cherish her life too. By ousting her, by letting her die, that’s not cherishing life. You contradict yourself, Andrea.” Dean argued as she glared right past him. “You talk about what we have seen. She’s seen it too. Let’s try to understand why she did this.”

“Why are you defending her?!” Andrea snapped back. “Don’t you see what she has done? If we forget what she did, we are saying it’s all right for any woman to go ahead and give herself an abortion.”

“You know I remember when I used to live in world that gave a woman a choice on whether or not she wanted to have a child.”

“It’s no longer the same world Dean, you know that and I know that. A baby needs to be born now.” Andrea’s head moved about and her hands waved as she spoke. “We have to give it that chance.”

“I agree. When it’s a baby.”

Andrea stepped close to Dean, she put her face into his. “Would you be taking that attitude if that was your flesh and blood she destroyed? Would you still say it wasn’t a baby?” Andrea stepped back. “I’m finished with you.” She turned sharply and walked away. Everyone seemed to follow.

“Andrea. Joe.” Dean called out. “Joe, you can’t do this.”

“The decision’s been made,” Joe said.

“You are wrong, Joe. Dead wrong!” Dean shouted.

Joe did not respond, he kept walking.

“Joe.” Dean called out with an angry voice. “You better have thought this through. Before you finalize this decision, you better make sure you are basing it on the fact that it’s something you have to do because you lead this community, and not because she aborted a Slagel.”

Joe stopped cold. He quickly turned around, barreled back to Dean, grabbed him by the collar, and slammed him into the wall.

“Listen to me you little shit. Don’t you ever imply that I don’t make my decisions fairly. Ever! Don’t ever do that to me again.” Releasing him, Joe stood Dean straight, then walked away. Enough had been said.

Dean turned his head to the side, still trying to comprehend what had just happened. He watched them all slowly disappear from his sight and he turned, went back into the examining room and to an unconscious Dina. “It’s out of our hands now. It’s in God’s hands.”

Dina’s heart monitor flat lined.

Dean slowly closed his eyes and shook his head. He debated on making an attempt to revive her. His heart said yes, his head said, no. Reviving her would be bringing her back just to die again. He reached up and shut off the monitor. He had lost all the way around.

She changed her clothes first, the sight of all that blood would send him into a frenzy before she could even begin to tell him. Ellen did not look forward to the task she was about to undertake. Telling Frank what had just transpired was something no one else could do. Nor did she want anyone else to. The situation was a new one and it hit close to home. The botched abortion by Johnny’s girlfriend. Ellen had to wonder if there were possibly any gentle words that could convey what happened.

She knew ahead of time Frank was in his office and that was where she went. As she reached for his office door, she took a deep breath and knocked once. “Frank, can I come in?”

Frank smiled when he heard her voice. Ellen was the last person he expected to see. “El?”

She walked in. “Hi.”

“Wow.” He stood up. “This is a surprise. Wait . . .” He cleared his throat. “We’re fighting.” He started to sit down again.

“Frank.” Ellen’s call made him hesitate especially when she walked up to him and kissed him softly on the cheek. She ran her fingers over the kiss as if to rub it in.

“Now I’m really surprised. What’s up?”

“Frank.” She exhaled his name mixed with sadness and heartache. “We . . . we have to talk.”

Frank knew it by the look on her face and the sound of her voice. Sliding his hand down his face, Frank slowly sat down and braced himself for whatever Ellen was about to tell him.

Johnny’s face went immediately to his hands as Frank laid a strong hand on his back.

“You O.K.?” Frank asked, then looked up to Ellen who stood behind the sofa in his home.

Johnny nodded and lifted his head. “I didn’t mean to make her do that.” He said so sad.

“John.” Frank spoke with compassion. “We can’t make anyone do something they don’t want to do. She didn’t want the baby. You getting mad when she told you, had nothing to do with it.”

“But she . . .”

“She was scared.” Frank nodded. “And think about it. Can you blame her? I don’t want to bring a kid into this fucked up world either.”

Ellen’s heavy breath carried in her whisper of offense. “I thought we were doing pretty good with Beginnings.”

Frank looked back at her. “El?”

Ellen snapped from her thoughts. “I’m uh . . . going to the clinic. I have to talk to . . . I have to go. Johnny I’ll see you there.” Quickly and without a goodbye, she left.

“Dad?” Johnny peered at Frank.

“El’s upset. But you’re my concern right now.”

“I feel bad.”

“I know. And now . . .” Frank said. “You have to be a man. You have to go over there and give Dina your support. O.K.?” Getting an agreeing nod from Johnny, Frank gave one soft pat of support to his back. “Come on. I’ll walk with you.”

Slowly, together, they both stood from the couch to go to the clinic to face a painful truth they had yet to learn.

“Dean.” Ellen softly called his name as she stepped into the lab.

Dean raised his head from his work in surprise of Ellen’s return. He spun his stool to face her. “What did you do? Come here to gloat.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I’m not feeling right about the . . . me, you, the Dina situation this afternoon.” She stepped to him.

“You . . . you abandoned me. I needed you.” Dean said with emotions.

“She was wrong.”

“Yeah, well . . . she’s dead.” Dean turned away from Ellen and continued to work.

“What?” Ellen gasped. She reached out her hand to Dean’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.” Her hand touched upon his back and she slid it from him. She took a single step back and stopped. “Dean.” She whispered. “Can you . . . can you just give me your honest opinion about something?” She waited for his reaction. He stopped

what he was doing and she knew he was listening. “Are we worse off? Has the world gotten so bad that someone would go to extreme measures to stop a child from being born here?”

Dean breathed heavily before answering. He turned around solaced and faced her. “Outside our walls, I believe it’s a jungle. A deadly jungle now. But . . . inside our walls. Life gets better everyday.”

Ellen sighed with a slight chuckle and stepped back to Dean embracing him.

“El.” Frank called soft yet strong into the lab.

Ellen pulled back from Dean and looked to the door. Frank stood there with Johnny.

“Dr. Dean.” Johnny said. “Can I see Dina now? I won’t be long. But I need to talk to her.”

Dean looked at Ellen then back to Johnny as he stood up. He slowly walked across the lab to him. “Johnny. I’m sorry. She . . . she didn’t make it.”

Johnny felt his knees begin to buckle. His heart sank to his stomach. His head spun. He didn’t know what to do, what to say. He turned around to Frank who stood behind him. He grabbed a hold of him, so confused and fell apart in his arms. “What did I do? What did I do?”

Frank felt Johnny’s pain, every single moment of it. If he could take it away, he would. But he couldn’t. “It’ll be all right Johnny, I promise. I promise you. It’ll be all right.” He grabbed hold of his son, pulled him closer, and pressed his lips tightly to his head. That was all Frank could do. Just be there.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A sweep of his hand through his hair until it rested on the back of his neck was Dean's first reaction when he opened his front door and Joe stood there. "El's not here. She's sitting with Johnny until Frank comes home."

Joe, hands in his pockets, bounced slowly from heel to toe in the doorway, "Last I knew, I thought I had grandchildren that lived here."

Dean nodded and opened the door wider. "They're upstairs, come in."

Joe walked in closing the door after he did. "Dean." He called out as Dean moved to the steps.

Stepping back, Dean turned around. "Yeah?"

"Today." Joe took a step to him. "Today things happened. Things that were wrong."

"I know."

"And . . . though I won't apologize for my anger, I will apologize for my actions. I should have never gotten physical with you."

Dean glanced at him with a sudden look of surprise. "I won't accept your apology, Joe. Because I was the one who was wrong. What I said to you was completely out of line. I have far too much respect for you and should have never have said what I did."

Joe extended his hand. "Then let's call the situation forgotten."

"You bet." Dean shook his hand. "How about I get the kids?"

"How about I go up and scare them." Joe walked by him to the steps and stopped on the third one when he saw Dean's confused expression. "It's a Slagel thing, you know. We're all slightly demented."

“A TV Guide? Why in the world would you save a TV Guide?” Robbie looked with a smile on his face to the small magazine he held in his hand before Ellen. The pages were yellowing.

“Why not?” She flipped through the pages. Her back leaned on the arm of the couch, her legs folded Indian-style. She was comfortable in her little corner facing Robbie, who sat next to her. “This was the last one I received. Look, it even has marked what I planned to watch that Saturday night.”

Robbie snickered at her then looked down to the box on the floor sitting next to the couch. “Let’s see what else you have in this box.” He reached his hand down into it. “Oh . . . I remember this key chain.” He dangled the miniature slot machine. “I remember this.”

Ellen tossed the TV Guide back in the box. “How in the world do you remember that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Robbie stared at it for a long time. “You had this on your keys when you had that little blue car. Remember, I was seventeen, you used to let me borrow it to run errands.”

“Back in the days when someone in Ashtonville was the object of your affection. I felt sorry for you because I thought Joe made you come every summer. Then you got older and I realized . . . nah, you had a crush on someone.”

“I did.” Robbie’s face turned a shade of red. “I had the world’s biggest crush on you.”

“On me?” Ellen was surprised.

“Yeah.” Robbie fluttered his lips sarcastically. “I was crazy about you. It started when I was about eleven. I used to have these little kid fantasies. The one where you’d choose me to sit with and watch television. It was funny. But then by the time I got fifteen . . .” Robbie cleared his throat and chuckled. “They matured. I can’t believe you never knew. It didn’t dawn on you why I was always hanging around you so much and doing all those chores for free?”

“No. I just chalked it up that you like doing yard work.” A look of flattery crept on her. “Thanks. That makes me feel good. Of course, you should have told me when you got older. Knowing how cute you were, it would have done wonders for my self-esteem.”

“I was going to.” He played with the key chain, pulled the lever, and watched the reels spin. “I had this big plan. I figured when I turned twenty-one, I was going to steal you from Pete.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah.” Robbie dropped the key chain in the box. “It was a serious crush. I was going to save you, as I thought it was, then I made the mistake of discussing it with Frank. At first he laughed at me. Then he got blunt and told me ‘leave her marriage alone. She doesn’t want you, you’re a kid’, so I dropped it.”

“I feel really bad. He should have never said that to you.”

“Oh.” Robbie waved his hand at her. “Not like he wasn’t right. Right?” He looked at Ellen. “Would you have? I mean, you can be honest. Tell me. Say I would have approached you or, even hit on you during one of our alone times. Would you have?”

“Been with you?” Ellen scratched her head in thought and snickered. “God, Robbie I was having an affair with your brother. But . . .” She laughed. “Yeah, probably, yeah. I would have. I know me. You would have hit on me and I would have went with it. Hell, who would have known. I could have discovered at that moment you were the one I was waiting for all my life.”

The corner of Robbie’s mouth raised. “Thanks. That was nice.” Robbie leaned in to her and quickly kissed her. “Now.” He changed the mood and looked toward the box again. “Let’s see what else you have hidden in this . . .”

Ellen saw the ornery smile creep on his face. “What? What do you see in that box?”

Robbie closed his eyes quickly, then opened them. “I recognize the pouch. You saved condoms?” His hand slowly reached down, but Ellen beat him to the prophylactics. “Let me see, it’s been awhile.” He reached for them.

“No. I’m embarrassed. I forgot about them.” Ellen held them away from him, waving her hand about to keep Robbie from getting them. He playfully leaned close into her to snatch them.

The front door slammed, grasping their attention. Frank walked in. “What’s going on?”

Ellen laughed. “We were just looking at what I had in my memorabilia box.”

“Your memorabilia box?” Frank unfastened his shoulder harness and let it fall over the edge of the couch. “I’ve asked to see that, you refused.”

Ellen stood up and lifted her box as she did. “Sorry. I thought Robbie could use seeing it.”

“O.K..” He rubbed his face. “What are you doing here Robbie?” He asked with edge.

Robbie, still smiling, ignored the cold tone to his brother’s voice. “I stopped by to see how Johnny was, and we started bull shitting. Johnny’s doing well.”

Frank nodded, a smile not crossing his face.

Ellen felt the tension. She exhaled loudly and scooted to the door. “I better go. It’s late. Night.”

Frank turned quickly as she started to leave. “Wait. Why?”

“I have to see my kids. You know the ones I brought into this fucked up world.” She smiled snidely. “Night.”

Frank blinked at her odd response and quick departure.

Robbie stood up from the couch and stretched. “I’ll leave now too.”

“Really?” Frank asked sarcastically. “Right at this moment?”

“Yep. Take it easy Frank.” As quickly as Ellen left, so did Robbie.

Waiting a few seconds, Frank walked back to the door and opened it. He stood, leaning in the archway, and watched as his younger brother trotted up the street to catch up to Ellen and walk with her. Frank watched until they left from his view. Angry, he stepped back inside his home and closed the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY

May 30th

“It’s heading out of hand.” George tossed his hands up as he paced around Andrea’s office. “Henry is usually so fair. Level headed.”

Joe had claimed Andrea’s desk, despite the fact that she was there as well, with Dean. “Yes he is. Maybe Robbie rubs him the wrong way.”

Andrea facially agreed. “They may just always clash. No matter what.”

George shifted his eyes around. “I don’t know. Twice today I got complaints from other survivors about the way he treats Robbie.”

“What are you suggesting?” Joe asked.

George hesitated, he didn’t want to say. “Dean. What’s your opinion?”

“I have none.” Dean stated. “It’s not my place to say because I’m not there when the Robbie and Henry situations transpire.”

Joe looked up at George. “You’re stalling. Say what’s on your mind.”

George nodded a few times in debate. “All right. I think if this continues anymore, we should put it to the community on whether Henry should be replaced on council.”

The screwdriver nearly dropped from Henry’s hand with his heart as he readied to replace the vent in the storage room next to Andrea’s office. A stuck vent trap was all Henry had to free, lift it and leave. But instead of satisfaction that he got an easy job done fast, he received hurting news.

Frank knew Ellen saw him. How could she not? He was only two feet from her desk. He waited for an acknowledgment of his presence and when he received none, he stepped closer to her desk. “El.”

Ellen actually looked up in surprise. “Frank? What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t hear me come in.”

“No. I’m busy with these evaluations.” She stood up and walked around her desk. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you. Last night you left . . .”

Ellen, folded her arms and waited for Frank to finish his sentence. He didn’t. “And?” She saw he had focused on the bunch of wildflowers on her desk. “What?”

“First the ring and now the flowers. Isn’t Dean romantic.”

“Dean didn’t bring me the flowers. Robbie did.”

“My brother is bringing you flowers?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, I remember when you used to too.”

“That’s before I realized how stupid I looked picking them. I don’t want him bringing you flowers El. In fact I want it to stop right . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen snapped. “If you came here to bitch, I don’t want to hear it.”

“No. I came here because . . . because I miss my friend. I miss you, El.” Frank neared her. “Yesterday, it was V-day. We vowed that we would always, always spend that day remembering our kids. We didn’t. Look . . .” Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “I even jotted down my memories that I wanted to share.” He handed them to Ellen. “I needed to share.”

Ellen began to open the paper and stopped. She handed it back to Frank and covered his mouth when she saw him getting ready to complain. “No.” she shook her head. “Share them with me tonight.”

“Tonight? Really? I’m gonna be working till ten.”

“That’s fine.” Ellen said softly. “In fact, I have to remove my supplies from the examining room in Joe’s office. I’ll just do that tonight. Meet me there when you’re done and we’ll talk.”

“Thank you.” Frank stepped to her.

Ellen moved away. “Talk Frank. No touching.”

Frank lifted his hand. “No touching. I can handle that. I can’t handle not talking to you.”

A triple light tap on the door announced Henry before his voice did. “Neither can I.”

Frank looked at him oddly. “Neither can you what?”

“Handle not talking to Ellen, especially now because I need to talk to her.”

Ellen shook her head. “Absolutely not. I learned my lesson with you, Henry.”

Frank hid his snicker watching the two staring at each other. “I’ll uh . . .” He stepped back, shifting his body out. “Let you two be. See you tonight, El.” Backwards he walked out.

Henry and Ellen, at the same time noticed Frank’s odd departure. But it was Frank.

“El, I need to talk.”

“Not unless you sign a waiver of anger.” Ellen walked behind her desk. “I knew you’d need me one day again so . . .” As she sat down she opened her drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. “Here. Sign it and we’ll talk.”

Henry read the short note which implied he wasn’t allowed to yell at Ellen for her advice. He grabbed a pen from the desk. “Fine.” He signed it and handed it back. “Why do I feel like I’m Charlie Brown and you’re Lucy.”

Ellen giggled and folded her hands. “What’s wrong?”

“Robbie.” Henry leaned back in the chair. “No. I guess . . . I guess it’s me. I’m losing it on him El. I snap at him. I’m short. Everyone but me sees it and I don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll talk to Robbie.”

“Excuse me? You’re supposed to help me.”

“Henry.” Ellen stood up and walked around to him. “I, right now, know Robbie a little more than most people do. And I know you. I’ll speak to Robbie. I know he has a lot of anger and he knows how to instigate.” Ellen winked. “I’ll handle it.”

Henry sighed in relief. “Oh, El.” He stood up. “You don’t think it’s all me.”

Ellen shook her head. “But, I didn’t say that. O.K.?”

“Promise.” Henry kissed her on the cheek. “And next time I won’t even whine about signing a waiver. I better go. Thanks again. Let me know.”

“I will.”

Henry moved to the door and stopped. “Shit.” He flew back in. “Robbie’s coming. If he sees me and you talk to him . . .”

“He’ll know. Stay here. I’ll get him to walk outside and you sneak out.” Getting a nod from Henry, Ellen walked out into the hall and headed of Robbie. “Robbie. Wow. What a surprise.”

Robbie smiled. “I came to see you.”

“I was going for some air. Wanna join me?” She grabbed his arm and turned him to walk back out.

“Sure.” He walked with her to the door and she pressed in her code. “Hey, El. I saw my brother. Why did he have the flowers I gave you?”

Ellen stopped mid-leaving. “Hold this door.” With her feet pattering, she ran down the hall to her office and looked in. “Oh! That dick!”

Robbie shook his head and waited for her to return. They walked outside.

Stepping out, Ellen looked to the bright sun. She let out a moan from the warmth. “So, what are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight?” Robbie shrugged as they continued to move. “Nothing. Why?”

Ellen held closer to Robbie steering him from containment. She looked back to see Henry sneak out and she knew it was safe to stop. “Well. I have to clean out the examining room at your

Dad's office. We're stopping runs for a while. I can use the help . . . and the company?"

"Sure." Robbie nodded. "What time. Four? Five?"

"Later. I was thinking nine. I know it's late, but Joe won't be there. We can be alone to . . . talk."

Running his forefinger and thumb over the corner of his mouth, Robbie wiped away his grin. "Talking alone and helping you sounds great."

Ellen grunted sarcastically. "You may not be saying that when we're finished."

"I highly doubt that. I like being with you. Always have. We'll have fun."

"I'm sure we will."

Robbie looked at his watch. "Then I better hurry and finish my work load. I'll see you later." He gave a squeeze to her arm. "And El . . ." He stepped back. "Thanks. I mean it. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Ellen said with confused pleasantries. Shrugging at his gratefulness over being dragged in to help work, and listen to her talk, Ellen returned to containment.

Frank looked down at his watch as he walked his check along the line of utility buildings. It wouldn't be long before he and John Matoose finished the structure and they could go home.

Frank did his check slowly, he had the gnawing feeling that he should be there. He checked all of the structures carefully, as if something was supposed to be found. Everything was turning out fine. But still, something was wrong, something was seriously wrong, Frank could feel it, but he just didn't know what it was.

Ellen stared at the open cabinet just above the counter in the examining room of the receiving center. She shook her head in disbelief at all the stuff that had gathered there. She knew Andrea would have a bird if she discovered how much Ellen had taken and forgotten to return. Ellen chuckled at her thoughts, Andrea hadn't a clue.

"Am I too late?"

Ellen stopped reaching and turned to the voice. Robbie was walking in, shutting the door behind him. "No just in time, I'm about to start putting stuff in boxes."

"El, you know, I had this really strange feeling that you asked me here tonight for another reason besides helping you."

"Well, yeah, I did." Ellen folded her arms and leaned on the counter. "How are things going?"

"Good." Robbie stepped to her.

"How about ... say . . . with Henry?"

"Henry's a prick." Robbie snapped back. "He's in my shit constantly."

"O.K. honesty's good." She turned her back to him and faced the open cupboard. "We can talk about Henry another time. We'll just talk while I work." She took a few items from the bottom shelf, then reached to the top. She stood on tip toes, trying to get that box of gauze she had hidden. Her finger tips extended to it, but they kept pushing it back.

"Here let me help you." Robbie suggested.

"Thanks." Ellen began to withdraw her arm. Her eyes widened when she felt Robbie press up behind her, right against her. His hand gently grabbed hers, so together they could retrieve the box. A twinge of feeling uncomfortable hit Ellen. "Thanks again. It sucks being so short."

"No problem. Maybe I can help your self-esteem."

Ellen paused in wonder on what he meant by that comment. She turned around, Robbie hadn't stepped back. Grabbing the gauze from her hand, he set it on the counter. He leaned his body against her, reached his hand behind Ellen's neck, pressed his lips

hard to hers and began to kiss her. Ellen, shocked, placed her hand to his chest to push him back. He didn't budge. His lips moved wide in a search and continued gaining momentum. Trying harder to move him again, she succeeded.

Robbie released his lips from hers and moved back. "El, what's wrong?"

Ellen touched her lips. "Robbie? I . . . why . . . ?"

"Alone time. Hit on you." Robbie tilted his head. "The person you've been waiting your whole life for." Robbie moved into her again.

Ellen, shocked and embarrassed, held her hands up to stop him. "Oh my God. Robbie, I am so, so sorry. I said things to you. Things you may have taken out of context."

"Right." Robbie's lips moved to hers as his hands pressed almost too tight to her face.

"Stop." Ellen pushed him back becoming more stern. "Now I'm not kidding. O.K.?"

Robbie threw his hands in the air and rubbed his head. "I'm confused. If this isn't what you want, then why did you ask me here this late, and when no one was around?"

"To talk to me."

"I don't think so. I just think you're chickening out."

"No, Robbie. I'm not chickening out." Ellen raised her hands. Calming down, she tried to take control over the situation. "I'm just . . . not. Understand?"

Robbie nodded his head, a disbelieving look in his eyes. "Oh . . . OK . . . Ellen, playing hard to get was something you should have done before you asked me up here." His hand reached up toward her.

Ellen pushed it away. "Look, if you're trying to joke around and get me scared . . . "

"I'm not joking. I've wanted you. You're finally giving in." Robbie leaned into her and reached for her waist.

Ellen, again, shoved him back, this time with more force. “This isn’t funny.” She tried not to show any worry. “Maybe . . . maybe you should leave.”

“Come on, Ellen, it’ll be fun. So just relax. I’m not leaving.”

“Then I will.” Ellen stepped to her right to go past him, Robbie blocked her. Ellen tried her left, he repeated his actions. “Robbie, let me by.” Ellen moved again to the right. His blocking her was a game to him. “Robbie!” Ellen raised her voice in her coldest manner. “This is not good. O.K.? What if Frank walks in here and sees you doing this?”

Robbie laughed loudly. “Do you think I care? Do you think I’m afraid of Frank?.Let him walk in. I don’t give a shit. Better yet, do you think he gives a shit? Do you think he cares about you? Frank doesn’t care about you. All you are to him is his fuckin’ whore.”

Not realizing the Pandora’s Box she would open, Ellen, with almost an involuntary defense motion, open handedly slapped Robbie hard across the face. Her hand stung upon its connection.

Robbie, without hesitation, whacked her in return. His was not as easy. His had weight behind it. His slap sent her a foot back.

Ellen reached her hand up to her throbbing face. She became engulfed with anger as her fingers felt the warm wet sensation of blood. It was not a situation she wanted to be in. The warning signals had gone off. It was time to run. Ellen, with all of what little weight she had, bolted toward the door. It didn’t take much though, for Robbie to stop her. She had to go past him, as she did, his arms grasped her from behind, holding her by the waist. “Let me go!” Ellen kicked back her foot, jamming it into his shin. She jolted back her elbow into him, taking him somewhat by surprise. His grip released, but only for a moment. As she began to flee once more, he grabbed her by her hair, and tossed her back behind him. Ellen’s back slammed into the counter. She didn’t even have time to catch her balance and Robbie dove on her. The pressure of his body against her gouged the counter into her back as his hands groped and pulled and his lips bit.

Ellen let out a throaty, struggling scream as she slammed her fist into his back and felt her legs part wider. “No. Stop this! Robbie!”

Robbie lifted his head and his hand squeezed her chin. “You said you would have me.”

She saw his mouth approaching, felt his body against hers and Ellen had only one choice. Drop to his level of thought. Her heart beat rapidly. “Not like this.” Ellen spoke softly, hiding the quiver in her voice. “See. Not like this.” Rigidly she kissed him quickly. “I want . . . I want to make love.” She swallowed. “Not here.” She contained her sigh when she felt the pressure ease up on her.

Robbie lifted only slightly. He stared at her as his fingers smeared the blood on her face. Blood that seeped from her ripped open stitches. “Here.” Parting his lips while breathing heavily, he kissed her.

Ellen’s throat tensed up when she felt his lips go to her neck and his hand undo her pants. Tightly she closed her eyes and tried to speak. A squeak escaped with her words when she felt his hands slip into her pants. “Robbie. Not here. Please. Let’s go . . . Let’s go back to your house.” Robbie removed his hand and Ellen slowly let out a breath as he also lifted his body from her. She kept her eyes on him as he stepped back. She had only one thought. And that was to run. Seeing a safe distance form, with everything she had, she charged again. She didn’t make it far. Robbie’s left hand gripped her tight by the shirt.

“What do you think I am!” Loudly he shouted, his face deep red. “Fuckin stupid! Huh! You think I’d buy it! You and your little games.” He snatched her in close. “Guess what, El? Games over.”

Like in slow motion, she saw the fist form on his right hand, his knuckles turning white. He reached back, and with anger, and frustration, he delivered one single powerful blow into the side of Ellen’s face. It spun her around, and landed her hands first on to the counter. With her rolling eyes, the radio, her radio, came into focus. She quickly reached for it, and pressed in the button.

“Frank, help Me!” she cried out with everything she had. “Oh, God Frank, help me!”

Frank felt Ellen’s call for help as he heard it rip through his radio. It burned through his soul, and he knew she was in trouble. There was no time to call her back, no time to hesitate. He knew where she was. Frank charged with his every emotion to seek her out. Ellen’s cry was heard . . . everywhere.

Robbie snatched the radio from her hand and hurled it across the room. It smashed against the wall. He grabbed Ellen by the back of the neck and slammed her head onto the counter, bending her over. “What are you doing Ellen?” He brought his lips to her ear as he slammed himself into her. “Frank can’t help you now.”

“Let me up now!” Ellen screamed out, trying to squirm from his hold. “Look what you’re doing! Stop this. It’s me!”

“Shut up!” He lifted her head slightly and slammed her face down into the counter. “Just shut up.”

“Fuck you!” Ellen felt the cold counter on her cheek.

“No, El. Fuck you.” Robbie pressed himself harder and harder to her, as he laid his chest against her back and used his knees to spread her legs.

A gurgling, grunting scream came from Ellen as she could feel the edge of the counter top cutting into her gut. “I won’t let you do this!” She reached back her hand feeling for his face, her fingernails finding his skin. Robbie knew what was coming, lifted back suddenly, but not without forfeiting some of his flesh to Ellen’s nails.

“It won’t be that easy.” Still pressing her to the counter by her neck, Robbie reached his other hand around her front.

The skin ripped on her abdomen skin when Robbie grabbed for her pants, but it wasn’t as frightening to Ellen as the feel of air when her pants fell to the floor. With everything she could muster up, Ellen screamed out. “No!”

Frank's heart stopped. His body filled with rage upon running into the examining room and seeing what was happening. Without hesitation, without a single thought, Frank charged over to Robbie, grabbed him, lifted him from Ellen, and threw him across the room as if he were nothing.

Robbie banged into the wall, his body slid down to the floor, he didn't know what happened, what hit him, or what was going to happen next. Frank stormed over to him, grabbed him by the throat, clenched his fist, and busted Robbie's nose.

Robbie couldn't react, he hadn't the strength. He felt the pain from Frank's plummeting fist crash into his face, once, twice, three times. The blows did not stop. When would they stop? He felt like he was going to die. He was dying. Robbie's body sailed through the air again, crashing back first into the counter. He opened his bloodied eyes. The frightful, horrifying sight of Frank raging toward him came into focus. Frank's hand gripped Robbie's throat and slammed him back down into the counter. This time it was Robbie who was pinned by the throat. This time it was Robbie on the counter. Only Frank stood above him facing him. The look in Frank's eyes, the red in his face.

Frank, with a choking grip, held Robbie to the counter. He reached with his free hand into his shoulder harness, pulled out his revolver, shoved it point blank to Robbie's face, cocked back the hammer, and rested his trembling finger on the trigger. But before he could pull the trigger, he looked into Robbie's eyes. They were his brother's eyes.

"Oh God Frank don't shoot me!" Robbie pleaded.

"What the fuck were you doing?" Frank's emotional words screamed at him.

"I'm sorry, Frank. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." Robbie began to cry.

"You're my brother. How could you do this to her?!" Frank shouted. His words tearful, his finger pressing harder.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“No!” Frank placed the gun closer to him. “Do you know what this means? Do you know what you did?” His hand gripped tighter to Robbie’s throat banging his head off the table with every single word he spoke. “How could you do this to her?!”

The tension did not break even when Dean and John Matoose flew in the room, both hearing Ellen’s call.

Dean immediately saw Ellen. “Oh, my God.” He rushed to her as she fastened her pants “El. Oh my God.” He grabbed on to her, she didn’t respond. Looking over his shoulder he saw Frank holding the gun to Robbie. “John!” Dean called out. “Get her out of here. Now! Take her home.”

John Matoose, without hesitation, raced to Ellen, and lifted her up. He fled from the room with her.

Dean raged over to Frank, grabbing hold of him. “Frank. No.”

Frank shoved Dean back, using his shoulder to do so. He said nothing, he just stared at Robbie, gun cocked.

“Frank, no.” Dean closed in again, trying desperately to be the voice of reason. “Don’t shoot him, Frank. Don’t do it.”

Frank bit his lip and shook his head. “Dean, get the fuck out now!”

“I can’t let you kill him. He’s your brother Frank. Your brother. Don’t do this.”

“Did you see what he did to Ellen? Did you look at her!” Frank’s eyes did not move from Robbie.

“I saw, Frank. But, I’m begging you, don’t do this. You did your job. It’s out of our hands now. Frank. Please.”

Frank heard Dean’s words. He saw Robbie. As much as he wanted to just end it right there and then, he couldn’t, he couldn’t pull the trigger on his only brother. Frank placed the gun back into his harness. He released his grip on Robbie’s neck, tossing him to the floor. “You’re as good as dead now anyway.” Frank stepped over Robbie’s body and began to leave the room. He had to walk away, he had to calm himself down. His heart beat so strong that it

hurt. As he made it to the doorway between Joe's office and the examining room, Joe, followed by Henry and Miguel, came rushing in. They too had heard Ellen call out.

Joe knew by the look on his son's face, something terrible had transpired. "Where's Ellen? What happened?"

Frank leaned in the archway, head resting on his arm, and he pointed his thumb back. "Ask the piece of shit."

Joe looked into the examining room, Dean was helping a beaten Robbie to his feet. "Frank, I'm asking you. What happened?"

Frank slowly turned and faced his father. "When I got here, Robbie was trying to rape Ellen."

"Oh my God." Joe closed his eyes. "Did he?"

"I . . . I don't think. I don't know." Frank rubbed his eyes, trying to keep his emotions intact.

Joe gripped his son's shoulder, and squeezed it as he walked past him. "You did good." He walked into the examining room. "Dean, leave us."

Dean knew it was not a time to say anything. He walked from Robbie, and from the examining room.

Joe stood near the door. When Dean had left, Joe closed it.

Robbie, whose head rested on the counter, lifted it to his father. "Are you going to shoot me?"

"No." Joe slowly walked to him. "Do you even comprehend what you have done?" Joe asked calmly of his son. "Do you? That was Ellen. She is family. Family. And what about your brother? You know how he feels about her. I'm surprised you aren't dead right now."

"I would have been. Dean walked in."

"Then you owe your life to Dean." Joe walked up behind his son. He spoke sternly, yet quietly in his ear. "What you did was wrong."

"I know that." Robbie began to cry. "I'm so sorry. Sorrier than anyone knows. I need another chance."

“You need to be grateful that you are still breathing.” Joe leaned closer to him. “You have no one to blame but yourself for what happens to you. No one. We let you in here, we fed you, we trusted you. We loved you. So listen to what I’m telling you. You are not the son I raised. You are not the son I trusted. You are nothing. Nothing to me, to Frank, to anyone. I don’t even know who you are. If you could do something like this, you are nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing.” Joe backed up. He said all he had to say. His mind was made up. He walked to the examining room door, and opened it. His office was silent. George had joined the group. “We know what has to be done.”

George placed his arm around Joe. “I’m sorry. I know this is hard for you.”

Joe walked to his desk and sat down. “We’ll do it soon.”

Dean approached Joe’s desk. “Joe, this is your son. This can’t be done. He searched for you. You are his family.”

Dean’s words shocked everyone. Henry who stood by the file cabinet looked up. Miguel stepped from the wall he leaned against. Frank turned from his archway and gave an ‘it figures’ look.

Joe looked up only with his eyes. “I won’t argue with you on this, Dean. I’m right this time.”

“He’s your son. We have no one to blame but ourselves. We pushed him from containment. Maybe he really wasn’t ready. Let’s work with him some more. He of all people deserves your second chance. Henry.” Dean turned around to Henry. “You’re reasonable. Tell them we can work with Robbie. No one has to know about this, it’s only the five of us.”

Henry shook his head. “And Ellen. Do you really expect Ellen to walk around this community with him still here?”

“Ask her! Someone ask her. Because I would bet my life she would not want him gone.” Dean waited for someone’s response. He received none. “Look I have never agreed to the oustings, ever. All of you know that. This time I am asking you to look who it is. It’s Robbie. When will we stop? Where do we stop? Soon, will we toss someone out for disagreeing with you, Joe?”

Joe dropped the pen he was holding and shook his head with an angry laughter. “Oh, I suggest you drop this conversation now. This is serious. This isn’t an arguable crisis. What happened here was against the law here. A law you, me and all of the ‘originals’ wrote. Drop it, Dean. Now is not the time.”

“Just take a look Joe. He just didn’t know how to handle himself. He’s been out there for five years. He comes here. He depends on and falls for Ellen. All of us know that. She invites him here at nine o’clock at night. No one’s around.”

Frank turned slowly from his archway to Dean, he took one step to him. “Are you saying she asked for it?”

“I’m just saying . . .”

It was the wrong thing for Dean to say to the wrong person. Frank would not stand for it. With one single punch, he sent Dean’s five foot seven body, hurling across the room. Frank stormed to him again, he flung chairs out of his way as he did so. No one except for Miguel, budged. Miguel, knowing what Frank would and could do to Dean, stepped in the path of Frank. Stopping him.

“Frank.” Miguel held his hands to him. “You made your point. Back off.” He reached down, grabbed Dean from the floor and lifted him to his feet.

Frank knew he was wasting his time and energy on Dean. He reclaimed his spot in the archway.

Dean touched his throbbing eye. “I guess some are allowed to be violent. And some people aren’t.”

Joe stood slowly from his chair and leaned against the desk to Dean. He had passed the point of shouting in anger. “Now I’m going to make a suggestion to you. Before I do let me tell you. This is turning out to be one hell of a week. Don’t piss me off anymore. Now my suggestion, is that you turn your little body around and walk out the door. The next time you say something that callous, like you did about Ellen. Whether you mean it or not. I will not stop Frank. And this discussion is over.”

“Fine.” Dean threw his hands in the air. “Fine. I’m leaving. It’s on all of your consciences. Not mine.” He left the receiving center.

Joe sat back down in his chair. “George, I need you to go to Robbie’s house. Get all the stuff he brought with him, not the things we gave him. Pack it up with anything we’re holding that he brought in.”

“Got it Joe.” George patted Joe on the shoulder once, then walked out also.

“Henry, Miguel. I need you two to get Robbie. Take him to holding until George is ready to fly him out.”

Robbie heard it all, he jumped to his feet and ran to Joe’s office. “No. You really can’t be doing this. I looked for you. For five years I searched and this is what I get?”

Joe motioned to Henry and Miguel. They walked over to Robbie and grabbed him.

“No.” Robbie tugged and pulled, he wouldn’t budge. “Frank. Frank.”

Frank wouldn’t look at him.

“Frank, please don’t let them do this to me. Please. Frank, I’m your brother.”

Frank turned to Robbie, his words soft and cold. “I don’t have a brother. My brother died five years ago.”

“No!” Robbie screamed the whole way that Henry and Miguel dragged him out.

Joe took a deep breath. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. At that moment in Joe’s life, it would have been impossible for his heart to break anymore.

Dean opened the front door. “What is it, Frank?”
“I’m here to see Ellen.”

Dean began to close the door. “She’s upstairs. She needs her rest.”

Frank stuck his foot in the door to stop it from closing. He flung it open with his hand and barged past Dean to the steps, taking them two at a time.

Hurrying behind him, Dean stopped him before he went in the bedroom. “Frank, just let her go for tonight. Please?” he asked.

“I can’t.” Frank opened the bedroom door, shutting it immediately behind him. He saw Ellen, her back faced him. She stared out the window. “El?”

Ellen turned around. Her cheek swollen, her lip bloody. Her face truly reflecting the wounds of her battle.

“Oh my God.” Frank ran to her. He gently cupped her face in his hands. “I’m so sorry.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m so sorry he hurt you.” More than anything Frank wanted to take it all away from Ellen. His eyes weld with tears of anger and sorrow when he saw what his brother had actually done to her. He released his hands from her face and tried to hold her, but Ellen stepped away. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t you touch me.”

“O.K.” Frank believed he understood why. He held his hands up. “I won’t touch you. Can we sit?”

With a look of disgust, Ellen’s bruised lips parted and she shook her head at him. “Get out, Frank. I want you to leave. In fact, I don’t I want to see you again. What’s the distance from north to south in Beginnings? Ten miles? Try to stay that distance from me.” She turned from him.

“What?” Frank grabbed hold of her arm. He spoke soft. “El, look, you’ve been through a really bad time.”

Ellen ripped her arm away from his grip then followed with a pummeling arm-down that pushed him back. “Why are you talking to me like that? Am I standing here crying, am I standing here traumatized? No!”

“El, I understand what you are . . .”

“You don’t understand shit!”

“Can you please . . .” Frank closed his eyes. “Can you tell me why you are so mad at me?”

“I’m pissed at what you did to Robbie. Your brother.”

Frank’s body jolted as he tried to speak. Her words had shocked him. “What? What I did to my brother? What about what he did to you. Look at you.”

“Robbie didn’t know what he was . . .”

“Robbie knew exactly what he was doing. Don’t defend him. Don’t.” Frank’s hand cut through the air. “You have always defended him. Well this time, El, he didn’t rip off a drug store. This time, El, he didn’t steal the neighbor’s car. This time . . . he hurt you.”

“You don’t know.”

“Know what!” Frank threw his hands up. “That he tried to rape you?”

Ellen closed her eyes tightly at the ugliness of that word. “It was not his fault. He’s not the blame.”

“How can Robbie not be to blame for attacking you? How! Explain that to me.” Frank lowered his voice to a raspy whisper. “And don’t you let me hear you blame yourself.”

“Why not? Huh? Why not blame us all, Frank. You, me, Dean, the whole lot of you that strived to get him out of containment. The whole bunch that insisted that he was ready when he wasn’t.” Ellen’s strong words streamed together emotionally. “And I knew. I knew he could snap. And I led him on. Intentionally or not, I did. And look what happened. Then, then instead of just stopping it. You went after him, Frank. You beat him like I have never seen you beat a man before! Your brother. A brother that spent five years searching for you. Living in a world so horrible that we avoid it.”

“And you think I give a shit about that?” Frank stepped to her. “Do you he deserves my pity? Let me tell you something El, he doesn’t. And whether we live in a TV fuckin perfect old-style world, or the hell on earth we’re in now, my reaction still would

have been the same. I still would have gone after him because he was wrong. Wrong.”

“No, you’re wrong. And you don’t see it because it’s what you do.” With edge and severity, Ellen delivered her words. “You go in and ‘right’ a wrong, without regards to who they are or how you stop them. You’re cold and ruthless and you love it. And somewhere in that sick, demented mind you get off on the fact that you think you’re a hero. I got news for you, Frank, you’re not a hero and you certainly aren’t . . .”

“Ellen.” The door to the bedroom flung open and Dean stormed in. “That’s enough. Stop it. Don’t say another word to this man. He saved your life. If it wasn’t for him you would have been raped. Or worse, dead. Now whether I like him or not, I will not let you degrade what he did for you.”

The sneer on Ellen’s face said it all as she glared at Dean then Frank and backed up to the door. “Both of you can get the hell out of my life. I have to find Joe. We have to deal with Robbie.”

Dean reached out and stopped her. His voice softened. “Robbie’s . . . been dealt with. He’s . . . he’s gone, El.”

Ellen’s eyes grew wide and her aching body trembled. Stumbling some in her turn, Ellen took off from the room, charged down the steps and out the front door. Every pounding footstep to Frank’s jeep hurt, but she had to continue on.

The keys were still in the ignition when she jumped inside. And without a second thought and ignoring the calls from Dean and Frank, Ellen sped off.

There wasn’t a part of Ellen’s body that didn’t hurt with the strong pounding of her heart. Centered on getting to the hanger, she drove despite the fact her left vision was blurred. But her determination proved futile fast. Not even a quarter mile up the hill that led to the hanger Ellen knew that the painful end had come. She heard the noise and saw the lights from the rising helicopter. She stopped the jeep and jumped out, trying to call out, but it was useless. The helicopter kept on lifting. It was over. A

very traumatic turn in all of their lives had come to an end. Robbie was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

May 31st

Frank rolled his head to work out the kinks in his neck. The sun shone bright through the closed blinds in Ellen's bedroom. The chair he had slept in the whole night, seemed soft at first, but grew harder as the night went on. Of course, he did not get much sleep. Whenever he seemed to doze off, the vision of Robbie on top of Ellen crashed into his mind, making him sit straight up. Every time he closed his eyes he saw that, he heard Ellen's screaming. Frank angered inside, along with hurt.

He rested his elbows on his knees as he stared upon Ellen. His fingertips touching his nose as he rocked back and forth. She looked peaceful as she slept. Lying on her stomach, her nude back barely covered with a sheet. The bruises from the night before were predominant and a painful reminder of what had happened.

Slowly he stood from the chair, walked over to the bed and crouched down by her pillow. Ellen faced the other way, her hair flowed back to him. Just to see if she was all right. Frank lifted his hand to her.

Ellen jolted awake by the light touch of his fingers. She tried to lift suddenly but her sore body stopped her. With a moan, she plopped back down and opened her eyes. "Frank?"

He let out a slight joking breath. "For a second I thought you were gonna call me Dean."

"Where is he?"

"Working."

"Why aren't you?"

"Because I got someone to fill in for me. It was either me or my dad sitting with you. Someone had to be here."

"I don't need anyone." Ellen lifted her eyes catching glimpse of her robe on the headboard. She pulled it down as she struggled and rolled over. Bringing her robe to her, she painfully sat up. "I thought I made that clear last night."

Frank nodded and stood up. “Yep. You did. Right before we found you passed out in the jeep.”

“I’m fine now.” Ellen put on her robe and rose from the bed closing it. “You can go.”

“Nope. What do you need?”

“For you to go.”

Frank tossed his hands up. “I’m not. You’re hurt. You need someone here. You can talk or ignore me. Don’t matter. I’m staying, So . . . what do you need. Want breakfast, coffee . . .”

“I want to take a shower.” Ellen walked across her bedroom. “Does Dean know you’re here?”

“Dean doesn’t have a choice. He didn’t last night. He doesn’t now.”

Ellen stopped and looked back at him. “How can you say that? Dean lives here. He lives with me. If anyone doesn’t have a choice, it’s you, Frank. You’re the outsider here.”

Frank kept his emotions in check. His jaw twitched slightly as he stepped to her, but he hid it well. “You know, you can lash out at me all you want. Just know that I can take it. If it helps you feel better, do it. Say whatever you want. In fact . . .” He walked to the chair he spent the night in and bent down to the floor, lifting a tablet. “I’ve been writing down things I want to tell you. Here . . .” He ripped the top two sheets and handed the tablet to Ellen. “Why don’t you write down everything you hate about me. Anything. Write it. Feel better.”

Ellen glared at him, tablet in her hand. Then without saying anything else, she slammed the tablet into his chest and walked from the bedroom to the bathroom.

She shut the door, and after immediately starting the shower, she reached for the medicine cabinet. She opened it, retrieved her toothbrush and got it ready. As she opened her mouth to brush, her jaw locked. Pain shot through. It was bad enough she couldn’t open her mouth, but the burning as the toothpaste hit the corner of her lips, made her cringe. Ellen rinsed. The cold water felt good.

As she stood up straight and closed the mirror, she caught glimpse of her reflection. Her face looked much worse than it had the night before. The entire left side of her face looked like something from a horror movie. Her eye slightly closed, a small cut above her eyebrow. Her cheek bone swelled some, but was encircled by a huge, blue bruise. And the corner of her mouth was entirely red. The more she stared, the angrier she became. If her face looked like that how bad was the rest of her? Ellen undid the robe and looked down at her naked body. It was worse. She slid her hand across her abdomen, and covered her mouth. Her hand trembled across her bruised lips. Taking a deep breath, she pulled herself together. “I will not let this get to me,” she spoke out loud. “I will not.” She dropped off her robe, turned on the water, and stepped cautiously into the warm shower.

Robbie groaned once, a painful soft moan that vibrated his whole body. His face felt the cold and hard ground. Yet as he opened one eye, he did not see the wilderness that he had anticipated. The vision before him, a red speckled linoleum floor, was not what he expected. He lay on his stomach, arms stretched above his head. He lifted his head once, the dried blood that had formed between his nostril and the floor acted as an adhesive.

Robbie sat up, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand, it still trickled blood. The bridge of his nose throbbed in pain and he could not breathe through it. He knew for sure it was broken.

What had happened? Where was he? He looked around the room. It was a large quiet room. Shelves filled with books, and long tables scattered about. An old library. The dust was so thick, it floated through the air and could be seen in the rays of the sun as it peeked through the board covered windows.

He remembered in his mind the night before, or at least he thought it was the night before. The vision of Miguel holding him down as Henry injected him with something in the neck. The night would forever be hard to forget. The overwhelming after-effects of the pulverization he took from Frank started to hit him, and Robbie lifted himself from the floor.

The room nor the building looked familiar. Robbie staggered around, his mouth was dry and he needed something to drink. Then it dawned on him, maybe Beginnings had changed their minds. Maybe they never removed him from the community, but placed him instead in some sort of prison.

Robbie lifted a chair that lay on its side. He plopped his sore body in it, taking deep breaths, because breathing was difficult. As he rested his head back, the door of the room opened. A figure of a man appeared. The sun shined brightly behind him causing the man to look like a shadow. The man was big, very big.

Robbie squinted to the figure as he walked in the room. “Frank?” he called out. “Frank is that you?”

Joe was on his way into the lab to speak to Dean when he heard the breaking of glass. He thought he heard some sort of mumbled obscenity following it, but he wasn’t sure. He hesitated in his walk in when he saw Dean trying to clean up a spill, then get so frustrated he had to stop to bury his face in his hands.

Joe continued in, laying a hand on Dean’s back as he stood next to him. “How you holding up?”

Sliding his fingertips down his face, Dean gazed up to Joe. “Not well.”

“I know that.”

“But I bet . . . probably not as well as Ellen.”

“Have you been back home today?” Joe asked.

“Oh, yeah. Several times. And several times she threw me out.” Dean shrugged. “I guess that’s to be expected. Last I was there she was working on some ‘reasons why I hate Frank and Dean’ list.”

“Ah, therapy.” Joe nodded and smiled a forced smile.

“Joe.” Dean leaned on the counter. “I am so sorry about your family. All the way around.”

“I am too. I’ve seen better days. Then again, I’ve seen worse.”

“Amen to that.” Andrea’s comment rang in the room as she walked in. “I just got back from examining Ellen. Curious?”

“Absolutely.” Dean said. “How is she doing?”

“Well.” Andrea nodded. “Hurting, sore. She won’t come in for an x-ray. But she’ll heal.”

“What about emotionally?” Joe asked. “Did she say anything to you? I mean when I was there, she seemed fine.”

“She is,” Andrea said. “Ellen has this unnerving ability to be very . . . cold. She doesn’t love anymore so therefore she doesn’t get hurt. A very distinctive defense mechanism that she has fine tuned through the years. She doesn’t know how to be any other way. So this isn’t bothering her. And if it did, she’s working through it. Compiling some sort of list.”

“Still?” Dean asked surprised. “Swell. I don’t want to see it.”

“I don’t think she plans on showing you.” Andrea smiled. “But my concern doesn’t just lie with Ellen . . .” She turned to Joe. “It lies with you as well, Joe. How are you handling all this?”

“Handling.” Joe nodded. “It’s a good thing I firmly believe obstacles and heartaches that don’t break us . . . make us strong.”

So impressed Andrea looked “Joe, that was very good.”

“Thanks. It’s a Joe quote.” He nodded then turned serious. “But I’ll tell ya, right now with all that’s happened, according to my quote, I should be Hercules.”

Paul looked around his house, he couldn't believe what had happened. Robbie was gone. It all seemed like a bad dream. George coming to the home the night before to gather Robbie's things. Calmly, being such the politician, George told Paul the reason. Robbie had attacked Ellen. Paul had a hard time believing that because Robbie was so into Ellen. He thought it was some sort of mistake. The details were skim. Robbie was with Ellen. Ellen called out for help. Frank showed up. Paul's mind wandered to the defense of his friend. Perhaps Frank misunderstood the situation. Robbie had adjustment problems, and a short fuse, but would he risk what he had searched so long for? Paul kept coming up with the answer 'no'.

He began to debate in his mind if it was time for him also to leave Beginnings. He had accepted the fact that they ousted people, he knew that. He couldn't accept the fact that they ousted Robbie. A line had to be drawn somewhere. In Paul's mind he believed Beginnings crossed that line when they tossed Robbie back into a world that was so harsh.

"Hello?" Michelle called from the front door that was open.
"Paul, are you here?"

"Michelle, hi."

"I had to see it for myself. I had to see if it was true. Robbie's really gone." Michelle folded her arms close to her and hung her head down.

"I can't believe it myself. You were friends with him also. Did you see it coming? I didn't. I know Robbie was short tempered, but to try to rape Ellen?"

"No. Not with how he felt about Ellen. Something is not right. Robbie wouldn't jeopardize losing the family he looked for. You know I wouldn't doubt at all if Frank set this whole thing up. Walked in, busted Robbie and Ellen . . ."

"Toss Robbie out." Paul finished her sentence. "But . . . who are we to say anything?"

"Certainly not originals." Michelle said.

“And neither was Robbie,” sadly Paul stated.

“I wish there was some way to help him. I really do.”

“I know what you mean.” Paul said. “Who knows, maybe, maybe someday, somehow we’ll get that chance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“So how long were you in the community?” The burly man with long red hair and whiskers asked Robbie as he handed him a cup of water.

“Thanks.” Robbie took the water, he gulped it down, it was bitter, and his face showed it. “About four weeks, maybe five. I don’t know.”

“That long? Never heard of anyone being there that long and being ousted. About thirty who were ousted live here.”

“Here? Where is here?”

“A small town ‘bout forty miles or so from the community.”

“So that’s where they dropped me.” Robbie grunted as he stood up, holding on to his side. His ribs had also been broken. “They dropped off a kid here a little while back. A kid named Jason. Know him?”

“Yes. But the kids not all there. He comes and goes all the time. But they didn’t drop you here. We heard the chopper last night. Figured they were ousting someone. We got on the horses and followed, got you and brought you here.”

“Is this some sort of place the rejects hang?” Robbie was sarcastic but realized it wasn’t warranted. The man was being hospitable. “Sorry, I’m just angry.”

“Understandable, and pretty beat up too. Never seen that before either.”

“Well it’s all a big misunderstanding. I know it is. I just got to get back there.”

“They don’t make mistakes. And going back there won’t make a difference, some of us had tried. They don’t care. They won’t let you back in.”

“They’ll let me back in.”

“And what makes you so special?”

“ My name is Robbie Slagel. I have a right to be in there. And I’m gonna go back there as soon as my body heals. Can I stay here until then?”

“Sure. I’ll even help you get back there, on one condition.”

“What’s that?” Robbie apprehensively asked.

“That you come back here and join us if they turn you away. I need bodies. Bodies to do what I want to do. I call myself Moses, because I plan on leading these people to the promised land. That land is Beginnings.”

“You plan to storm Beginnings one day?”

“I do. When I have enough people. And trust me they will regret it.” Moses held out his hand to Robbie. “Well Mr. Slagel, what is your answer?”

“If they turn me away I will be back. Without a doubt.” Certain that he would not have to return, Robbie sealed his promise with a firm handshake. He needed Moses and his town so he could build up his strength. Strength to go back and reclaim his place in Beginnings, and strength to fight Beginnings if they refused to let him back.

Dean expected the house to be quieter when he returned home that evening for what seemed the tenth time. Quiet was not what Dean got, he was immediately pummeled by his screaming children the second he stepped into his home.

“Daddy . . .Daddy.” Alexandra jumped in his arms.

“Where’s Mommy?”

Ellen stepped from the kitchen into the dining area holding plates. “You’re back.”

“What are you doing out of bed?”

Alexandra grabbed Dean's nose and squeezed. "Mommy fell down a hill."

"Yes, I know sweetie." Dean removed her pinching hand and put her down. "Where's Frank? Tell me he's not upstairs rearranging my stuff."

"Frank left awhile ago." Ellen placed the forks down. "The kids are starving. I'm glad you're here to do the meal thing."

Dean ignored her dinner conversation. "He left you alone?"

"No Dean, I haven't been alone. Everyone and their mother stopped by today. Frankly, I'm sick of people."

"I'm here now, why don't you go upstairs and get some rest."

"No, I don't want to rest. I'm going out for a walk." Ellen walked past him to the living room, she bent down and kissed her kids. "Mommy won't be long. She'll be right back." She quickly headed to the door.

Dean ran to her, stopping her. "El, don't go out. Come on. Stay home. We'll talk. You can . . ." Dean smiled. "Show me the 'Dean hate' list."

"Dean, I'm sorry. But I need to get out of this house. I have been here all day. I've had people in and out asking me how I'm doing. Giving me looks of pity. I had a bad experience, yes. I need to get over it. Now laying around and feeling sorry for myself, isn't going to do it. I need to put it behind me."

"El, please." Dean tried to be soothing. "I understand what you are saying. Fine, get over it, but do it after you've rested for a few days. Look at your face." He ran his hand down her cheek. "You're hurt. This was not a minor thing that happened to you."

"You don't think, Dean? Compared to what has happened in my life time it is." Ellen began to leave but stopped. "Dean, look, I know what you and everyone else is trying to do. I appreciate it, I do. But I have to get through this my own way."

"Is forgetting that it happened the way to do it?"

"Trust me, I'll never forget it happened. But I fought too hard to get where I am in my life now. I can't, for a second, let this pull

me back.” Ellen opened the door. “I won’t be long. I promise. I just want to go off by myself for awhile.”

Ellen knew where to go, the only place in the whole community that she felt peace at. A place she called ‘the hill’. She had to borrow a jeep to get close enough to walk there. But it was worth it. Off by the security training area, it was far enough away, yet high enough to see everything afoot. It was peaceful and quiet and lonely. Standing in the grassy area of ‘the hill’ Ellen paced slightly in thought.

“I kind of figured this is where you would be,” Frank called to her. “I went back to your house, you were gone. Dean said you wanted to be alone.”

Ellen turned her head back to him. “At the risk of sounding sarcastic, why are you here then?”

“Something’s bothering me and it can’t wait.”

Ellen, arms folded tight to her, stared out. She heard the rustling of papers but feared turning around.

“See. I have a problem with number fourteen. What the hell else am I supposed to do with my fingernails after I bite them? You have to spit them out. Number three . . . I laughed, I agree. But number forty-eight. I have to argue on that. No way . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen gasped out his name then turned around. “You can’t argue my ‘things I hate about you’ list.” Ellen walked up to him and snatched it from his hand. “And what are you doing with it anyhow?”

“Dean had his.”

“I don’t care.”

“I thought, you know, we could compare our lists.”

Ellen was surprised. “You made a list of things you hate about me?”

“Well, yeah. I thought that’s what we were doing.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Wanna see?”

“Yes.” Ellen snapped and took the sheet. “At least it’s not six pages.” She unfolded it and stared. She turned it over. “Frank? It’s . . . blank.”

“That’s because there’s nothing I hate about you.”

Ellen cringed and whined loudly. “Now see. See.” She stomped. “This right here is the exact reason I put that one thing on my list.”

“Number twenty-seven. You hate me because I’m sensitive.”

Ellen laughed. “That is not what it said. I said I hate you because no matter what, you always know what to do and what to say to get to me. Even if it’s all an act.” She shook her head at the blank sheet of paper. “Now I feel really bad about my list.”

“Um El? That’s uh . . . the point.” Frank winked as if he let her in on a punch line she didn’t quite understand.

“I know that.” She handed the paper back to him. “Do you realize how good the blank paper idea was?”

“Hell yeah,” Frank said. “You should have heard Andrea going on about how sweet of an idea it was when Dean told her he was gonna do it. So I said, ‘No fuckin way is he getting one up on me.’”

“You overheard Dean telling Andrea he was giving me a blank hate list.”

“Yeah.”

“And you stole it from him?” Ellen stepped close to Frank. “You stole Dean’s win-me-over idea?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God, Frank. That is so wrong.”

“So is making a hate list.”

“You told me to.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

Ellen went silent as she stared up at him. “And I didn’t mean . . . I didn’t mean a lot of what I said last night. I was angry, I was hurt. My body ached . . .”

“El. Don’t worry about it.”

“I have to.” Ellen softened her voice. “Frank, you’ve come to my rescue more times than I can count. And just so you know how I feel. Really feel. Every time you charge in and save the day, you are no less than a hero. My hero. Always.”

Frank raised his eyebrows slowly one time and shifted his weight to one foot. He looked up to the sky then back down to Ellen. “Nice try.”

Ellen mouth dropped open in shock.

Frank closed it. “Nope. You were right. I have to admit. Nothing’s like it.” Frank took on a phony arrogant tone. “Yep. Run in, be the hero. Run home . . .” Frank cleared his throat. “And whack off. I do get off on being the hero, you know.”

Slowly Ellen shook her head with a soft chuckle. She let a moment of silence pass and she looked up to Frank. “I really miss you.”

The heavy breath of relief Frank let out brought him closer to Ellen. His hands hovered over her face and his lips over hers. He waited until he knew Ellen wasn’t pulling back and then he laid his hands to her cheeks and spread his fingers to feel her entire face. He brought his lips to Ellen’s and kissed her as gently as he could without hurting her. But that one barely touching kiss was filled with the intensity of his emotions that seeped through. “I love you.” He stared at her. “This has been a pretty rough month for us. And last night was the end to that. It was painful. I want to get through this with you. I need to. And I swear to God, everything’s that happened with Robbie, my stand, your stand. We have to put it behind us and never . . . look back. Because it’s over.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

June 7th

The fluttering of the horse's mouth sent a foul stench of air blasting toward Robbie. He quickly turned his head from the odor, holding on to the reigns trying to keep control of the black horse loaned to him by Moses. "Easy." He pet the head of the horse.

"Got everything?" Moses secured Robbie's pack behind the saddle of the horse.

"Yes. I think."

"Now, she's watered and fed. Keep a good steady pace and you should hit Beginnings in a few hours. The way that I mapped out for you should take you to the southwest section of the perimeter. It's about two miles south of the back gate. Got it?"

"Got it." Robbie placed his foot in the stirrup and mounted the horse. The horse jumped back a little.

"It's gonna be difficult with you leaving at night. But that fancy watch you have has a light on its compass. Stay steady east, don't wander left or right. About two thirds of your way there, if you are correct, you'll hit the highway. It's easy from there on. Are you sure you wouldn't want to wait until sun up?"

"No. I want to get there at sun up. It's best." Robbie was ready to go. "Now what am I gonna do with the horse?"

"If they let you in, there's a lot of trees there, tie her to a tree. If we don't hear from you in say ten hours, we'll fetch her. I hope if you make it in there you'll remember us."

"No problem." Robbie reached down his hand. "If I don't, I'll be back."

Moses shook Robbie's hand and with a firm whack, smacked the horse on its backside to send it running off.

Robbie was on his way. With all the skills he had acquired in his life, and the instincts he had developed on his search for his family, he knew finding Beginnings would not be a problem. He had given his body time to heal and hopefully, Beginnings time to cool down. He knew the first person he would see would be Frank,

so on his journey, in his mind, he searched for the right words to say.

But what could Robbie say? He had made a huge mistake. One he regretted and he wished he hadn't done. One he would have to talk his way out of. Robbie was certain that he could talk to Frank. Frank was his brother, his flesh and blood.

Robbie held high hopes that he wouldn't be let down. Things can always be forgiven. He just needed the chance. The entire way back to Beginnings, he kept that in his mind.

The horrendous dream Ellen was having about Robbie made her abruptly awake. But the sudden sitting up in bed caused the overwhelming feeling of nausea. Her stomach churned and her mouth salivated. Ellen jumped from bed and bolted to the bathroom, shut the door, slid to the floor, hugged the commode, and threw up.

Dean looked up to the ceiling when he heard the familiar routine. The same thing he had heard every single morning. Just as the coffee was finishing, and Dean was going up to wake Ellen, it happened. The running footsteps, the slamming of the bathroom door, the clank of the toilet seat, and the not-so-subtle sound of Ellen up-heaving. He knew what was causing it. The suppressed emotional after effects of her trauma were spewing their way out somehow. And in a way she bodily couldn't control. Too much time had passed and Dean knew how wrong it would be for him to let it go on any longer without saying anything. He placed down her coffee mug and walked upstairs. "El?" He knocked on the bathroom door, calling softly to her. "El, are you O.K.?"

"Fine." Ellen's voice echoed in the toilet bowl.

"El you are not fine, you're sick. Maybe you should see Andrea today." He leaned against the bathroom door.

"Dean!" Ellen held tighter to the rim, her eyes watered as she fought desperately the dry heaves that happened upon her. "Please leave me alone. I'm fine."

"I'm not so sure."

Ellen rolled her eyes and she struggled with that knot that formed as her stomach fought to empty contents that were not there. Finally, it subsided. Ellen stood up slowly, flushed the toilet, washed her face, rinsed her mouth with water and brushed her teeth. When she opened the bathroom door, Dean was still standing there. "Dean, go away."

"No. Look at you. You look terrible."

"Gee thanks. I knew I could count on you to give a good compliment." She moved to the bedroom.

"El, I didn't mean it like that." Dean followed her. "I'm concerned. O.K., how's this . . . you look . . . you look really bad." Dean nodded. "Better?"

Ellen grunted, walked past him to her bedroom and shut the door.

Frank found himself trying to remember the names of all of his high school teachers. It was a way to wake up his mind because the coffee wasn't doing the trick. Not often did he carry his coffee with him when he walked rounds checking on the perimeters. But he did on that morning, mug in hand, clipboard in the other. He was tired and his body moved like it. Not getting much sleep the night before was the reason. A pseudo problem at containment got Ellen out of her home in the middle of the night and Frank the chance to be with her. It was the same thing they had done for so many years and the thing Frank vowed he wanted

to stop. But they were at it again, back to sneaking around. But this time they just talked all night.

Taking slow steps, hoping the caffeine from his two cups of coffee would kick in, Frank checked the back gate.

“Frank,” a voice whispered out to him.

Frank heard it. He was surprised. Who was calling his name at six-thirty in the morning?

“Frank.”

It happened again. Frank looked around, he didn’t see anyone. Now he’s had it. Not only was Ellen driving him nuts, she was making him hear voices too.

“Hello, Frank.”

The unmistakable voice. Frank was looking in the wrong direction. He was looking within the perimeter, not outside of it. As he turned to the voice a burning sensation went through him. He could feel his body temperature rise. Robbie was approaching the fence. Frank swallowed once. A shock took over him, he could not move. He couldn’t believe that Robbie was actually standing there. “How did you find your way back?” he asked coldly.

“It wasn’t too difficult.” Robbie neared the fence, but not too near, he knew what would happen if he touched it.

“I suggest you back off and return to where you came from.”

“I can’t. I came here to talk to you, to talk to Dad. I want to explain.”

“Explain what?” Frank grew angrier. “Explain how you beat up and almost raped Ellen? Got news for you Robbie. There is none.”

“Frank, I swear . . .” Robbie stepped closer, when he saw Frank reach for his gun he put his hands up. “It wasn’t what you think. Just please talk to me.”

“No. Leave.”

“Frank, if you won’t listen get Dad. I know he will.”

“If you think for one second anyone is gonna listen to you, you’re crazier than I thought. You’re gone, Robbie. Gone. And

you're not getting back in. I'll see you dead before I let that happen."

"Just listen to me."

"There's nothing to listen to." Frank turned and began to walk.

"It wasn't what you think, Frank." Robbie talked fast, trying to get all his words in. "It wasn't supposed to get like that. I admit it got out of hand . . ."

"Got out of hand? Is that what you call it? Walk away now, Robbie. You're my brother, I let you live once, I promise you, I won't let you live again." Frank meant the words he spoke. He was not giving any idle warning. He slowly walked away.

"Frank!" Robbie called out. The further Frank walked, the angrier Robbie grew. His temper took over. "Frank!"

Frank ignored him.

Robbie wanted to slam the fence in frustration, he couldn't. His rage spewed forth through words. "Frank do you think that was the first time I was with her? I fucked her before. Why do you think she wanted me to stay in containment?"

Frank stopped cold in his tracks. He felt as if every ounce of blood in his body rushed suddenly to his face. It burned in anger. In one movement Frank sprang his revolver from his shoulder harness and rushed the fence. "Back away from the fuckin' fence! Now!" Frank's words were strong as he shouted them.

"I'm sorry, Frank!" Robbie held his hands up.

"I will give you three seconds to get your ass out of here. If you are not moving in three seconds, I will blow you away!" Frank steadily held the gun. "One!" He pointed the gun. "Two!" He clicked back the hammer, and took a deep breath. "Three." As Frank's finger began to depress the trigger, Robbie took off into the woods. With the sound of a horses 'nay' and subsequent trotting, Frank relaxed his arm, and put the revolver back. Regaining his composure, but heart still racing, Frank left to seek out his father.

Ellen carried an armful of hospital gowns into the examining room. She smiled at Andrea who leaned against the counter writing in a chart. “Enjoy your break while you can. Five more just showed up.” She turned to leave again. “Happy annual physical week.”

“Ellen.” Andrea called softly as she worked. “Please have a seat.”

“Sure.”

“Shut the door.”

“Why?” Ellen questioned then saw Andrea look up with a smile. “Oh! You need my help as community counselor. No problem.” Ellen shut the door, and walked over to Andrea.

“How are you feeling?” Andrea asked.

“Huh? Oh, fine.” Ellen nodded. “What seems to be on your mind?” Ellen was impressed with how professional she sounded.

“I don’t want to talk about me.” Andrea closed the chart and faced Ellen. “I want to talk about you. Dean says you’ve been throwing up a lot lately.”

“Oh he’s nuts I have not. Today I did, that’s because Henry made these really gross ginger flavored rice cakes. They didn’t agree with me.” Ellen smiled. “Is that all?”

“So, your holding in the trauma hasn’t anything to do with.”

“Absolutely not.” Ellen said assuredly. “How can it. I’m healing. I no longer look like Quasimodo. I’m energetic and I don’t think about it. So . . .” She tossed her hands up. “No worrying.”

“Good.”

“See ya.” Ellen moved to the door.

“Are you pregnant?” Andrea watched Ellen’s hesitation in her exit. “Ellen?” Andrea was taken aback when she saw Ellen turn around with a horrified look on her face. “You are.” She

gasped out. “Ellen, why didn’t you tell me? We have to monitor it.”

Ellen swallowed and stepped closer. “I was going to. But I thought I was going to lose the baby after the Robbie thing. I didn’t.”

“So you’ve known for a little while. How long?”

Ellen peered up to the ceiling then back to Andrea. “Well, when I missed my first period, I thought it was stress. Then when the second didn’t come I got suspicious. But as soon as I neared the third I knew I . . .”

“Three missed periods? Sweet Jesus, Ellen, you know what this means. This baby cannot possibly be Dean’s.”

Ellen cringed. “I know. Why else do you think I haven’t said anything?”

“Well you better say something soon. It won’t be long before you can’t. And . . .” Andrea waved a motherly finger. “Don’t even try to pull one over on Dean. Even if that boy lost count and thinks this baby is early, he’s gonna know the second that baby is born weighing ten pounds and covered in black fur.”

Ellen’s eyes closed and she let out an airy chuckle. “Andrea I’m going to tell them both. Soon. O.K.? Just don’t say anything until I do.”

“Oh, no I won’t.” Andrea folded her arms with an ornery smile. “We don’t have much entertainment in Beginnings. And don’t think I’m not gonna enjoy, like a good book or movie, sitting back and watching this one unfold.”

Ellen nodded her head to Andrea in a sarcastic ‘thank you’. She knew she could count on Andrea’s motherly support.

“Son of a bitch!” Joe wiped the just splashed coffee from his white shirt as he and George walked to the door of his office. “I can’t make it a single morning without doing this.”

“That’s what you get, for walking and drinking.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joe reached for his doorknob. “You’d think I’d learn by now.”

“Hey Joe, is that Frank coming this way?”

Joe turned around to look as the door flung open. “Sure is. What’s he doing over here at this time of the morning?” Joe walked into his office.

“Don’t you want to know what he wants?” George followed him.

“He can come in here and tell me. I hope it’s not about the dead squirrels again. It really burns my ass that he bitches about them.” Joe sat down at his desk. “Besides, we have a ton of things to sort out and get to.”

“Dad!” Frank threw open the office door.

“Frank.” Joe looked up at him. “If it’s about the squirrels again, I’m not in the mood.”

“No it’s not. I need you to get Henry over here. I have to talk to all three of you.”

Joe shook his head. “Can’t do that. Henry’s over at school, the air conditioning is out. We don’t want to burn up the kids.” He then noticed the look on his son’s face. “What’s wrong, Frank? I can get him here in a couple hours.”

“Please. Just let me know when.” Frank, frustrated, began to leave the office.

“Why, what’s wrong?”

Frank stopped. “I’ll get more into it later, but we may have a problem. Robbie just came back.”

From the stack of routine blood work requisitions, Dean lifted his head to the soft shuffling that began in the lab. Slowly he turned his stool around and chuckled when he saw Ellen standing there. “Why are you sneaking? I’m not that busy.” He turned back to the requisitions.

“I have to take care of something. I’ll be back.”

“Nothing’s wrong right?”

Ellen moved closer. “Nothing. No. Then I’ll help you get through these. I promise.” She laid her hand on the stack.

Dean caught glimpse of her left hand, still wearing the ring. He lifted her fingers. “I was thinking. If you want to, we can cut this off.”

“What? No. No.” Ellen shook her head and pulled her hand back. “I just . . . the answer hinges on a lot. There’s a problem that has to be dealt with.”

“I know.” Dean nodded. “That’s why I haven’t said anything about wanting an answer. But El?” He stood up. “Can I just say something? You know I love you. But I just need for you to know I’m not expecting you to say yes because you have this great love for me. I know how you are. You give emotionally all that you can. And to me . . . that says a lot. I want you to say yes because you want to settle. Build a foundation. Have security again. We have a family. We have a friendship so . . . we have a lot.”

Ellen inhaled and reached her hand up to Dean’s cheek. “You’re making this difficult for me.” She stepped back and walked to the door.

“You’re turning me down.”

Ellen paused and turned around shaking her head. “I don’t deserve the way you are to me. And . . . I have things to resolve. If they resolve correctly, and your offer still stands, then my answer will be yes.”

“Here you go, Frank.” John Matoose walked into Frank’s office. He dropped a stack of books on his desk. “Manuals for the Darwin Perimeter beams, reflectors and catches. Also, Henry’s homemade manuals for those retractor beams.”

“Thanks.” Frank moved the stack and spread out a map.

John peered at what Frank was doing. “We re-doing the perimeters?”

“I want to have a grasp, refresher on weak areas and such.”

“Always good.” John backed up.

“Oh, hey John. Question.” Frank sat down behind his desk. “I don’t bother much with how mechanical is run. But, uh . . . how much would say the average mechanical division worker know about the beams and perimeters?”

“Average?” John laughed. “There’s only four of us.”

“O.K., well, then say, Scott. How much does he know?”

John shrugged. “He knows as much as he wants to know. It’s all up there. And speaking of which, I have to head back. Return those.” John pointed and turned to walk out the open office door. He nearly bumped into Ellen. “Hey, El.”

“John.” Ellen stepped in the office and closed the door.

“El?” Frank raised his eyes to her. “What’s up?”

“Oh nothing.” Still leaning, she looked innocent.

“El, come on. I love spending time with you, but I’m busy. What is it?”

“You know what? I’ll come back later.” She turned her back.

“You came up here for something, what is it?” He demanded.

“O.K. I did.” She took a deep breath. “We have a problem.”

‘Slam’ Frank’s hand hit hard on the desk. “Jesus Christ! What is it now?! What the fuck else can go wrong today!” Frank’s loud voice blasted Ellen.

“No, no.” Ellen held up her hands. “This is not a good time. I’ll talk to you later.”

“You have me fired up already, tell me now!”

“Frank forget it.”

“El!”

“I’m pregnant.” Ellen cringed as the words slipped from her mouth.

Frank slowly stood up, he walked around his desk. “Can you repeat that please?”

“I said . . . I’m pregnant. About three months.” She cringed again, leaning further to the door. “I know this isn’t what you want. I know you’re pissed, but I needed you to know before I told Dean. I think, no, I know, after his initial shock, he’ll raise the baby. So don’t worry.” She knew Frank’s eyes were on her and focused. She wanted to run with each taunting step he took to her.

“I’m gonna be a father again?” He laid his hands on her face, pressed his lips hard to her, then released her as hard as he kissed her, sending her a foot back. “This is so fuckin’ great.” He shook his head laughing. “Let’s go.” He grabbed her hand.

“Wait. Where?”

“To get your things. You and the kids can live with me. It’ll be a little crowded with Johnny and . . .”

“No.” Ellen pulled her hand away. “You’re not supposed to want this or be happy. You never wanted a baby.”

“I just said that because I thought you stopped being fertile.”

Ellen gasped. “Obviously not. Look . . .” She grew aggravated when Frank tugged her again. “Stop it. All right. Dean doesn’t even know yet.”

“Then you tell him. Then you leave him.”

“For you?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“El, you’re pregnant to me. You think Dean’s gonna congratulate you and pat you on the back? No. He’s gonna be pissed. You might as well tell him and get it over with.” Frank laughed in a gloating way. “You know what. Let me tell him.”

“No. I will be the one to tell him. But what makes you so sure he’s going to want to dump me. What if he doesn’t? What if he just gets mad and goes after you?”

Frank scoffed. “And do what. Poke me? Ow, Dean stop.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“And I’m being very serious. Dean will not raise my kid. He will not live with you while you’re carrying my baby. End of story. Choose to stay with Dean and I will not make it easy.”

“This is blackmail. You want me to just turn everything and everyone’s lives upside down. It isn’t right.”

“Do you think the way we’re being is right? Do you think this will ever stop between us? Do you? It hasn’t yet. We tried. Even recently. This baby is a sign. A sign that it’s time to do things right. Tell Dean, get it out, end it and we can start our lives.”

“It’s not that easy. I need time to ease into it.”

“I’ll give you time.”

“This is going to crush him.”

“Just like it crushed me when I found out he got you pregnant.”

Ellen’s hand waved about . “This is totally different. I asked him to get me pregnant. I’m sneaking around with you.”

“And we won’t have to anymore. Why are you being like this? It’s not like he’s the love of your life.”

“Neither are you, Frank.”

Frank raised a finger and pointed with an angry glare. He moved to the door. “You have two weeks. Either you tell him or I will.” The door slammed.

The visibly hand painted sign greeted Robbie as he walked his horse past it. “Egypt” scribbled across the board in red letters.

How ironic, that was what Moses would name his town. Then again Moses wasn't in control of all his faculties. He wanted to lead his people. Robbie's head hung low, almost as if he was ashamed to be returning to the town.

Moses wasn't surprised to see him. He had sat there waiting for Robbie, his red beard dripping water from sitting in the rain. He stood up when Robbie handed him back the horse. "Didn't quite go as you hoped, huh Robbie?"

"No." Robbie walked past him, then into the library, the place he had grown accustomed to.

"So what now? You are joining us right?"

"I am." He plopped down to the floor.

Moses sat next to him. "Now the way that I figure it, it will be a while. We need about forty more bodies to take that community. We have to do our own survivor pick-ups to find them."

"Then what Moses? Are you planning to ravage the community? Burn it down, take control?"

"Yes. Why, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing if you want to be right where you are now. If you go in and destroy what they have, you are destroying what you want."

Moses seemed a little confused. "I'm not getting you. How else are we supposed to get the community if we don't destroy them first?"

"How are you supposed to survive if you destroy them?"

Moses began to point his finger at Robbie. It trembled as he spoke. "Oh no! You want me to abandon my plan don't you? You think we'll get wiped out. I don't, if we outnumber them . . ."

"Listen to me. I know they won't just let us in. We are gonna have to force them to open the gate. We can get that by taking something they have, need, and will want back. Once we have it. Then we have bargaining power. That power will get us in. That power will help us overturn them."

“You have to get in there first before we can take anything out. I’ve seen them perimeters, how in the hell do you expect to break those?”

Robbie smiled brightly at Moses, a cocky, arrogant smile. “Moses my good man, you are lucky you found me. I can get in there without them knowing. I know that for sure. But I need the support of you and your men. Our best weapon will our ability to not appear as a threat. Because your worst enemy is the one you least fear. Are you in?”

Moses agreed. He didn’t know all what he was agreeing about and to, but it sounded good.

Joe remained calm. He leaned far back in his chair, one leg crossed over, and he tapped his pencil on his desk from eraser to tip as he stared at his son. “Frank, did you expect this not to happen?”

“Well, Dad . . . yes.” Frank noticed the unaffected faces of his father, George, and Henry. “We dropped him off seventy-five miles away. I didn’t think he’d find his way back, and if he did, not this fast.”

“He’s not the first to come back.”

Frank ran his hand across the top of his hair. “I’m not understanding this. Please explain to me how you cannot see a problem here. This isn’t any survivor we’re talking about. This is Robbie. We all know of his training. We also know that he knows this community. Doesn’t anyone here find this a little threatening? Am I the only one who sees him retaliating against us?”

Henry saw that Frank was upset, he tried to calm him, using his most logical tone of voice. “Frank, look, he’s only one man. What can he do? Do you honestly feel he can bring us down?

Better yet do you honestly feel he can break our perimeters? You helped set them up, design them. To be blunt, people have tried to get in, and people have . . . fried.”

George picked up where Henry left off. “Besides, by what you said, he went running. I don’t see a threat unless he comes back again. Then I might worry. Might. But if he gets in, what’s he going to do? Go after you, me, Henry or Joe? Let him. He’ll be taken down.”

Frank wasn’t buying it. His gut instinct told him differently and his body actions conveyed his feelings to the room.

Joe leaned forward and folded his arms on his desk. “I know that look, Frank. What do you need from us to make you feel at ease? Don’t go overboard now.”

Frank felt it was better than nothing, at least he was getting somewhere. “I’ll go through what I feel are our weak spots in the perimeter, see how we can strengthen them. If Robbie’s gonna break in, it won’t be during daylight. It’ll be at night and it will be there. I want Greg taken off of community day watch and put him on community watch at night. I also now want a tower person day and night, not just at night. I’ll settle for this for, but if he returns, even to the gate, I will demand more. Deal?”

Joe nodded in agreement. “Deal. I’ll give that to you now. And if Robbie does come back, we promise to be more attentive to your suggestions.”

“Thank you.” Frank folded his arms and leaned against the filing cabinet. He saw the look on his father’s face, along with the one on Henry’s and George’s. They thought he was over reacting. But Frank knew way too much about his little brother. After what Robbie went through in his search for his family, Frank was certain Robbie wasn’t going to take his rejection in stride, run away and never return, Robbie was coming back and with a vengeance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

June 13th

“We are not going there to attack.” Robbie told the twenty men he and Moses stood before awaiting their departure for Beginnings. “We have to give a peaceful, non-threatening appearance. Hence why we arrive during the day. They will not let us in, don’t for a second believe they will. They don’t trust us. If they see for a second we are less than sincere in our intentions, they will know we are up to something. For sure they will wipe us out. Here’s what’s going to happen. About a mile before we reach the community, we will be spotted by a tower guard. At that point we will dismount our horses and walk to the back gate. The tower guard will then inform Frank. It will take Frank approximately seven minutes to get his men to the gate, in formation, and waiting, guns in tow for us. That’s when I want us to approach.”

“Wait a second.” Moses interrupted. “We’re not armed. You said nothing about walking us up to a firing squad.”

“They won’t shoot us, Moses, trust me. We come to them in peace. We want them to look like the fools for thinking we’re a threat. We mean them no harm. Believe me, this is step one to the master plan. It will work. We will prevail.”

Moses didn’t want to give the go ahead. A part of him still didn’t trust Robbie completely. What if Robbie was a trap, sent by the community to bring them down. That would mean Moses and some of his men were walking right into it. But what if Robbie was actually on the side of Moses? If the master plan worked as Robbie intended, they would be living in Beginnings in one month’s time. The true test of Robbie would come if all went down as he said, when they arrived at the gate. Apprehensively Moses gave the order. “Mount up!”

The fifteen men mounted their horses and began to ascend to Beginnings.

“Joe . . . I’m pregnant.” Ellen was ready and she ducked.

Joe kept it in control. The hot coffee that he had just drank made him choke, some even seeped from his lips, but nothing sprayed out. After coughing one more time, he wiped his hand over his mouth and stared across his desk at Ellen. “You did that on purpose. You told me while I was taking a drink. And I suppose this fatherly advice you want has to do with my son?”

“Yes.”

“Forget it.” Joe took another drink. “I’m not dealing with his bad reaction. In fact, you keep having children with Dean, you’ll never be able to leave him.”

“Joe.” Ellen spoke shocked. “I need help dealing with Frank, because this baby is Frank’s.”

Joe nodded. “Have a good day.” He stood up.

“Joe wait.” Ellen followed him. “I need help. Frank’s being impossible. He’s insisting I leave Dean. He says I’m moving in with him. He gave me a time limit on telling Dean before he does. It could get ugly.”

“I see. And you don’t know how to handle him, or how to handle telling Dean.”

“Exactly.”

“Good luck.” Joe walked to his office door.

“Joe.”

“Ellen. If you weren’t screwing around with two goddamn men this wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Joe, please.” Ellen grabbed his arm as he was leaving. “I need Joe advice. Tell me what to do.”

“Fine. Tell Dean, leave Dean, leave Frank, marry Henry. He whines as much as you do and you’ll make a perfect couple.” Joe walked out.

Ellen tensed up in a growl of frustration and fled after him. Joe was going to give her the advice she wanted to hear whether he liked it or not.

Andrea had to know. It had been a week since the revelation of Ellen's pregnancy and she had heard nothing. It was all quiet at the clinic front. Which wasn't what she expected. Fights, arguments, depression, a little excitement that to Andrea, didn't involve anyone getting hurt . . . physically. "And . . ." Andrea's whispering voice sounded sneaky as she spoke with Dean in his lab. "Everything is O.K. on the home front?"

"Yes." Dean nodded placing a finger to his lips and pointing at Johnny who sat writing in a corner.

"Ellen and you are fine?"

"Quiet. Things have been quiet. Ellen's been . . . nice."

"Nice? Like she's buttering up perhaps?"

"What?" Dean laughed. "No, she's working through this problem."

"What problem?" Andrea dug, she had to find out. Did Dean know?

"Um . . . the Robbie problem? She's doing . . ." Dean crinkled up his face as he looked around Andrea.

"What's wrong?"

"Frank." Dean shook his head.

"Well, Dean, you knew it was bound to happen."

"What are you talking about?" Dean's eyes stayed fixed across the room.

"Huh?" Andrea peered over her shoulder to where Dean looked. Frank was looking in the closed lab door, bobbing up and down, waving his arms trying to get Johnny's attention. "What is wrong with him?"

“He’s mentally unbalanced. Excuse me.” Dean walked across the lab and opened the door, closing it quickly behind him. “What do you want, Frank?”

“I need to speak to Johnny. I need him to pull some security hours tonight.”

“I’ll tell him. He’s taking a test.”

“I’d rather tell him, Dean. I’ll only be a minute.” Frank tried to get to the door.

Dean blocked him. “Frank. He’s taking a test. You can’t go in there.”

“Why? You think I’ll help him cheat?”

“Actually Frank, that would be a concern of mine if we were dealing with the fundamental plot structure of See Spot Run. Unfortunately we’re not. Go.”

“Man.” Frank stepped back. “You have such little-man-attitude. No wonder Ellen’s leaving you.”

Dean nodded slowly as Frank started to walk away. “You know, Frank, I would worry about that last statement if . . . Ellen didn’t tell me she was marrying me.”

It was there, but Frank tried his hardest not to let it be seen. The slowing down of his stride when Dean said that. Frank didn’t turn around, he didn’t give Dean the satisfaction of seeing his reaction. Frank kept walking.

Henry’s bare toes wiggled as his foot propped upon Ellen’s desk. “And look at the bruise, El.”

“Oh, my God.” Ellen shook her head at the purple circle under Henry’s big toe. “That’s terrible.”

“I know. Stomped on me. For no good reason. Jenny just walks up to me and says I work John too much and she stomps her foot on mine.”

“Jenny can be so immature. So what did you do?”

“I stomped right back on hers.”

“Good for you.” Ellen nodded.

“El.” Frank strongly called in her office causing both Ellen and Henry to shriek.

“God, Frank.” Ellen grabbed her chest.

“Yeah, Frank.” Henry put on his sock. “You shouldn’t scare her like that. The baby will be born with a shocked expression deformity.”

“You know?” Frank asked. “El, he knows. I thought you weren’t telling anyone yet.”

“Henry doesn’t count.” Ellen answered.

“I don’t count.” Henry said and bent over to put on his shoe.

“Good.” Frank stepped to Ellen’s desk and leaned to her. “Then I don’t have to wait until he leaves to say this. I’m telling Dean and I’m telling him right now.” Frank’s hand hit on the desk. The slam caused an ‘ow’ from Henry who was still bent over before him.

“Frank. You promised me. I have another week.” Ellen argued. “If you tell him. I’ll tell him it’s his.”

“You would.” Frank snapped. “Just like you told him you would marry . . . Henry! Why are you staring at my crotch?”

Henry raised his eyes up, still hunched over. “I’m not Frank. I’m staring at your radio. It’s off.”

“Yeah, I know.” Frank placed his hands on his hips. “John’s taking calls for the next fifteen minutes so I can bitch at El in peace.”

Henry brought his finger closer to the radio clipped on Frank’s waist. “Well, they must want you, the pager light is blinking.”

Frank bit his lip and shook his head in disgust. “Shit.” He grabbed the radio and turned it on. “What!”

“Frank . . .” The call of his name came through with static. “This is Dan. Looks like trouble. About a half a mile from the perimeter we have a band of people, men. With horses. Looks like . . fourteen . . no, twenty. Approaching the back gate.”

“Fuck!” Frank switched the band and spoke loudly into his radio. “Code nine. I repeat code nine. Back gate. On the double.” He hooked his radio to his belt, and backed to the door. “Let’s go Henry. El, stay here. Don’t leave, I mean it. Do not leave this room.”

All argument was gone from Ellen and replaced with concern. She slowly stood up. “Frank.” She waited until he turned around. “Be careful.”

“Always.” Frank smiled and winked then bolted from her office with Henry.

Code Nine. Frank repeated it two more times as he made his way to the back gate. When Code Nine was called from the radio, that was the signal. All twelve men on Frank’s elite security team, on duty or not, were to drop what they were doing, arm themselves, and go to the designated area. There they would take their formation. Code Nine meant trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Twenty feet away from the back gate, Frank had his men. All lined up, straight across, a drill they had practiced numerous times, but that was when it was only a drill. All twelve of them, hunched down on one knee, rifles in hand, awaiting Frank’s signal. Frank knelt off to their left, watching and peering out to the gate. Watching the figures move in close.

“On my call.” Frank yelled to them. As they came closer, he lifted his M-16. “Take aim.” Frank aimed. “Get ‘em ready.” The synchronized sound of pumping chambers went down the line as Robbie, Mosses and their men came within two feet of the gate.

“Wait for my call.” Frank locked in on them with his rifle’s scope. He spotted him. Robbie. Frank stood. Aiming solely upon his brother he placed the target mark smack in the middle of his Robbie’s forehead.

Robbie held his hands high and stepped to the side of the men. “We’re not armed! We come in peace.”

Frank, still aiming, instructed his men. “Hold your position!” He walked closer to the gate, his aim tight on Robbie. “Back away from the gate! Back up!”

Moses smiled and waved his hands. “We come in peace man, chill.”

“Back away from the fuckin’ fence! Now!” Frank demanded.

Robbie knew Frank wouldn’t believe for one second anything they said. There was still a chance at that moment, that Frank would get pissed off enough to yell ‘fire’. Robbie wasn’t taking that chance. “Frank, we are not armed. We came to talk.” Then he spotted salvation, he spotted his father and George walking up from behind the lined up security man wall. “Dad.” Robbie called to Joe. “Dad, we aren’t armed. Tell them to put their weapons down.”

Joe approached cautiously. “I want to see hands. All of them now.” The band of men at the gate reached high. “Turn around, slowly.” Joe and George watched. They saw no weapons. Joe walked closer to the gate. “They aren’t armed.” He yelled to Frank’s men. “Weapons down.”

Frank’s men, lowered their weapons. All except for Frank, his aim was steady, on Robbie.

Robbie watched Frank. “Dad. We just came to talk. I can’t do that with a gun pointed at my head. Please.”

Joe never took his eyes off of Robbie, he called out his command once more. “I said weapons down!”

Frank apprehensively lowered his rifle. “What are you doing, Dad?”

Joe ignored Frank, he had Robbie to contend with, that was enough. “Robbie, what do you want. We don’t give hand outs.”

“We’re not here for hand outs. We are here in peace. I met up with these people Dad. They mean no harm. We want you to consider letting us back in.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because we can be a help. If you let us in, we can prove we can be an asset. Harvest is in a few months. You need men. You need workers . . .”

“We need nothing. We’re fine. You have no right to even ask us to reconsider letting you in. We let you in once. That’s all the chances anyone gets.” Suddenly Joe noticed the giant rubicund man, he recognized Moses. “I know you. I threw you out of this place. Your name is Thomas.”

Moses cleared his throat. “I call myself Moses now.”

“O.K. Moses.” Joe spoke coldly. “Why don’t you lead your people the hell away from our community. You are not wanted or needed. Go.”

Moses thought it was funny the way Joe commented on leading his people. But he couldn’t let laughter or even a smile slip out. He had to be serious and deliver his final speech. “Robbie, I’m sorry I brought you up here. I just thought that, maybe they would consider if they saw we mean no harm.” He faced Joe again. “Sir, we’ll leave. I just hope someday you’ll see that we all are God’s children and hopefully one day, we can live side by side as brothers.” Moses turned his back and began to walk away. He signaled his men, and they followed. All but Robbie, who remained at the gate.

Robbie moved a little closer. “Dad, I’m sorry I let you down. I am. I’m gonna try harder. I’ll show you. I’ll make you proud of me again.” Robbie stepped back, he raised his hand and waved. “I love you Dad.” He quickly turned and chased after Moses and the others who had already mounted their horses. Robbie mounted his, and all of them quickly rode away.

Joe watched. A sense of sadness fell upon him. Watching Robbie ride off, brought along a feeling of loss. But he could not let that cloud his mind. He had to think clearly. Robbie and

Moses' little peaceful act was clearly that, an act. It was definitely a prelude to something, but what?

Joe paced around his office, hands in pockets. George and Henry, seated before him. "So, we are in agreement on this. This is what we'll do? Correct?"

Frank knocked once then opened the door. "I'm here. Now you wanna tell me what's up with you?" His voice demanding.

Joe turned to Frank and faced him off. "First of all, I will tell you this only one time. Don't you ever question my actions again, is that clear?"

Frank wondered if he should square off with his father or not. Then he remembered, it was his father. "Clear."

"Good. Now, what do you have in mind?"

"We know it's the group from that town. I say let's take two missiles, attach them to the chopper and wipe them out. Get rid of them."

"Right Frank, we'll just blow them away. For what? For walking up to our gate? Christ, I worry about what goes on within the walls, not outside. When they threaten what's in here, then they'll be no more. Not any sooner."

"No." Frank argued. His emotions strong within his speech. "I strongly disagree. You pride yourself on how everyone here sleeps safely at night. How safe are they gonna feel knowing what is lurking behind the walls? We know how many live in that town."

"Whether or not you want to believe it, Frank. They are still humans. They are life."

"They're the ones who killed Jonas. I feel it."

"Feelings aren't proof. And we can't just go around destroying what life there is left for our own peace of mind. Now,

I know you want to beef up security. Do what you have to do. I'll stand behind you one hundred percent. I'll also stand behind you, like always, if you shoot anyone that comes within two feet of the perimeter, after sun down. But threat or no threat, our life rules still apply. In broad daylight, no. You know as well as I do they can't take us."

Frank couldn't accept it. He knew his voice, no matter how loud he let it get, was just not going to be heard. He gave it one more shot. "Just tell me, Dad, how are you and the Council going to explain to our people, that we are beefing up security because we let a possible threat walk away?"

"Bingo." Joe pointed. "A possible threat is no reason to eliminate them."

Henry, not one to want to get in the middle of a Slagel-tempered argument, did. "Joe, uh, I think he may have a point. Not about blowing them away, but on how everyone is going to react. Perhaps that should be an option tonight?"

Joe walked over to his desk and sat down. "You're right. We'll make that an option. Tonight we're calling an emergency meeting. For you, Frank, I'll bring up our options to them, let the community decide what they want. We as the Council will take that in consideration."

"You can't ask the community as a whole to voice an opinion. Most of our community won't buy it. They were once what just walked up to our gate. They won't for one second want to see anything happen to Robbie and them."

"You're driving me nuts!" Joe viciously rubbed his eyes in aggravation.

"Dad." Frank walked up to his father's desk and rested his hands on it. He leaned in to his father, his eyes pleading. "Listen to me. Do not make the mistake of waiting. Don't. We can't for one second chance losing anyone in this community. We can get rid of them in a heartbeat. If we let them just linger out there, then any blood shed in this community is on our hands."

“It won’t come to that, Frank. You know our security here. Now you know what you are to do. You know when you allowed to do it. That’s all I’ll give you.”

“Fine.” Frank slammed his hands on the desk. “But make no mistake. My job is to protect this community. I do that. I do that well. But day or night, if I see a threat, I will override council and attack.”

Joe rose up in anger. “You will not!”

“I will!”

“Then I’ll remove you from duty, and that’s not want you want!” Joe leaned further into his son. “Now I suggest you get rid of the attitude, get your ass to work on our extra security, and leave me to my job. I also suggest that you avoid me for the next hour. Is that understood? First you question me in front of everyone, then you get in my face. Right now you have really pissed me off! Don’t you forget, I may be an old man, but I’m the only one in this community who can kick your ass!”

Frank was fed up. Arguing with his father was pointless. Instead of screaming back, Frank, enraged, rushed backwards. As he exploded from the office he slammed his fist with his every frustration into the filing cabinet, causing a loud crash, a huge indentation, and everyone to jolt in their seats.

“Hey!” Joe called to him. “You will come back and pound out this dent . . . again!”

Frank ignored him and kept on walking.

“Son of a bitch!” Joe made his way to the filing cabinet. “He did it again.”

Frank walked off his feelings. The whole situation gnawed at him, he knew he was right on this one. He knew his father, though not wrong about many things, was wrong about this. The only thing was, Frank prayed that his point would not be proven correctly. If that happened, that spelled tragedy. He had work to do and headed back to his office to start on it.

Upon opening his office door and stepping inside, he saw Ellen seated behind his desk. “What’re you doing here?”

Ellen stood up and moved to him. “I was worried. I just said . . .”

“Did I not tell you to stay put?!?” He scolded at her like a young child.

“Well, yes but . . .”

“Didn’t I tell you don’t move?!?”

“Yes.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing here?!?” Frank backed up as he began to shout about. “I told you that for a reason. I wanted you where I knew you were safe! How can I protect you El, if you’re off running around?!?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Frank. I am not your child!”

“No, you are not. But you are carrying mine. And I’d fuckin’ die if anything happened to you guys and I could have prevented it.”

Ellen knew at that moment something far worse was going on in Frank’s mind. It just wasn’t her, it couldn’t be. “Frank, you’re not really mad at me are you? You’re venting.”

“Yes!” Frank stopped, and calmed himself down. “I’m venting.”

“You wanna tell me what’s up?” She followed him over to his desk. He leaned against it, arms folded. “Come on.” She pleaded. “It’s me. What’s going on?” She ran her hands up and down his folded arms.

“Robbie and twenty other men showed up at the back gate.”

Ellen blinked long in surprise. “Robbie showed up?”

“It’s the second time it happened. We didn’t want anyone to know or worry about the first time. But now, he’s got this group. And they’re being bold. Marching right up to us. They have some sort of plan, I know it. I know Robbie. I saw behind his eyes. But my Dad . . .”

“Joe doesn’t see it?”

“Oh, he sees it, but he doesn’t want to do anything about it until we know for sure. I, on the other hand do not think we should wait. It’s a mistake El, a big one. So . . . Do me a favor.” He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. “When I’m not around you, don’t be alone. Whatever you do, even if it means being around Dean. Don’t be alone.”

“I’ll try,” Ellen said softly. “Will this end soon, this confrontation with Robbie and them?”

“I hate to say it, but it looks like it’s only going to end, when they make their move.”

“And will they?”

Frank hesitated in his fear of overreacting, but he answered Ellen with his gut sincerity. “Without a doubt.”

The burnt to a crisp squirrel rolled across Moses’ plate after its short basting on the fire. It actually didn’t smell bad to Moses, of course evening had hit, he hadn’t eaten and he was hungry. Ready to pick it up and sink his teeth into the charred flesh, Moses retracted from his rodent feast and turned his head to the sound of the approaching horse. Dropping the squirrel with a ‘clink’ on the plate, he dusted off his hands and stood up. He smiled the closer the horse drew and he saw it was Robbie. “Thought you weren’t coming back. Got scared we lost ya.”

Robbie dismounted before the horse even stopped. He controlled it by the reigns and lifted the cloth sack attached to the horse. The sack moved.

Moses looked curiously. “What’s that?”

Reaching into the large sack, with a loud and high squawking noise, Robbie pulled out a chicken holding it by its throat. “Dinner. Courtesy of Beginnings.”

“Well I’ll be.” Moses reached to the beak of the vocal bird clenched in Robbie’s grip. “You got in.”

“Nah, not yet. But I will. And without a problem” Robbie stroked the chicken’s head. “I just wanted to give this to you, Moses. My little assurance that I mean what I say. Getting into Beginnings in not a problem.” Robbie winced only once at the loud chicken, then with arrogance, he bit his bottom lip, grinned, squeezed his hand and crushed the chicken’s neck.

From the roof of containment Frank could hear the community joining up for the late evening ‘decision’ meeting. A meeting he opted not to attend, he didn’t want to be anywhere nearby when they voted the wrong choice. Frank preferred to be farther away from the social hall than containment. But he had to finish up adding the extra spotlight, then he’d go home. Too much was on his mind, so much that not even the site of Henry walking with, as Frank called her, It, bothered him.

Making the final adjustments on the light, Frank heard the bang and thump. He lifted his head and listened. Again he heard it, a bang against the metal side of the building and then almost a ‘plop’ sound. Tightened the brackets, Frank grabbed his screwdriver, stood up and peered over the roof’s edge. He saw the reason for the noise. Denny.

Jumping for the hanging rope, Denny would grip it, climb a foot against the wall and fall back down.

“Hey,” Frank yelled down to him. “What the hell are you doing?”

Denny scratched his head and peered up to Frank with an embarrassed smile. “Climbing.”

“Why?”

“The rope was there.”

Shaking his head, Frank gathered up his things, hit the rope and climbed down. “You shouldn’t be running around out here. Get to the meeting.”

Denny whined. “I don’t want to. I want to play security guy.”

“You can’t.”

“But I got nothing else to do. There’s no one at containment anymore. Ellen’s at the clinic working on experiments. I don’t want to work in the field. Can I join security, huh, can I?”

“Denny.” Frank laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Maybe when you’re older.”

“But I’m big. I’m bigger than Dean. And he’s old.”

“Everyone is bigger than Dean.” Frank nodded. “But you can’t.”

“I’d be real good. Always there. Always around.” Denny pleaded. “Please.”

“Denny, I wish I could use that quality but . . .” Frank caught glimpse of Dean and Ellen entering the social hall. “But . . . you know what?” He smiled brightly. “Maybe I can. I do have an opening for a special detail. Undercover.”

“O.K.” Deny nodded. “Undercover?”

“Well, sort of a body guard.”

“Oh, I can do that.” Denny said with excitement.

“Good.” Frank patted him on the shoulder. “Start now. Your job is to protect Ellen. Watch her at all times. Watch her with . . . Dean. He’s a . . . uh . . . security risk. Yeah, we’ve been watching him.”

“Dean?” Denny asked surprised. “Is he bad?”

“Could be the worst.” Frank leaned to the boy and whispered. “There’s talk that he’s . . . the anti-Christ.”

“Oh no.” Worried, Denny stepped back. “What’s the anti-Christ?”

“Ask your mom. But you’d better hurry to the hall.”

“O.K.” Denny gave a thumbs up. “I will. Thanks Frank.” Saluting, Denny backed up, spun, almost tripped the flew to the social hall.

Frank grinned watching Denny race away. With all that was on his mind, it felt good to Frank that he was able to take a moment and amuse himself.

“Denny. She’s fine. Go.” Dean pleaded at the front door of his home. “Go. Now. Or I’m telling your mom. Home.” Growling in frustration, Dean closed the door, leaned against it and banged his forehead off the surface.

“Situated,” Ellen said as she came down the steps. She slowed down at the bottom when she saw Dean. “What’s wrong?”

Forehead still against the door, Dean slightly turned his head her way. “Denny.”

“My body guard.”

“El.” Dean turned around. “Frank’s an asshole.”

“Why are you blaming Frank? He gave Denny a little job. Denny’s just excited.”

“Ellen.” Dean stepped to her. “The kid called me Satan three times tonight. He didn’t come up with that on his own.”

Ellen snickered. “Sorry.”

“Speaking of Satan. Don’t you have some news to deliver to Frank?”

“I’m going.”

“You’re stalling.”

“I know.” Ellen slowly nodded. “Maybe he’s sleeping.”

“He won’t be. He’s waiting to hear the community decision”

“And I have to figure out the best way to tell him.” She exhaled. “Anyway I do it; he’s not going to take it good.” Ellen

drew in thoughts before going over to Frank's as to the how to handle the news. But knowing Frank the way she did, Ellen knew the best way to tell him was to be straight forward, blunt, and to the point.

"So then Jenny rambled on and on about John's work load." Ellen's hands waved as she sat on the bed talking to Frank. "Henry started whining about distribution policies and did I tell you, Frank, I really like the fact that your hair has grown a little. I don't think I ever saw you with more than a half an inch of hair on your . . ."

"El. Enough. What's the decision?"

"It was close, Frank. Very close." Ellen said assuredly even though she and Miguel were the only ones who voted to side with Frank. "Joe merely stated the situation and told everyone the choices. Wait or take them out. And . . . we wait."

Frank closed his mouth tightly and nodded as he started to pace. "Close huh??

"Very."

"You're lying."

"Why would I do that?"

"To make me feel better. But that's all right. I'm fine with this, I am. I have extra men on tonight. My radio is on. I set a few traps outside the perimeters. I think we have enough coverage. I'll get up every two hours and check on everything."

"Frank." Ellen rose slowly. "These men have been out there and gathering for a while. You never worried before about them."

"They never had Robbie." Frank told her. "And this peaceful approach is a smoke screen for something else. You know, they have a lot of men, but even if they got in here, I don't worry about it. We'll be ready. Wanna know why? We can see a hundred men coming. One man, one very well trained man, we can not."

“Robbie.”

“Exactly. You know this is what he did. He was trained to break perimeters designed not to be broken. Slip in, do his job, slip out. My concern does not lie in whether we can get him if he breaks in. My concern lies in how much damage he can do while he’s in.”

“What can you do?” Ellen asked.

“Be him. Think like him, see like him. Try to get ahead of him. Be ready.” Frank’s voice dropped. “But he has to have a focus. A goal he’s going after. And that’s my big hold up. Because El, I haven’t a clue what or who that is.”

The orange-amber fire lit enough for Moses to see what Robbie stared so intently at. Dropping down next to Robbie by the fire, he took the picture from Robbie’s hand. “Your brother.”

“Frank.”

Moses stared at the picture. A pose probably seldom seen of Frank, one where he was smiling. “You look at pictures of your family a lot. I noticed.”

“Yeah, but that’s all I have. That and memories.” Robbie retrieved the picture of Frank.

“This cool down time you wanna have. Is it because you’re having second thoughts of this plan?”

“Nope,” Robbie said with certainty. “Not at all. We need to slip a little from their minds so they can slip into a sloppy confidence. It has nothing to do with my family. Guaranteed. Because they made it abundantly clear to me . . . they aren’t my family anymore.” Staring once more to Frank’s photo, Robbie peacefully tore it in half and tossed it into the fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

June 20th

Frank had awoken a little earlier than usual to begin his shift. He wanted to get a head start on the day. He still wasn't quite secure in the fact that all was fine concerning Robbie and the men he had joined. Even though Frank got up twice each night to get a check from every man who had a post, he still wanted to be sure. Starting the day earlier helped to ease his mind.

It was an important day to him. The day Ellen was supposed to tell Dean. How much had to be on Frank's mind, how tired did he actually have to be to not even enjoy the thought of the gloating he would get to do.

Grabbing his tee shirt, Frank placed it on, tucking it in his pants. He then took his shoulder harness from the headboard and secured it to himself. Reaching down to the night stand for his revolver, he stopped for his radio to do his morning check. He picked it up. "Frank here. Radio check." He placed it back on the night stand, retrieved his gun, checked the chamber and placed it in its holster.

The sound of someone blowing then tapping over the radio was the response to Frank. "Hello?" The unknown male voice sang out. "Hello?"

Frank turned his head sharply to the radio, zeroing in on it.

"Hello?" He tapped and blew again. "Frank? It's about damn time you checked this thing this morning. We've been waiting to hit your frequency."

Frank's nostrils flared, that unknown voice was not one of his men. He breathed heavily as he snatched up the radio from the night stand. "Who is this?" He demanded.

"Do you care?" He started to laugh. "Oh I can't be like that. Hey Frank, it's me Moses. How the hell are you? Long time no talk to. Did ya forget about us?"

"Make your point. I'm changing frequencies in five seconds." Frank was annoyed. Not only did they come too close to the

community, but they had radio capabilities. He began to walk from his bedroom.

“All right, all right I’ll get to the point.” Moses took an agitating tone. “Anyway, we were just wondering if you were missing anything this morning. Seems, besides this radio, we came in last night and borrowed something very important to certain people in your community. Anyone not show up at the breakfast table?”

A frightening rage overcame Frank. His heart pounded as he opened his bedroom door, he had to stop dead in his tracks. “El.”

“I know, I know you’re thinking they didn’t come in. Wanna bet?” Moses taunted.

Frank ignored him, he raced from his bedroom and pounded on Johnny’s door. “John!” He flung it open. “Get up, get dressed, get Pap. We have trouble. Now!” Frank left a bewildered Johnny behind as he charged down his steps.

“Frank are you listening . . .” Moses teased more. “Got a poem for you.”

Frank flew out on to the sidewalk from his home. He caught his bearings. He had to go to Ellen’s. He had to check her. Fearful of what he’d find, he ran as fast as he could, praying all the way.

“Here’s this poem, you’ll like it. Twas the night of the ambush and all through the town. Not a person was stirring, there wasn’t a sound. Mother and children all nestled in bed. Never knowing the danger that lurked over their heads. Pretty good huh? Wrote it myself.”

Frank arrived at Ellen’s house. He could see the first floor lights were on. A good sign. She or Dean were awake. Without knocking, without thinking, Frank burst through the door.

“Frank!” Dean walked from the dining room. “What the hell . . .”

“Where’s El and the twins, are they sleeping?” Frank words were heavy and breathless. He had to get himself under control. He moved to the steps.

“Of course their sleeping.” Dean walked to him, blocking him from his destination. “What is wrong with you? You can’t come in . . .”

“Did you check them?”

“What?”

“Did you fuckin see them this morning!?” Frank shouted.

“No, I was going up . . .”

Moses’ voice needled again. “We have something you want, and you can’t have it. Our rules now, Frank. Figure it out yet?”

Dean’s heart dropped as soon as he heard that. “Frank, what’s going on?”

“Come on, Dean.” Frank ran up the steps. “You check the twins. I’ll check Ellen.”

Dean followed. He should have known by the look on Frank’s face something was wrong. Not knowing why he was checking, he frightfully opened the door.

Frank was scared also. He hesitated for a second, then opened the bedroom door. He flung on the light. Ellen was in bed. “El!”

She sat straight up and blocked the brightness. “What’s going on?”

“Get dressed and come downstairs. Stay close to Dean.” He left the room, Dean was in the hall. “She’s in there, she’s fine.”

“The twins are too. Frank, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know.” Frank ran down the stairs yelling as he was leaving the house. “Don’t let them out of your sight! I mean it.” He slammed the door, and ran out into the street. They did it. Robbie and his men, did something, but what? Frank, though relieved that Ellen and the twins were fine, had a deep sickening feeling in his stomach. Moses was implying he took someone. Who?

The streets were quiet. They wouldn’t be for long. Frank had to know. As frightening as it was, he had to know. He grabbed his radio and called to the tower guard. “This is Frank. Hit the horn.

Now, I repeat, hit the ‘all-in’ horn now!” Frank ran down the street toward town. The flag pole which sat dead center of the community was where he had to be. It was where everyone had to be shortly.

Andrea and Miguel sat in a cozy position on their couch. While other people placed their children to bed and settled with each other for the evening, Andrea and Miguel had their mornings. They did the same thing every day. Waking up early to enjoy quality time with each other without the interruption of a six year old and a thirteen year old. Denny fought with Katie as if he too were only six.

They sat back, sipping their warm beverages. It wouldn’t be long before they had to awaken their children, so they savored every single moment alone. Their quiet, peacefulness was soon interrupted by a sound they had only heard one time before, and that was on a drill. The sound of triple blaring sirens, screeching out like a bomb alert, jolted them from their comfort.

“Miguel?” Andrea grabbed her chest. Her heart raced. “Is that for real?”

“Let’s assume it is.” He placed down his mug. “With all that’s been going on we can’t be sure. Let’s get the kids and head to the pole.”

Frank stood alone as the sirens were deafening around him. Where was everyone? What was taking them so long? He could see his father and Johnny making their way to him. Relieved, Frank walked to them

“Frank!” His father, still in disarray from the sudden awakening, charged to him. “What the hell is going on?”

Frank held up his radio, grasping it tightly with his hand. He became distraught with anger and frustration. “They have radios now.”

“Who?”

“Robbie, Moses. They have our radios. They got in here last night.”

“Impossible!” Joe insisted. “We would know.”

“No, they got in.” Frank shouted as he looked over his head at the people gathering. “Help me, Dad. Help me find who is missing.” He tried to get past his father, but Joe stopped him.

“No one is missing, Frank. They’re taunting us. Playing mind games.”

“No! I feel it.” Frank pointed to his own chest hard. “I feel it. I warned you about this. I warned you. I know someone’s gone.” He stormed past his father checking all faces. Trying to put names, and people together. “Are you gonna help me?”

“Fine.” Joe raised his hands to the silent group, as he did, a scream, Andrea’s scream was heard in the distance. It grew closer.

“No!” she cried out hysterically running as fast as she could to the flag pole. “No!” Tears streamed down her face as she raced to town carrying a small piece of wood. She slammed it into Frank’s chest as she ran past him to Joe. She grabbed hold of Joe’s shirt and began to shake him. “They’re gone, they’re gone.” She began to pound her fist against his chest crying. “How did this happen you son of a bitch? How did you let this happen?”

Joe reached for her fists, blocking them. “Andrea, I’m sorry.”

“You said we were safe. You said we were protected.” She screamed with emotion and anger at him. Miguel came up from behind her and wrapped his huge arms around her, dragging her away.

Andrea kicked, screamed and fought him.

“Please.” Miguel held her tighter. “It’s not his fault. It’s no one’s fault. We’ll get them back. I promise. They’re all right.”

Frank wanted to scream. The anger felt from the depth of his soul was out of control. The crying, the screaming. And Andrea wasn’t the only one. Denny was gone, Katie was gone. How many others were too? The noise level and confusion encircling him was a bad dream. It engulfed him. It was a nightmare he could not awaken from. He didn’t know where to turn, he didn’t know what

to do first. He clenched tightly to the four inch piece of wood that Andrea slammed him with. He clasped it so tight, a splinter dug into his hand. He lifted it to look at it. The edge of the wood indented into his huge palm. As a trickle of blood ran down his hand, his eyes gazed upon the words burned into its surface. The words that Andrea had read. The words that ignited a hatred and rage within him. The etched-in-wood message that meant more than the mere three words printed there . . . Bye-Bye Mommy!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“I can’t figure out where they broke in.” Frank walked with Joe both from the back gate. “My men were at their posts last night. Right now, we’re combing the hard to get into areas. They know we don’t have the manpower to cover those obvious sites, so I think they went to them. Possibly digging in from under. We’re looking right now for maybe a tunnel, or hole or something. I’m baffled.”

“You may be right.” Joe slowed down his pace. “Frank, I’m sorry. I should have listened to you.”

“Dad, look, what’s done is done. We have to think about those kids, and the other kids in this community. I have El preparing containment like you said. We’ll get all the kids in there. Then at least we’ll know they’re safe. The others . . . we’ll get them back. We’ll find a way.” Frank stopped, they had reached the point where he and Joe would go separate ways.

“Yes . . . we will. Right now, we have to wait and hear from them. I’m heading back to my office and man the radio there. I’ll talk to Henry, get him to check the mechanical options. Did they down a perimeter? Did they shut down power somehow?”

“What do you need from me?”

“You work on your job, our security force. Use every man in here if we have to. But let’s make sure that they have shifts. The last thing we need is a bunch of exhausted men. Like you.”

“Nah, I’m fine.” Frank stepped back. “I’ll start the new draft now.”

With a peaceful smile Joe gave a firm squeeze to Frank’s arm. “We’re gonna work on a way to bring these sons of bitches down without losing any of our own men.” Solemn, Joe’s hand slid from Frank and he walked slowly, almost slouched toward his office. He had to come up with a way out of the mess and confusion the community was in. Joe prided himself in the fact that the community was safe. That pride was trampled on. Joe did

not take blows very lightly, and the community had suffered a major blow. The safety walls had been violated. The time had come to strike back, the only problem was, they couldn't. Striking back meant risking the lives of the innocents that Robbie had stolen in the night. That, was a risk, Beginnings could not take.

Robbie excitedly stood behind Moses, hands on his shoulders, shaking him. "We did it. Yes."

"Should I call back now?" Moses grabbed the radio.

"No." Robbie took it from him. "The kids will wake up soon. I don't want my dad or anyone to hear them in the background. We hit the next phase of the plan before we contact them by radio."

"What exactly is that phase, Robert? You failed to tell me that." Moses turned around in his seat.

"We go back and get our guaranteed admittance."

"That's what I thought the kids were. I thought by taking them hostage, they'd negotiate, let us in."

"Nope." Robbie was proud of himself. "We need more. And tonight . . ."

"Whoa! Dumb, dumb, dumb." Moses interrupted. "Tonight? They'll kill us if they see us. Besides, security will be doubled."

"True. But that aren't gonna chance hurting us, for fear we'll hurt the kids. We have to finish this phase of the plan. My person inside knows, and is waiting. Tonight's the night we take from them, something, or rather someone very vital, our trump card." Robbie said snide and so sure of himself.

"Who are you taking? Is it your dad? That big guy? Who?"

Robbie shook his head arrogantly. "Nope. Much better. There is only one person in that whole community who is absolutely vital to their survival. He cures them, heals them, invents for them.

They would die as quickly as we do without him. And the best part is, he'll be so easy to get. Tonight their future is ours because we'll have . . . Dean Hayes."

With the shock of the situation beginning to set in, the hysterical crying ceasing, Andrea sat comforted on the couch between Dean and Ellen in their living room. She rocked back and forth, holding tightly to a handkerchief in one hand, her arms folded tightly to her. She tried to control her breathing but hyperventilation fell upon her every time she tried to speak. "Where's Miguel, I need him."

Dean ran his hand across her back. "Soon Andrea, soon. He's carrying things to containment, and helping secure it."

"I don't understand. Why wasn't this done before?" Andrea asked. "Why did it take the children to be taken for action to be done?"

As Ellen began to answer her, a knock was at their door. "Dean. Can you?"

Dean stood up and walked to his door. When he opened it, Frank stood there and he didn't look good. "Frank, Ellen's fine, if that's what you need."

"Can I come in? I need to speak to her."

Dean hesitant, opened the door wider for him to step in. He motioned his hand to the living room.

When Frank entered he saw Andrea and was far from ready to face her. But there she was. She turned around from the couch, and stood upon his entrance.

Andrea moved slowly to Frank, her face cold, Ellen followed closely behind her. She stopped in front of him and stared long and silent. Then without warning, she reached back her hand and

slapped him hard across the face. “You are responsible for this! You set up the security. You were supposed to stop them from coming in. I blame you. If anything happens to my children, I will never forgive you. If you would have known what you were doing, none of this would have happened.”

Frank lowered his head and lifted his eyes. “I’m sorry.” He turned and walked from the house.

Ellen’s heart instantly broke for Frank and she raced out of her house after him. “Frank!” She called to him as he kept walking toward town. “Frank wait.”

Frank stopped and turned around. “El, please. I don’t want to hear it.”

“What?” She approached him out of breath, when she did, he turned his back to her. “Frank it’s me. Why would you hear it from me? She’s just letting it out on you. She doesn’t really blame you.”

“But I blame myself. I feel helpless, and useless.”

“You can’t. I’m so proud of you Frank. You have to know that. What you do here makes me proud.”

Frank exhaled quickly. His eyes were glossy as he looked up at the sky. He couldn’t look at Ellen. He knew if he did, his emotions would give way. “I tried, El.”

“I know you did.” She ran her hand across his face. “I’m here for you.”

Frank grabbed her and tightly pulled her to him. He held onto Ellen only briefly and then he stepped back. “I gotta go.” He gripped her hand and gave a quick squeeze. “Gotta go.” Getting a grip on the feelings that lashed at him. Frank turned and moved on.

Henry opened the door to Joe's office and walked in. His heart broke for Joe who sat looking so distraught as he stared at a silent radio. "Anything Joe?"

"Nothing." Joe shook his head. "George is with Andrea and the other care takers trying to reassure them. How can he do that, Henry? We've got nothing to tell them."

"I don't think they meant to take Denny." He neared the desk.

"What do you mean? What did you find?"

"I've been piecing this thing together. For the past few hours I've been to the homes of these children. They all had the same evidence." Henry threw down four cloths. "Whoever did this knew what they were doing. They knew exactly how much ether to place in the rag so they didn't overdose these kids. They're smart, Joe. They knew to go to the town hospital to find the ether, and the vet hospital to find tranquilizers if they ran into trouble."

"Tranquilizers? How do you know they used them?"

Henry laid down a cartridge on the table. "I found this at Andrea's house. My guess, their insurance against trouble. That's why I don't think they meant to take Denny. I think he woke up while they were snatching up Katie, hit him with a dart, realized he was a kid, and took him."

"Denny's a big kid." Joe sat back in his chair, a part of him relaxed. "In the dark, they wouldn't know he was so young. Obviously they don't want to kill anyone at this time."

"It looks that way." Henry said. "Right now, I think it's a kidnapping situation. The kids are the hostages. Beginnings . . . the ransom."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The screaming, hooting, and chanting heard from the darkness behind the trees, was the most un-nerving factor in it all. Knowing they were out there. Not knowing how many. Hearing the one child, one little girl crying out. “I want my mommy. Please let me go to my mommy. Mommy!” She cried over and over.

Joe stood with George staring out into the darkness, they both tried their hardest to figure out why Robbie’s men were doing what they were doing. Were they taunting them for a reason or were they just being the sick displays of human beings that they were? The tension was so thick in the air but it paled in comparison to the helplessness now by those in Beginnings, or at least those watching the back gate.

Joe paced back and forth in front of George. The three men ordered to stand guard with them waited for a signal they knew would never come. “How long have they been out there now?”

George looked down at his watch. “About forty-five minutes. All I know is I wish they didn’t bring Kimmy with them. There’s nothing more that I would like than to just shoot the hell out of the trees.”

“We’re at a loss here, George. If we kill one of them, what about the others that they have with them back at their camp. To make matters worse, they haven’t even told us what they want.”

“In.” George was very confident in his answer. “I just don’t know why they haven’t said that yet.”

Frank, not Joe, was the one who answered that question as he joined his father and George. “Because they aren’t finished taking what they want, that’s why.”

Joe looked curiously at his son. “What, you really think they’re coming back in?”

“Yes I do. Tonight too. This whole thing. These men out there sounding like a bunch of drunks, this is a diversion.”

Joe moved closer to the fence. “Well if they go after the kids we’ll stop them. At least we know the kids are safe. How’s it look around the perimeter?”

“Good. Very good.” Frank answered. “Instead of doubling men at a point. I singled them there. I figure one man hidden, and watching, can radio if they see anything. We can cover more ground.”

“Excellent idea.” Joe stuck his hands in his pockets and walked back closer to Frank and George. “I just feel so responsible.”

“You and me both, Dad.”

George knew what they felt like. He had been there before, through many a crisis while he was president. One reason he never pushed to run the community, the responsibility was tremendous. “Joe, I know you blame yourself. If I can, I’d like to give a little advice. As a leader, blame goes with the territory. When things are good, fate is responsible. When things are bad, you as a leader, are responsible. But for as angry as they get, and as quickly as they get angry, that’s how fast it fades as soon as you solve things. Trust me.”

“Thanks, George.” Joe looked to his son. Frank had wandered as near to the fence as he could get. He just stood there, arms at his side, staring out looking as if he was trying to focus through the blackness into the trees. Joe walked up to him, speaking softly. “Frank? What is it?”

“Listen. Robbie’s not out there.” Frank kept his stare forward.

“How do you know?”

“There are eight voices out there. Seven men, one child. Not one of them is Robbie.”

“Maybe he is just not saying anything.”

“No. He’s not there.” Frank spoke with assurance. “If he was, I’d feel it.”

“If he’s not out there, then where the hell is he?”

Frank turned and looked seriously at his father. “I’d bet my life I know.” He walked away. “I’m changing this.”

“Changing what?” Joe followed.

“I want to pull some men from the perimeters and put them in town. The perimeter checks are useless.” Frank stopped walking.
“My gut is screaming now. He’s gonna get in.”

Ellen covered her son with a blanket as he slept on a cot in the skills room of the containment center. The huge room was beginning to quiet down finally. The children thought it was just a big party. Running around, ignoring their care givers, totally oblivious to any tension in the air. “Night Billy, I love you.” Ellen leaned down, gently kissed him on the cheek.

Dean’s hand reached in front of her as she stood, he rubbed it over his son’s head. “Are you going to stay here all night?” he asked her.

“Yeah. I doubt I’ll sleep though.” She walked away from the cots. “Walk with me, Dean.”

“Sure.” He followed. “What’s up?”

“I want to run to the house. I have some things to get together, and I want to get cleaned up.”

“Do you think you should be alone? Frank doesn’t.”

“I know, but I don’t think they’ll come back in two nights in a row. They won’t be that stupid.”

“I think you’re right. Sure go ahead, don’t be long though. I don’t want to leave them to go and find you.”

“I won’t be.” Ellen started to walk away but stopped. “Dean, when I get back, can you and I . . . can we . . . we need to talk. Quietly.”

“About what?” Dean questioned. “It sounds serious.”

“It is. But I’d rather wait until I get back to tell you what it is about. Is that all right?” Ellen kissed him on the cheek and backed up.

“Sure.” Dean was curious. The kiss he received to his cheek seemed to send warning rights through him and he couldn’t figure out why. Shrugging it off as a figment of his tensed up imagination, Dean returned to his children’s side.

“Why won’t they just shut up!” Frank pounded his fist on the map which sat on the hood of the jeep.

“Ignore them.” Joe said. “They’re trying to get to you.”

Frank shook his head, and continued to try to explain to his father what the plan was. It was difficult because the men behind the trees grew louder and louder. He slid his hand across the map. “I want to do some concentrating on the vacant rows of houses in the living section. If I were sneaking in. That’s where I’d hide . . .” Frank huffed a breath. The voices in the trees began to repeatedly call his name in a taunting manner. “I can’t concentrate.” Hands on hips Frank spun from the jeep. “Shut the fuck up!” He bellowed out.

“Frank.” Joe cringed and pulled him by the arm off to the side. “Take a break, just an hour or so.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can. If you exhaust yourself, what good will you be to me? Besides you’re making me tense. Take a break before I shoot you.”

Frank turned back and looked into the trees. Walking away from it wouldn’t be a bad idea, even for a short time.. “You’re right. I’m gonna find El. Radio if you need me.”

“I’ll do that.” Joe was as relieved to see Frank. As soon as he did, he ran his hand over the bridge of his nose in relief. One more

minute next to his totally frustrated son, and he would have snapped.

The containment center was eerily quiet when Frank walked in. He headed back to the skills room after checking Ellen's office. He immediately spotted Dean. Dean sat on the floor leaning against the wall in the space between his two children. A pen light in his mouth, a book in his hand. "Dean." Frank whispered. "Where's Ellen?"

Dean took a deep breath in frustration. He took the pen light from his mouth, closed his book and stood up. "She'll be right back." He spoke as he stepped over the sleeping adults.

"Where did she go?"

"Home, Frank. She'll be right back. She wanted to get some things and shower."

Frank ran his fingers through his hair. "I told you not to let her out of your sight."

"That was seventeen hours ago. I don't think even you can take seventeen hours straight with Ellen."

"I'm going to check on her. If she comes back. Tell her to stay put, I need to talk to her."

"Yeah, yeah." Dean opened his mouth to ask more, possibly how everything was going, but Frank was long gone.

Robbie made his way down the small hillside covered with brush. He stayed low, on his stomach, the whole time since he made his way in through the front tunnel gate. He was never seen. They weren't even looking for him there.

He lifted his head slightly above the weeds. The lights from town were bright and he couldn't see anyone that looked like they were walking guard. Peering through his binoculars he saw containment was guarded, but by only two men. He moved his view over to check out the living section which sat close by the containment. The huge spotlights did not reflect into that area. So dark and only one man patrolled the street. So easy, he thought, how stupid could they be? Three guards in the whole inside of town. They were giving their enemy an invitation to walk in. Robbie knew his work would be easier than anticipated and he just had to wait until the time was right.

Just as he began to settle into his waiting position, Robbie spotted him walking from containment. The thought of bonus rang through Robbie's mind. He perked up some and smiled . . . Frank.

Frank didn't want to get angry with Ellen for leaving containment. His break time was limited and he didn't want to spend it yelling. Ellen was his biggest sense of support. He knew that and he needed that. Seeking what he could only get from her, he walked into her house and straight upstairs. He could hear the shower water turning off when he reached the top of the steps. Positioning himself by the closed bathroom door Frank waited.

Ellen shrieked when she opened the bathroom door and Frank was there. Closing her robe, she grabbed her chest. "You scared me." She walked by him to her bedroom.

"What are you doing here?"

"Showering." She smiled at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I told you to stay put in containment."

Calmly, Ellen stopped in the bedroom. "I'm not responding to that. Because I refuse to believe I'm not safe walking around. Not

with you out there. So . . . why are you here.” She turned to her clothes that rested on the bed. Reaching for them, she heard the long emotional breath from Frank. Slowly, she turned back around and he stepped to her. She looked upon his face and the lines that formed there. Though Frank had always been the portrait of strength, she saw behind the eyes of a man who had reached his limits. “Frank.” She whispered out his name.

He took hold of her, grabbing onto Ellen as if he hadn’t done so in a long time. His lips went immediately to hers and he began to kiss her. His actions were his response. They spoke the words he wanted to, and Ellen heard them.

He searched for something to take away all that he felt and feared and he found it in Ellen. Lifting her up, his arms clutched around her, Frank brought Ellen chest to chest. He stepped to the bed, his wide kisses never ceasing. After bringing his knee to the bed first, Frank gently laid Ellen down and brought himself to her. He felt every ounce and inch of her body wrap around him, and Frank got lost, if only for a moment, in the security of that.

Frank wanted to stay on top of that bed with Ellen, nakedness to nakedness, but he couldn’t. He had to get back to the tense horror that still lurked at the back gate. He watched her briefly as she fastened her shorts, sitting on the side of the bed still half nude. Total appreciation of Ellen was in his stare, he knew she just didn’t see it.

“Frank.” Ellen giggled as she placed on her bra. “You’re being weird. You’re staring.”

“You’re beautiful . . . where’d I throw my socks?” Frank scratched his head, laying one hand on his bare chest as he looked around.

“Check under your shirt.” Ellen looked around. “And see if mine’s there, you threw it off the bed.”

How so few articles of clothes could make such a mess was beyond Frank. He shuffled Ellen’s robe from the way and spotted

his pants near the bed. Shifting his views around more he saw the whiteness of his tee shirt and lifted it. “Nope. Gun.” He dropped his shirt.

“You’re not getting dressed?”

“El, there’s a fine routine. Boxers . . .” Frank pulled at the elastic of his boxer shorts. “Socks, pants, shirts. Can’t break that routine . . . here’s your shirt.” He tossed it to her.

“Thanks. I want to hurry back to containment before Dean decides to leave.”

“Yes. My socks.” Frank bent down.

“I want to tell him about the baby.”

“El?” Frank dropped his just found socks in surprise. “El.” He stepped to the bed. “I know I’ve been pressuring you. But today, tonight, you don’t have to. Not with all that’s happening.”

Ellen hesitated before placing on her shirt. “It’s time. I’m three months pregnant, or near to that. He has to know. And containment is best. It’ll be too quiet for him to yell.”

A hush took over Frank and he dropped to his knees before her taking the shirt from her hands. “El, listen. I want to ask you something.” He held her hands.

“Frank, I have to go. Ask me later.”

“No, now. I want . . . I want to ask you now. Dean . . . he’s not going to be happy about this. You know he believes that what happened last year was just an incident. It’s pretty much going to be over anyhow when you tell him. And I never said it, but it doesn’t mean I didn’t think it.”

“Frank.” Ellen had a chuckle to her. “What are you rambling about?”

“I want you to be my wife, El. What do you say?”

“You know you’re only asking me because I’m pregnant.”

“See. Why do you have to be like this? I am very serious. I . . .” Frank lifted his head to the sound of breaking glass downstairs.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know.” Frank stood up. “Dean?”

Ellen shook her head.

He had to check it out. With all that was going on, Frank couldn't take a chance. He reached down and grabbed his gun. Laying his forefinger to his lips, he moved slowly to the door. He placed his back against the wall, clicked back the hammer on his revolver, and slid his way to the steps. When his back hit the edging of the wall, he peered slightly over to see who was down there. He spotted shoes. Dirty shoes. He knew it wasn't Dean.

Quickly he went back to the bedroom and walked up to Ellen, he whispered softly so his voice could not be heard. "Stay here. Don't move. It's not Dean." He kissed her quickly and backed out.

Ellen's eyes widened. She mouthed the words. "Be careful."

He mouthed his response. "Always."

Repeating his earlier motions, he made his way back to the steps, looking over again. The person was gone. Holding his gun high in front of him, finger on the trigger, Frank backed his way slowly down the steps, being careful not to make a sound. Taking the steps seemed to take forever. Reaching the bottom step was a triumph.

Frank took a deep breath as he reached the first floor. Ready, he turned the corner sharply, holding his gun out. As he opened himself, he saw his Robbie standing in the living room holding a gun of his own.

Before any words could be said, before there could be any thoughts, a single shot was fired. Only one brother had time to fire his weapon. Only one brother had time to hit his target dead on. That brother was not Frank.

Placing on her shirt, Ellen jolted at the shot, and fear raced through her when she heard the front door slam. Who did Frank hit? Did they get away? Was he chasing him? She couldn't just stand there and wait. Grabbing Frank's radio that rested on the dresser, she flew from the bedroom and ran to the stairs. Her heart stopped beating when she saw Frank trying to walk up the steps. He held on to his stomach, blood flowed from between his hands. "Oh God. Frank!"

Frank didn't have the strength. His brown eyes peered up at her as his body swayed. One more look and he fell backwards, crashing into the wall and dropping to the floor.

“Frank!” Ellen flew down the steps, falling feet first on the last four. She crawled to Frank, who laid, blood pouring from his gunshot wound. Hand still clutching her shirt, Ellen covered his stomach. Pressing hard to stop the bleeding. She lifted him and slid behind him, holding him in her arms. She laid her lips to his cheek as her hand reached for the radio that had fallen by the steps. Shaking, she called into it. “Joe. Oh God, Joe, help. Frank's been shot. Hurry, my house.” She dropped the radio to the floor and cradled him more. “Hold on, please hold on.”

Frank opened his eyes, he could barely focus, when he looked up to her. “El . . .” His words were weak and hoarse. He coughed as he tried to speak.

“Shh.” She kissed him, brushing her cheek against his, still holding on tightly to her shirt, trying to stop the bleeding. “It'll be all right. You'll be all right.” She looked down at him. She looked into his eyes which were trying to stay open. As she saw the blood seeping over her hand and on to the floor, a feeling of desperation hit her. She realized at that moment what she held in her arms. She held her life, and she was losing it. She couldn't lose Frank. As she stared down at him again, it happened. A reaction that had not happened in five years. A single tear formed first, it welled within her eye, flowed softly down her cheek, and dropped onto Frank.

He reached his hand up to her, placing it on her face. He brushed the tears that now streamed down her cheek away with his thumb. “El . . .” He spoke weakly and struggling through his pain. “I love you so much.” He closed his eyes, his hand dropped, and his head fell back.

“No!” Ellen felt his body slump. “No.” She pulled him closer. “Oh God help him. Don't take him from me.” Her heart was breaking. Her body shook with emotions as she cried, pressing her face to his. She couldn't let him go. If she released her embrace

for one second, he could slip from her. Slip from her arms, and from her life. She couldn't bear that.

Joe burst through the door of Ellen's home, he was followed by Miguel and Henry. The shock of the scene that lay on the floor before his eyes was more then he could handle. He lost his breath, and fell to his knees. "Oh my, God."

Ellen lifted her eyes. Her face red and tear streaked. "He's dying Joe. Help him. He's dying." Ellen laid her head on Frank and began to sob. "I can't lose him. I can't."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The chaos felt in the clinic was tremendous. Andrea rushed to meet Dean at the main doorway. After hearing Ellen's call to Joe. Quickly, first summoning Dean from containment, she began to prep for Frank's arrival. She only had minutes and just Melissa to help her. If how bad Frank actually was, was determined by Ellen's call, then Frank wasn't good. But Andrea didn't know anything of his condition. She could only guess. The one thing Andrea remained certain of, was her ability to handle the situation. At that moment she was grateful for the twenty years she spent as a nurse in New York City.

Dean peered out the glass doors, awaiting Frank. "How long ago was it that they called?"

"Five minutes maybe." Her hand gripped the gurney as tightly as Dean's did.

"Blood. Are we stocked?"

"Melissa has five pints waiting in the O.R. we can always get . . . here they are."

Both Andrea and Dean held open the glass doors. The jeep screeched to a halt. Joe, Henry, and Miguel jumped out, they lifted Frank, who laid in Ellen's arms, from the back of the jeep. They carried him to the clinic. Frank's long body draped motionless over their arms. Ellen held his head from behind as they rushed inside and laid him on the awaiting gurney.

Dean hurried to Ellen as Andrea immediately went to Frank. "El. are you . . ." He noticed her eyes were red, her body, half dressed, covered in blood. ". . . all right?"

"Help him, Dean." She rushed past him to Frank's side. "Andrea?"

Andrea felt for a pulse. "I have a pulse. It's a good one." She lifted the unrecognizable blood soaked shirt from his wound. "Shit. Help me to O.R. STAT."

Ellen grabbed hold of the cart as it began to wheel down the hallway. “I’m coming with you.”

Andrea, focused, kept moving. “No, stay here, it’s best.”

“You need me in there. I am not leaving him. I won’t.” She pleaded. “Please.”

“Fine. But the moment you get out of control, you are out.”

“Thank you.” She looked to Dean, who held his hand on Frank’s stomach. “Thank you, Dean.”

Dean shook his head at her. “Maybe you should get dressed first before you go in there.” He pushed the cart faster, out of Ellen’s hands, leaving her standing there.

Henry, without hesitation, took off his shirt. “Here, El. Now go.”

Ellen kissed him on the cheek. “Pray for him.” She ran down the hallway pulling the shirt over her head as she did. She burst into the operating room. Frank was being covered, while Melissa attached a monitor to him. The beeping sound began immediately. Frank’s heart. She heard it. It was a sign of hope to her. She ran to Frank’s side, and positioned herself by his head, right by the monitor. “Hold on, Frank.” She placed her lips to his forehead. “I’m here.”

Andrea held her just scrubbed hands high, as Melissa placed a gown on her. “Ellen, the bags are ready. Hook Frank up.”

Ellen stood up. She reached for the tubing and placed the ends of it on the table. Near his head, on a tray, lay the needles needed. Her hands shook as she reached for them, she couldn’t even pick them up.

Dean, frustrated at Ellen’s inability, intervened. He grabbed the needles, and Frank’s arm, and inserted them. “If you want to stay in here, you have to better than that.” He resumed his position across from Andrea, placing his mask over his face. “Ready.”

Andrea peered through the tops of her mask at Dean, then at Ellen, who cradled Frank’s head. “Melissa, scalpel.” She held out her hand. “We have a major bleeder here. I just have to find it.

Dean . . . suction.” She began to go to work on Frank. “How’s our vitals Ellen?”

“Pulse is fifty, BP is 80 over 60.” Ellen’s voice shook. “How bad is it Andrea?”

“I’ve seen worse. We’re lucky that Frank is such a big guy.” She looked quickly at Ellen. “You have to calm down. We are doing fine here. I just have to find the bullet . . . Suction Dean . . . who shot him Ellen?”

Ellen shook her head. “I don’t know. I was upstairs in the bedroom.” She kept staring at Frank.

“What was going on?” Andrea asked.

Dean breathed heavily in response. “It’s obvious what they were doing. They seemed to be lacking clothes.”

Andrea glared at Dean, her hands pausing just briefly. “This is not the time for that, Doctor.” Her eyes returned to her work. “Found it . . . I got the bullet . . . one more second . . . there.”

Ellen closed her eyes, her lips pressed to Frank when she heard the clank of the bullet hit the tray.

“Dean suction . . . I see the bleeder, it’s not bad. It’s not bad, Ellen. There doesn’t seem to be much damage. I think I can do it.” Andrea nodded her head to Melissa who informed her she was replacing the empty pint of blood, with a fresh one. Andrea’s smile could not be seen through her mask. She was happy, the whole thing could have been worse. It was repair time, crisis over. “Talk to me Ellen. Just talk to me.”

Dean didn’t understand Andrea’s infatuation with calming Ellen. It annoyed him. He tried not to let it interfere, but it did. He didn’t want to hear Ellen’s story. What he witnessed was enough.

Ellen tried her hardest not to cry, every time she spoke her body trembled and shook.

Andrea extended her hand to Melissa for another instrument. “Ellen . . . calm down . . . you don’t want me to kick you out, do you? Now is this you Ellen? Take control girl. Talk to me.”

Ellen sniffled and wiped her hand across her face. “He has to be all right.”

"He will be . . . Sutures. . . He's going to be just fine. As soon as I'm done, we'll hook him up to more blood, replace what he has lost, and he'll recover. I promise." Andrea began to suture.

"He has to." Ellen hovered over Frank. "He has to." She kissed Frank again. "He said he wanted to marry me. I didn't even answer him. I didn't get a chance."

Dean's heart dropped along with the scissors onto the tray. He took off his mask and backed away.

Andrea lowered her mask with a deep breath of relief. "You'll have your chance." She dropped her gloves, and placed her hand on Ellen's back. "He's going to be fine . . . Melissa, get a fresh bag on him, with a stronger anti-infection agent. After you're done let me know. I'll get Miguel to roll him in his room." The operation was over, Andrea walked to the sink to clean her hands.

Across the room, Dean's back was to Ellen. His fist on the table. Like he hadn't seen in a long time, Ellen was out of control. It was all about Frank. The realization of Ellen and Frank finally struck him hard.

Andrea shook her hands then dried them on a towel. She was abated at the success of everything. "Joe needs to know his son is fine. I'll go tell him. Dean?" He didn't answer her. "Dean? I'll be back." As she made her way to the doors, her body froze, her heart stopped. The steady beeping of Frank's monitor that filled the room, now screamed out in one steady sound. He flat lined.

"No!" Ellen cried.

Dean turned around. The room which he blocked from his mind, zoomed into sudden focus. He ran to Frank.

"Shit!" Andrea raced over. "He's crashing . . . Dean bag him! Ellen step back!" She grabbed the foot stool under the table, stood on it, cupped her hands and placed them over Frank's chest. "Ready?"

"One sec . ." He placed the air bag in Frank's mouth. "Now!"

Andrea began to compress on Frank's chest, counting her compressions out loud. "One and two and three and four and breath. One and two . . ."

The high pitched beep rang loud in Ellen's ears, she couldn't stay away, she moved closer to Frank. "Come on . . . Please, come on."

One cycle. One minute. Andrea checked for a pulse. "Nothing . . . Again."

Ellen could hear the counting, she prayed. "Frank please."

Two cycles. Two minutes. Nothing.

Ellen knew the look on Dean's face. Andrea worked over top of Frank with such desperation. The seconds were flying by, time was of the essence, and they were running out.

Three cycles. Three minutes. No pulse.

"Dean." Ellen called to him. "The drug. The P.C.R.S."

"No, Ellen." Dean squeezed the bag.

"Please."

"Shut up!" Dean listened to Andrea count.

Four cycles. Four minutes. Andrea checked again. "Damn it Frank come on. One more Dean."

"Dean . . . Dean . . . you have to do it." Ellen pleaded.

Dean shook his head, he squeezed again. He saw Andrea listen for a heartbeat.

Andrea's eyes lifted, she removed her stethoscope and flung it across the room. "I'm sorry Ellen. Call it Dean."

Dean looked up to the clock. "Eleven sixteen." He pulled the bag from Franks mouth.

"What are you doing?!" Ellen reached for Dean, he turned away. "Help him!"

Dean lowered his head. "I can't!"

"Yes you can!" Ellen stood straight. "You can, Dean. You're the only one. The drug. Hurry!"

"It's not ready. We don't know what it will do." He walked to the counter across the room.

Ellen charged to him, her heart on the line, she grabbed hold of his jacket. "It's ready. What good is it if we don't try? You have try! You can save him. Save him, Dean. Please. I'm begging you."

Dean tried not to look into Ellen's eyes, he kept turning away, shaking his head.

"Please. If it doesn't work, what will it hurt? Don't do this Dean. Don't let him die on me. Please I love him. He's my life. I'll do anything. I'll give him up. Just don't let him die." She began to sob. "Please."

Dean pushed her away, backed up quickly and ran from the room. He had to do it. If there was the chance, no matter how slim, he had to take it. It was what he created the drug for. It was the test. Within seconds he flew back into the room holding the syringe. "Back away." He ran over to the table. He looked at the clock. It was eleven seventeen. He placed his fingers on Frank's chest, feeling for the space near the breast bone. He inserted the needle and plunged in the drug. The room was silent. They waited with baited breath, watching the second hand make its way around the face of the clock . . . twice. Nothing. "It didn't work. I'm sorry Ellen." Dean threw the syringe on the floor. He had failed.

Ellen slowly moved closer to Frank. It couldn't be. It was. Frank was gone. Her life was over. "Frank." She moved to his ear. Her soft voice squeaked.. "Frank, I know you hear me. Listen to me. You can't do this. You can't die on me. You never gave up on anything. Never. Fight, Frank. Fight. Don't leave me." Her tears flowed faster as she hovered over him. Her body shaking as she kissed him. "I love you. . . so much. Don't do this. Please."

Andrea listened to Ellen, her pleading, her crying, her begging. So emotional and it wasn't good for her. Ellen had to be taken from the room. She made her way to a solace Dean, who was rubbing his head, watching. "We have to get her out of here. It's not good for her."

Dean turned sharply to Andrea. "Why do I care what's good for Ellen right now?"

"You know why." Andrea scolded. "She's pregnant Dean. Care about that. Now help me." Andrea walked over to Ellen and grabbed her arm.

Dean heart sunk to the furthest depths it could. Hesitantly he followed Andrea. “Come on, El. This isn’t good for you.”

“I don’t care.” She pulled her arms away from them. “I can’t leave him.”

Andrea grabbed hold again. “Sweetie, we’ll leave him here, calm down, and then come back.” They began to drag her as she fought them.

“No!” Ellen’s one cry. Her one word screamed from her soul and echoed through the halls of the clinic.

Joe looked up. He heard her, he heard Ellen’s anguish. His heart fell. And he knew. His head lowered, it was over. He had lost his son.

Ellen tried desperately, she fought with everything she had not to be taken. She reached out her hand toward Frank. Grasping out, crying, as in one final attempt to reach him. “Frank! No!” She threw back her head as the doors to the operating room flung open.

Before they could leave, before they could step out. Melissa called out to them. “Dr. Hayes, Dr. Winters.”

Ellen’s pleas were answered . . . by Frank. The sound was loud and clear. His heart was beating once more. Breaking from Dean and Andrea’s grip, Ellen charged forward faster than her body could move. She began to trip, her right knee banging to the floor as she saved her balance and reached for the table. “Oh my God.” She flew to Frank’s side. The beeping was strong and steady. “He came back.” She kissed his lips, holding his face in her hands, whispering. “You came back.”

Andrea’s eye widened as she turned to Dean. “What did you give him?”

“The P.C.R.S.. It worked.” Dean was stunned

Ellen lifted her head when Dean walked back into the room, she stood straight up and moved to him. “Dean.” She threw her arms around him, holding him tightly. “Thank you. You saved him. Thank you.”

Dean reached up and grabbed hold of her arms removing them. He stepped back from Ellen not even looking at her. “Andrea, I have to go to my lab and get his second dosage ready. I . . . I don’t . . .” He couldn’t say anymore. Throat closed, Dean shook his head, held his hands up, and backed away, giving one more look at Ellen before leaving the operating room.

Room number ten was quiet. Ellen sat by Frank’s bedside, holding on to his hand. Joe stood behind her, both hands on her shoulders.

Andrea finished administering the medication into the intravenous. “There, that’s the second dose. Just to let you know what’s happening. He has normal sinus rhythm right now. Things look very good. But, we know Frank. If Frank wakes up too soon, he’s gonna want to get out of this bed. Because of that, we want to keep him out for three days, then see if he wakes up on his own.”

Joe’s hands dropped off of Ellen. “What do you mean ‘if’, Andrea?”

“We think everything will be fine. But we still have to remember he was dead for eight minutes. That’s a long time. If he wakes up, he may not be the same man.”

“He will be.” Ellen kissed Frank’s hand. “I feel it. I know him. He’s coming back strong.”

Andrea smiled. “I believe that too. Right now, I’m going to get some rest. My body needs it. It’s been a bad day.”

Joe moved from behind Ellen and walked to Andrea grabbing hold of her hands. “You’re a very special lady Andrea. You saved my son’s life. With everything on your mind, you still saved his life. I am grateful, more than you know.”

“I do know.” She patted his hands. “I also know, you will bring my son back for me. I believe that.” Andrea leaned into Joe

and kissed him. “Goodnight Joe.” She waved to Ellen, and walked slowly from the room. She had to rest. Though momentarily, the tragedy that occurred in her life was placed far in her mind, it all came back to her when things slowed down.

Joe returned to Ellen, standing by his son, keeping watch and vigil over him.

What a perfect scene. Dean thought as he stood in the doorway of Frank’s room. His mind flourished with the thoughts of what he had to say to Ellen. His heart was heavy. It was broke. He had lost a battle he didn’t realize he hadn’t a chance of winning. He cleared his throat loudly to get their attention. When they both looked to him, he spoke. “I, uh, need to speak to Ellen.”

Ellen stood from her chair, motioning for Joe to sit. She walked to the doorway then into the hall with him. “Dean.” She gasped. “Oh, God, thank you. Frank is doing good. He’s alive because of . . .”

“Shut up, Ellen.” Dean closed his eyes tight. “Just . . . shut up.”

“What?” Ellen was shocked. “Dean, I was just . . .”

“First.” He held up his hand. Face stern he moved closer leaning into Ellen who had backed against the wall. “I want to make something clear. I did not give that drug to Frank because you offered to give him up.”

Ellen nodded slowly. “I know that. You’re a good doctor. That’s why I can’t thank you enough for . . .”

“Ellen!” Dean slammed his hand into the wall just beside her head. “Listen to you! Do you even comprehend what else transpired tonight? Do you? What I saw. What I felt. How about learned?”

“This isn’t about you, Dean.”

“The hell it isn’t. He’s fine.” Dean pointed. “Deal with me now.”

“If you’re worried about me keeping my word about giving him up, I . . .”

“Screw your word. Give him up. Go on. Keep in mind, I don’t want you.”

Ellen folded her arms tight and tried to slip away. “I’m not listening to this.”

“I’m not finished.”

“I don’t care.”

Dean’s arm blocked her from going anywhere. “You owe me this.”

“Fine.” Ellen huffed out with attitude. “Talk.”

“I want you out of my house.”

“I’m gone.”

Dean laughed. “You’re a real piece of work. When were you planning on telling me you were pregnant to him? Would that have been before . . .” Dean lifted and dropped her left hand. “Or after you married me.”

“Dean.” Ellen didn’t expect that.

“No.” He shook his head. “I could take the fact that you two were sleeping together moments before he got shot. And the baby. You got pregnant. That hurts, but still, it’s something in time I’d handle. But do you know what crushed me? I repeat the word crushed. Is when you told him you loved him. Love. I thought that was something you were incapable of. Wasn’t that what you told me all these years? You can never love any man? I told you I loved you. I loved you with my heart and soul. You let me tell you that.”

“Dean, you’re forgetting I was honest with you about the way I felt..”

Dean bit his bottom lip, he wanted to slam the wall again, but he controlled himself. “El, you don’t know the meaning of word honest. To you it means whatever you can get away with without getting caught. You lived with me for almost five years. Five

years! Did it never occur to you that you'd hurt me? Why couldn't you just be honest with me? Why couldn't you just give me that decency? I deserved to know."

"Why didn't you walk away from me last year when you found out about us then?"

"Because you didn't. You wanted to stay. In fact, if memory serves me right, you said you'd break it off. I just never bothered asking you if you did, because I trusted that you would. Just tell me. I need to know. How long has this been going on? How long have you really been with Frank? The truth."

Ellen closed her eyes, and put her head back. She had to think of what to tell him. How to tell him. She opened her eyes and looked at him. The pain on his face said it all. It was time to end all of the deceit once and for all. "Dean. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I did this to you." She moved to him, but he backed off.

"Oh, this is going to be good, isn't it?" Dean shook his head. "Give it to me. How long?"

"Since we got to Beginnings."

Dean's mouth dropped open, an exhale came from him with almost a laugh it was such a shock. "We've been here five years." Dean swallowed. "Five years?" He had been given all the information he could handle. "Thanks a lot, Ellen. Thanks a lot" With a lump in his throat, Dean left.

Composure time. That was what Ellen thought her and Dean needed, and she allotted that. Emotions were high, adrenalin pumped and things were said that shouldn't have been. It was time to face the man she shared a family and life. With a clear, calm head Ellen wanted to talk to Dean. He deserved better from her than what he got. He deserved something she didn't say to him in that hall. 'I'm sorry'.

Containment is where she knew she'd find him. Around their children. And Ellen, leaving Joe with Frank, went there. Greg was behind the desk when she walked in.

"Ellen." He set down the book he was reading. "How's Frank?"

"He's doing well. Thank you. I'll keep you posted." She moved to the main door. When the buzzer sounded off, Ellen pulled open the door. "If . . . if you hear any shouting. That's just me and Dean. Don't worry about it."

"Dean's not in there."

Ellen stopped in her stride through. "He's not? When did he leave?"

"A long time ago. When he went to help Frank."

"And he hasn't returned?"

"Nope."

"Odd." With concern, Ellen continued into containment. She was certain Dean would return. Why would he not? His children were there. And Ellen decided to wait as long as it took.

CHAPTER THIRTY

June 21

The headache. The pounding excessive headache was all Dean could think about. With eyes closed tightly, he buried his face tighter into the pillow. The pain throbbed from the base of his skull clear around to his eyes. Piercing pain, like a dagger.

He moaned softly, he didn't want to move. His mouth felt like cotton, dry, gross. It couldn't be a hangover, he didn't drink that much. With every thought he had, his head ached. Vividly in his mind he pictured Ellen, he heard her voice over and over, 'I love him, Dean. He's my life. Don't let him die.' Besides having the world's biggest headache, he felt like the world's biggest fool. Five years they had been together without him knowing. Was he that blind? Obviously. The whole situation to Dean just sucked.

Dean remembered leaving the clinic and stopping at the empty social hall for one drink. One drink. No one was around, he grabbed a bottle poured a shot and it was lights out. His tolerance could not have been that low. Maybe the moonshine really was that strong. Whatever the reason he was paying for his momentary lapse into self pity.

It had to be morning, his body felt like it was. Dean didn't want to move, but he knew he had to. Besides having to get to the clinic, he had to piss so bad, he was in pain. That alone was the reason to get out of bed. With eyes still tightly closed, wanting to avoid the brightness of the day, he lifted himself to a sitting position. After grunting out in pain, Dean rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. No, he thought, he had to get motivated. He spread open his fingers to peer his eyes through, breaking in the light gently. It was a dream. Dean looked around at the unfamiliar furnishings. He was in a bedroom, but not his. Dean worried. Though out of character for him, he feared in his drunken distraught state what he had done.

Turning his aching head to the side, he looked at the bed. Empty! His head flung back, with all the pain, in relief.

But then it caught his eye. The one thing on that bed, that shouldn't be there. Blood? Dean reached his hand down to the pillow and felt it. Some of it was dry, some of it wet. Where did it come from? From him? Maybe that was the reason his head pounded. Had he fallen in a drunken rage?

He brought his fingers to his head and slowly felt around. They stopped cold on the large bump on the side of his head. The large, damp, lump. Dean pulled down his fingers and looked at them. Blood!

The door to the room opened with a loud creak. Dean lifted his stare from his fingertips, glared up and focused in on the person that entered the room. In shock, Dean rolled his eyes in disbelief, and blurted out just one word. A word that rarely, if ever, crossed his lips. A word that summed up his emotions at that one moment. "Fuck."

Dean couldn't avoid her all day. He never returned to containment, at least while she while there, and Ellen had to speak to him. In her mind, she believed fate intervened. Maybe it was best their paths didn't cross until both had some separation time.

Joe arrived back at the clinic for his shift with Frank, and Ellen began her futile search. After being unsuccessful at the lab or at home, she went to containment again. If anything, Dean didn't hate her enough to stay away from their kids.

Ellen underestimated Dean's anger. When she arrived at containment, he was nowhere to be seen. She bit her tongue and ignored the sympathy cringe she got on behalf of Frank, when she saw Michelle helping out there. In the skills room Ellen spotted Paul holding Alexandra who was obviously crying. "Alex."

Alexandra turned her little head, jumped from Paul's lap and leaped into Ellen's arms.

"Sweetie." She ran her hand down her daughter's long hair. "What's wrong?"

Paul stood up. "She's very upset. She misses her daddy. I've been trying to calm her for an hour."

Ellen pulled her daughter back to look at her. "Honey, Daddy probably didn't want to leave, he's just busy that's all."

"I was alone." Alexandra buried her head into her mother.

"I'm sorry. But I thought Daddy would be right back."

"He didn't come back."

"Sure he did." Ellen stroked her hair again. "You were sleeping. You just missed him that's all." She tried her hardest to comfort her daughter.

"No." Alexandra argued.

"Yes he was. I know he was . . ." Ellen then noticed Paul shaking his head. "Alex . . . I have to put you down for a second. Please? Mommy just needs to talk to Paul." Ellen placed her daughter on the cot. "Stay here." She kissed her daughter then walked to Paul. "What's going on?" She pulled him aside.

"Dean wasn't here last night."

"How do you know that? I mean you just got here."

"No, I didn't. I couldn't sleep last night. I was worried with everything that was going on. So I thought I'd come here and help anyone with the kids."

"Maybe you just missed him that's all."

Paul shook his head once more. "As I was walking to containment, I saw you leave."

"You're sure about that? You're sure he didn't come in here?" Ellen questioned him some more.

"Positive."

"Something's not right. This isn't Dean." Ellen took a deep breath. Holding up her bangs, she looked back at her daughter then at Paul. "I hate to do this, but, could you occupy her."

"Sure, no problem."

“Thank you.” Ellen waited until Paul approached Alexandra and asked her if she wanted to go with him to see his guitar. Ellen knew that was her clue, her sign, to sneak out and she left containment.

As she stood, looking clueless, she spotted the guard walking from around the building. “Dan.” She approached him. “Were you on last night?”

“Yes, why?”

“Did you see Dean at all walking around?”

“Uh . . .” He scratched his head and thought. “Yeah, I did. He went into the social hall. But I didn’t see him leave. You know, with my rounds and all.”

“Thanks.” Ellen crossed the street and walked down to the end of the block. She walked into the unlocked hall. Empty. She checked under the pool table, behind the bar, Dean wasn’t there. Someone had been though, a bottle of moonshine and an empty shot glass sat on the bar.

If Dean was drinking moonshine, it was no wonder she couldn’t find him. There were a few more places she could check, if she still turned up nothing, then she’d allow herself to worry and move on to the next option . . . telling Joe.

“Joe.” Ellen called from the doorway of Frank’s room. “We have a problem.”

“What now?” Joe rolled his eyes. “Is it bad?”

Ellen walked in. “At first I didn’t think so, now I kind of do.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find Dean. He didn’t return to containment at all. He’s not in the lab or Andrea’s house. Dan said he saw him go into the social hall last night. But . . . nothing. I checked everywhere. I can’t locate him.”

“Do you think he got drunk, passed out somewhere and is sleeping it off?”

Ellen shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m starting to get concerned. You don’t think anything happened to him do you?”

“I doubt it.” Joe stood up and walked to the door. “He probably drank too much and wandered into the woods again. I pull a check myself.” Leaving the room, Joe didn’t want to tell Ellen that he *was* concerned. Anything was possible. All Joe wanted to do was locate Dean, find him, see that he was fine, chew his ass out for being unreachable, then be grateful that he was all right.

“This isn’t happening to me.” Dean tried to stand up, but weakly fell back onto the bed. “This is just great. Just great. Are you telling me I’ve been kidnapped?”

Robbie squatted down in front of him. “At least we have you in a great room. The best.” He reached to the night stand. “Here, you need your glasses.” He handed them to Dean.

Dean grunted. He grabbed them and put them on. “There. Now I can see my kidnapper in focus.”

“I brought you some water.” Robbie showed him the cup

“I don’t want your water, it’s poison. I hope you aren’t giving that to the kids to drink. It hasn’t even been purified. Don’t give them anymore until I work out something.” Dean stood up slowly. “This is great. What the hell else could happen to me? Do me a favor. Shoot me. Just shoot me. Take me out like a dog and put me out of my misery.”

Robbie laughed and rose to his feet. “I wouldn’t do that. You’re too valuable.”

“Obviously not valuable enough to avoid knocking on the dome.” Dean touched his head. “I probably need stitches. I’m still bleeding.” He wiped the blood on the side of his jeans. “It’s going

to be impossible to stitch my own head!” He began to shout and rant about. “Thank you!”

“Calm down. We aren’t going to hurt you anymore.” Robbie thought Dean was funny. “We need you. We planned on taking you. I am not the type of person to harm an innocent man.”

“Really? So it wasn’t you who shot your brother?”

“Yeah, it was. Frank was hardly innocent. You of all people should know that. Besides, I not only did myself a favor, I did you one, too.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dean sat back down on the bed, he was having trouble balancing.

“Eliminated our biggest threat. Frank was your biggest threat to Ellen. He was my biggest threat to carrying out my plan. Now he’s gone. One obstacle eliminated.”

Dean began to open his mouth. He wanted to say. ‘You stupid idiot, you only wounded him.’ But he stopped himself. Robbie thought Frank was dead. With that on Robbie’s mind, then he underestimated Beginnings’ ability. “What did you do Robbie? Go to my house to get me, saw Frank and shot him just for being in the way?”

“Well . . . yeah. I guess. Sort of, it wasn’t exactly planned. Wanna know what happened?”

“No.” Dean knew enough of what went on in that house. “I’d like you to take me to see the kids now.” Dean began to stand.

“Tough.” Robbie shoved him back down. He pulled up a chair and sat directly across from Dean. “I’m going to tell you. You see, Dean, I had to get rid of the enemy . . . Frank. It was perfect, I see him going into your house. I followed. When I go in, I hear noises upstairs. So I walked up, slowly, right? When I reach the top, I see can see in the bedroom. And I see my brother, giving it to your woman.” Robbie stood up and placed his face close to Dean’s, whispering in his ear. “I mean giving it to her. Fucking her, Dean. In your house . . .” Dean turned his face away, but Robbie snatched it back, making him listen. “In your room. In your bed! I stood there. They didn’t even know I was there. I had

the perfect opportunity. I could have gone in and put the gun to Frank's head. But it wasn't good enough. He had to see it coming." Robbie released Dean's face and backed away. "So, I went back downstairs and waited until I heard them walking around upstairs. Then I made a noise. I knew he'd come down. And when he did . . . Pow! And it was bye-bye- Frank. Oh, in case you're wondering, I didn't really hear that final scream of pleasure from Ellen. That should make you feel a little better."

"Oh, yeah I'm overjoyed." Dean was annoyed. "Are you done with this story?"

"You're being rude. Here I am, the perfect host, and you're acting like this?"

"How the hell else do you expect me to act? Whimpering? I'm too mad. The past twelve hours have been a dozy. First, the woman I love comes in to the clinic with her lover who's been shot. I have to try to save this man. Then I find out that she's pregnant to him. And if that's not enough, she's been screwing him the entire five years we've been together. Then you knock me on my head. Give me the worst headache of my entire life. Kidnap me and make me listen to you describe the perverted enjoyment you got out of watching them moments before you blew away your very own brother. Now is there a point that you are trying to make here? What is it that you want from me?"

"Whoa!" Robbie held up his hands. "I was just . . ."

"I don't want to hear!" Dean began to shout. "So you killed your brother. So you kidnapped me and a bunch of kids from town. Big deal. That doesn't make you one up on anything. Now if you're finished playing these sick-mind games with me, I'd like to see the kids you borrowed from us!" Dean rose from the bed and walked to the door.

If it was anyone else screaming at Robbie, he would have nailed him. But something about Dean intrigued Robbie. He liked him, and watching Dean ramble on in frustration was pure enjoyment. He needed him and in strong mind. Dean didn't realize

that he wasn't just a pawn in the game, he was the main piece. With him, Robbie was certain, he had his check-mate.

"Oh, Frank I don't know." Ellen wrung out a wash cloth in a basin of warm water. She opened the rag slightly and began to run it across his neck. "If you could have seen the look on his face. He yelled at me, you know." Ellen sat down on the edge of the bed. "I guess I had it coming." She tossed the cloth in the basin and ran her damp fingers down his face. "I miss you. I wish you were awake for all of this."

"He'd gloat." Johnny commented as he walked in the room looking both drawn and sad. Not only was he concerned for his father, but he had volunteered to fill in as much as he could for Frank, as well. "How is he?"

"Same." Ellen stood up, walked over to Johnny and kissed him. "Stable. He's gonna pull through. He made it through the night. That was a big step."

"Do you think he can hear us?"

"No. He's not in a coma, he's sleeping. And it's induced." Ellen went back over to his side.

"So why the conversation?" Johnny closed in on his father.

"It's for me more than him." Ellen folded her arms and looked at Johnny. "I talked to him all the time."

"Did you want to go take a break or something?" Johnny asked. "I'll sit with Dad."

"Nah." Ellen shook her head and walked back over to the bed. "I'm waiting to hear back from Pap about Dean. Staying here will keep my mind occupied. Funny . . ." Ellen gave a soft sad chuckle. "I'm trying to camouflage one concern by burying it with another."

“Dean!” Denny jumped up from his lying position as the door opened. “Dean!” He shouted excitedly and ran to him, embracing him up and lifting him from the floor.

“Easy.” Dean grabbed his head, then planted his feet firmly. “I’m glad to see you.”

“Oh, gosh. Me, too.” Denny noticed Dean was alone, no one followed him. “Are you here to rescue us? I’ll grab the kids.”

“No, I’m not.” Dean told him.

“We’ve been kidnapped, you know.”

“Yes, I do Denny. So have I.” Dean looked about at the sleeping small children. “How are the kids?”

“I’ve been watching them. They cry a lot.”

“How have they been treating you?”

“They’re O.K., they’re aren’t mean if that’s what you want to know. Except for that guy Moses. He’s not very nice. Robbie is though. He says he didn’t really kidnap us, he just borrowed us for a while because everyone at Beginnings was mean to him, especially Frank.” Denny’s eyes widened. “Frank! Frank’s the cool guy, he’s gonna come and rescue us isn’t he??”

“I don’t know, Den. We may have to think of something else. But right now, I’m here with you. I’ll do my best to protect you.” Dean rested his hand on Denny’s back.

“No offense Doctor Dean, but who’s gonna protect you?”

“Thanks Denny, thanks a lot.” Dean squatted down before Katie. “How’s your sister?”

“She’s fine. She cried yesterday because she peed her pants, and now she has no underwear.”

Dean ran his hand over Katie’s blonde hair. “We’ll see what we can do. If they’re gonna keep us here, they’ll have to be some changes.” Dean stood back up, moaning as he did and walked to the door. “I’ll be right back.”

Robbie stood in the door when it opened and Dean stepped out. “Satisfied, Dean?”

“Not one bit.”

Robbie took hold of Dean’s arm and led him down the hallway. “What’s the problem?”

“Do you want a list?”

“No, not really. They’re fine. We’re not hurting them.” Robbie opened another door, it led to the library. The large room that once was dusty and dark, was now bright and set up like a command headquarters. “But tell me anyway.”

“First, you have five kids in a room no bigger than ten by ten. I want them kids moved with me somewhere with more room, so I can watch them. Second. I’m worried about the food situation.”

“We’re feeding them.”

“I’m sure. But you have to understand. These kids are now used to eating a certain type of food. They drink pure water. Their delicate systems will not handle anything that you pump into them. You are going to end up with a bunch of sick kids on your hands.”

“That’s why you’re here.” Robbie sat down behind a large desk. “You’ll make them well.” With typical Slagel mannerisms, he leaned back in his chair, rested his head in his cupped hands, and gave that I-know-it-all look.

“With what?” Dean looked around. “We wiped out this town long ago. There’s nothing left. Nothing of use that is. How long are you planning to keep us?”

“That remains to be seen.”

“On what?”

“That too remains to be seen.”

“Don’t play games with me, Robbie!” Dean pointed at him. “You took these kids as a bargaining tool. You should’ve been more prepared to handle them.”

“I took the kids as a smoke screen. I took them to cover up the fact that I was going in the very next night to get you.”

Dean's heart sank to his stomach, a sickening feeling fell upon him. "They mean nothing to you?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that. They can be useful tools if we need to enforce what we want."

Dean knew exactly what that meant. The kids were expendable. They were Robbie's bargaining chips. "You would really hurt them?"

"Dean, I don't see it coming to that. I really don't. Beginnings doesn't want those kids harmed anymore than I do. We will get what we want." Robbie stood up and walked around his desk. "In fact, in the long run, I think you and I will be friends."

"I highly doubt that." Dean spoke sarcastically.

"I really don't remember you having this much attitude. Is this something new? Why are you being so hostile?"

"You can't be seriously asking that question? And I thought you were the smarter Slagel brother. I'm being hostile because I have been kidnapped! Or haven't you noticed you took me against my will?"

Robbie just laughed and folded his arms, leaning against his desk as he did so.

The door to the library flung open, and with a large stomp, Moses made his entrance. "It's eight o'clock. It's time."

Dean looked to the huge man that just entered, then to Robbie. "Time for what?"

"To radio Beginnings and let them know we have you. They're probably missing you right about now." Robbie moved toward Moses. "Dean, this is Moses. My partner in all of this."

Dean just grunted and turned his head away from the introduction.

"Hey!" Moses shouted. "He introduced you to me. For a brilliant scientist you sure rude! That's wrong."

"Wrong?" Dean was at his breaking point. "And I suppose taking someone against their will is perfectly all right."

Moses stepped forward. “Better than what you folks in Beginnings do. Shutting out the rest of the world. Do you not know that the Bible says ‘thou shall not have more than thy fellow man, thou shall share the fruits of thy labor’ Palms, chapter eight verse ten.”

“What?!” Dean turned his head around to him, glaring at Moses without a single ounce of fear. “The Bible does not say that. And it’s psalms, not palms, you big ape.”

Moses charged for him, picked Dean up by the collar and lifted him above him.

Robbie reached for Moses’ arms. “Put him down! We need him. Ignore him.”

Moses set Dean down. “He’s got a mouth on him. How long do we have to put up with that?”

Robbie pulled Moses aside, away from Dean’s earshot and whispered. “As long as it takes. He’s the ace in the hole.”

Dean stared at their brief entanglement and he finally realized his value. And he knew he would have to use that to his full advantage. Dean had a plan to get him and the kids out of the kidnapping situation, he just had to figure out what it was. Ideas were spinning through his mind so fast, Dean just needed to grasp them in order to implicate them.

Ellen folded her hands over her nose and mouth, breathing slowly as she paced around Joe’s office. “This isn’t happening.”

Henry put his arm around her, trying to get her to sit. “Come on, El, just sit down, please?”

“I can’t. I can’t relax until I know.” She moved away from him. “Are you sure Joe?”

“Almost positive.” He sat behind his desk, radio in front of him. “I’ve tried every station, if they hear me, they aren’t answering. We’ve looked everywhere. We can’t find him. Robbie having him is the only explanation.”

“But how Joe? Dean is a grown man. How did they sneak him out?”

“We think Robbie hid out in the community until things calmed down. It’s feasible that Dean is who they wanted all along. Dean is the perfect hostage. They know how bad we need him.”

Ellen just shook her head. “You seem so sure.”

Henry approached her. “El, I’m the one who convinced Joe that it happened. I went back to the social hall to check it out. That’s where I think they got him. Behind the bar, there was some broken glass. It looked like it was scooted out of the way. I also found a few drops of blood.”

“Oh, my God.” Ellen had to sit, she reached behind her for a chair. Henry helped her. “What if they killed him? What if that’s why we haven’t heard from them at all?”

Joe shook his head. “I don’t believe that’s the case. There is a bright side. If they have Dean, they surely won’t hurt him. Having him in there is at least some protection for our children. Also, we have to remember, Dean was a scientist for the Army. He was military. If by any chance they let him talk to us, we have to pay close attention to what he says. He may be giving us some sort of information.”

Ellen shifted her eyes from Joe to Henry. “You mean like say something in code? Dean? He’s smart but . . .”

“Anyone would try to do that.” Joe said.

“Dean?” Ellen questioned again.

“Attention Beginnings!” Moses made his announcement over the radio. “We have someone here who you may want to speak with.”

Robbie handed Dean the microphone. “It’s all yours, Dean. Keep it short. Tell them nothing.”

Dean took the microphone and pressed into the button. “It’s me.” His voice was soft.

Ellen leaped from her chair when she heard his voice. “Ask if he’s all right. Ask if he’s all right.”

Joe held up his hand to her, and lifted his microphone. “Dean, are you all right?”

“Aside from being kidnapped, and having a huge gash in my head. I’m fine. The kids are fine too.”

Joe put his head down in relief. “What do they want?”

Moses’ voice interrupted. “That’s a big no-no question. Ask another.”

Dean snatched the microphone away from Moses and gave him an agitated glance. “They won’t let me tell you anything right now. They’ll get back to you. I wanted to talk to you, Joe.” Dean had grasped one of those flying ideas and hoped that Joe would understand what he meant. He wanted to try to convey that Robbie underestimated Beginnings, because Robbie believed Frank, Beginnings best weapon, to be dead. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you I was sorry that I couldn’t save Frank. I’m sorry your son died.”

Joe lowered the microphone and looked up at Henry. “He’s on our wavelength . . . Yes!” Excited about Dean trying to pass on information, Joe forgot to show despair when Dean conveyed his condolences. “Thanks, Dean I appreciate that. Look . . . we’re all concerned about you guys. Ellen is very worried about you.”

“Tell Ellen don’t bother.” He handed back the microphone to Moses. “I’m through talking. When you have something for me to say to them, then I’ll do this.”

Moses depressed the button. “That folks was the world renowned Doctor Hayes, with a bit of hostility to that Helen person.”

“Ellen!” Dean snapped. “Ellen. Not Helen. Don’t you pay attention!”

“Will you shut up!” Moses shouted back. “You’re getting on my nerves!”

Robbie removed Moses' thumb from the microphone button. "If you two are going to argue, could you not let Beginnings hear you? Please!" Robbie began to speak to his father. "Dad, before you say anything listen to me. We are in control now. I will contact you. Don't try to call us." With the last of Robbie's words, a static came over the radio.

The silence now in Joe's office was a terrible reminder of whose game Beginnings was playing. Joe became angry. The only peace he had in the whole mess was now, they had Dean, and Dean was driving them nuts.

"I don't think they're coming back in." Henry said.

"We can't be sure. We underestimated them once." Joe stated.

"Yeah, but they got exactly what they wanted. Dean."

"And we have to start working on a plan to get them back. A rescue operation."

Henry shook his head. "We won't be able to pull that off without Frank. We need Frank."

"So we need time. How do we ask for time without taking a chance on them realizing what we are doing?"

"Dean obviously knows." Henry commented. "He has to. He must realize that in order for us to go in there and help him we need our best man . . . Frank. In order to have our best man, we need time. Ellen?" Henry noticed Ellen standing and walking to the door. "Where are you going?"

"I can't sit here and listen to you two talk about this so tactically." Ellen fought her emotions. "I don't know how much more I can take. You guys are talking about buying time. Please realize they have Dean. It's Dean. My children need him. How do I explain to them where their father is? How do I buy them more time? I'm sorry." Ellen ran from Joe's office. She wanted to escape and wake up from the bad dream that seemed to be happening to her. Every single part of her life was affected. There wasn't a single soul in Beginnings not feeling the same frustration

and anger that she was. The urge to fight back and regain what was theirs, was overshadowed by the inability at the time to do so. Beginnings was in stale-mate with the small band of men they underestimated. The small band of men who believed they could, and eventually did, hold them at bay.

Dean shook his head back and forth as he listened to Robbie ramble on. “It’s not a perfect plan, Robbie. You keep repeating the word, perfect.”

“You’re trying to bring me down on this one. I’m smarter than that, you know.” He leaned across his desk to Dean.

“I know. That’s why I find it hard to believe that you actually think that they are just gonna let you in and reside there. When do you think they’ll do this? Tomorrow, the next day?”

“When they realize what they are missing. If they don’t realize it, then we take drastic measures. We send them messages. That’s where the kids will come in handy.”

“If you off any of the kids then you are opening yourself to them coming in here and annihilating you. They will risk it. In order for them to let you in, they are gonna really want back what you took. Then and only then will they bargain with you.”

“How long do you suppose that will take, knowing them as well as you do.”

“Why . . .” Dean paused. He had to hide his grin. Robbie just asked him ‘how long’. It was too perfect, too easy. Dean had to try. “Why would I tell you?”

“Because I’m a nice guy. And you’re stuck here so . . . how long?”

Dean began to run quickly through his mind the healing process. How long until Frank wakes up, on his feet, has his strength. “A few weeks maybe.”

“Oh, we can’t wait that long.”

“Good.” Dean brought to his face a confident smirk. “Then you’ll fail. But answer me this. Suppose on the slim chance they let you in. Do you really think it will be a peaceful co-existence?”

“Sure. At first.” Robbie sat back. “See, they’re gonna expect us to try to overrun them. We won’t give them that satisfaction right away. No. We will let them start to trust us, then, bam, gone, all of the originals . . . dead. All except you and your family of course.”

“Oh, of course.” Dean shook his head again. “You keep bestowing such honors on me.”

“I do. You know you won’t die. You know your children won’t die. Hell, I even cleared the way for you and Ellen to be Frank-free.”

“Swell. Thank you. But . . .” Dean rested his aching head on his hand as he leaned sideways in the chair. “I don’t want her.”

“Mind if I take her. There are no women, Dean.”

Dean raised his eyes while slightly rolling them. “Sure.”

“Thanks. And because you’re being so generous . . .” Robbie went back and re-sat behind his desk. “I’m gonna be nice. I want you to tell me what you need me to do for the kids.”

There was nothing short of sending them home, that Robbie could do. Dean stared at Robbie a long time before he would rattle off the list of unavailable necessities that could only be brought by Beginnings. Things that could open up vital lines of communications if Dean could convince Robbie to let Beginnings bring the items. Robbie was a personality contrast. Besides an air of smug and evil, Robbie held an air of innocence and naivety Dean could take advantage of. And still basking in the fact that he grasped onto another one of those flying ‘getting out of Egypt’ thoughts, Dean began to give Robbie the list.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Dean snapped his fingers several times in front of the face of Moses, who just stared off. “Hello?” Dean snapped again. “Are you paying attention to me?”

“Does it look like I’m paying attention to you? I’m thinking here.”

“What in the world could you have to be thinking about?”

“Ways to cool you’re attitude, Mr. Scientist.”

Dean waved his hand at him. “Pay attention this is important.” Dean showed him what looked more like a bunch of plastic containers with tubing, instead of the water purifier. “I didn’t spend the last six hours making this to have you screw up using it.”

“You know, just keep it up with the mouth and I won’t care what Robbie says about you. You’ll be history.”

“Do you really think I care? If I did, wouldn’t I be a lot more nicer to you? Now listen up.”

“Let me give you a little proverb here.”

“Don’t! . . . There is nothing more irritating then hearing someone wrongly quote the bible, when chances are, they can’t read. Now ten minutes. Ten minutes minimum you boil the water for. After that, it gets poured through here at the top. Watch yourself boiling water can be hot.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” Moses began to fiddle with the tubes. “This isn’t going to purify anything. All you did was stick a bunch of things together that you found at the hardware store.”

“I quit.” Dean threw his hands up and walked away. “I’m going to my room. I have a headache and you’re making it worse. But let me leave you with this. It does work. Just because tinker toys are advanced for you doesn’t mean I can’t build something that works.” Dean stormed away. As he walked to the hall that led to his room, he passed Robbie, who had been watching.

“Being pissed at the world isn’t going to make this situation any better.” Robbie followed him. “This is war here. Shit happens. You are making this situation a hell of a lot worse than it needs to be. We aren’t hurting you. We aren’t torturing you. You aren’t stuck in some dungeon.”

Dean flung open the door to his room. “You don’t even comprehend anything do you? You took me at the lowest point in my personal life. You snatched me up when I needed to resolve things. So yeah, I’m pissed. I miss my kids. What are they going to think? How’s Ellen going to deal with that? With them?”

“I would have let you talk to her. But no, you just dropped the radio and walked away.”

Dean turned to face Robbie. “O.K., I want to talk to her . . . Now.”

“Nope can’t do that. Not now. I have to be careful you know, I can’t have you passing information back and forth.”

Dean took a deep breath and let it out. “It’s not Joe that we’re talking about, it’s Ellen. Anything I say to her will be on a personal level. Either about us, or our children. O.K.?”

“Nope. Dean, it’s my game. My rules, man. Sorry.”

Dean said nothing, he merely slammed the door sternly in Robbie’s face.

Ellen cupped Frank’s hand in hers, tracing small circles on the outside of it. She could feel the roughness of his hand, the strength that he always held in them. Occasionally, while talking she’d bring her lips to them, smelling his skin, tasting him.

Frank had made it through the crucial first twelve hours. His heart remained strong. Andrea was more than confident that a full recovery would be imminent. Still, Ellen needed to speak to him,

hear his voice, feel him. Ellen knew, the moment he opened his eyes, she would be relieved. Things would be different between them once he awoke. They had to. Her recent inner revelation of feelings for Frank would forever change the course of their relationship . . . she thought.

“Hey.” Joe called from across the room and walked closer. “How’s things going?” He watched Ellen weakly shake her head and Joe stepped to her, pulled Ellen away from Frank and took her in his arms. “It will be all right.”

Ellen felt that it would. Feeling secure, feeling like a small child wrapped in safety in her father’s arms. She needed him to hold her like that. Ellen for the first time, in a long time, was beginning to fall apart. Her strength lay in the bed next to her.

“Come on.” Joe pulled gently, moved her from his chest. “Get yourself together. The twins are in the waiting room. I’ll help you get them settled into containment.”

Ellen ran the back of her hand across her nose. “Have they asked about Dean?”

“Yes they have. The great thing about kids is, you can change the subject and they never even know.”

“We have to tell them.”

“We do.” Joe put his arms around her shoulder and began to walk toward the door with her. “I will be with you when you do. Let’s go get them.”

Ellen sniffled, looked back one more time at Frank, then walked from the room with Joe.

Henry looked oddly at his key that seemed to be somewhat bent. “Shit.” He shook his head and picked up his pace as he made

his way to the receiving center to find George who was packing up the radio.

“Hey, Henry.” George looked up as he gathered up the wires. “I was thinking about the radio situation. I was thinking the containment center, in that front little office. We always have security on there and we wouldn’t have to have an extra man on radio watch. Kill two birds with one stone. What do you think?”

“Sounds good.” Henry looked at his key again. “George can I borrow your key?”

“Which one?”

“The master panel key. Mine seems to be bent.”

George unhooked his batch of keys from his belt. “How in the hell did you bend that key? We never use it.”

“I don’t know maybe I sat on it. But you’d think I would have felt it. It’s probably about time we thought about going keypad.”

George snickered and took the security key from the clip and tossed it to Henry. “Here. Don’t bend mine.”

“I won’t.” Henry caught it. “I’ll make another one for myself tomorrow.”

“What are you doing with it?” George asked.

“I want to do a perimeter history, you know see if the system was overridden at all. I need this key to get into the system.”

“What for?”

“It’s just an option we haven’t checked, as far as figuring out how Robbie got in goes.”

George just shook his head as he finished packing up the radio. “We didn’t check it, no. But you and I both know there are only five people that can override that panel. The council, Frank, and John Matoose. We all have keys.”

“Count me out since I never use mine, and I haven’t a clue how long it’s been out of commission. John and Frank are the ones who check that panel twice a day.” Henry gripped the key. “But humor me please. It’s just a corner we haven’t checked. I just want to eliminate it.”

“Considered yourself humored.”

“Thanks.” Henry took the key and left the receiving center. He headed to the security systems building. Though running a history on the perimeters could be a waste of an hour, Henry had to check it. Even if it was just to say he left no stone unturned.

Dean lay on his bed, hands behind his head, looking up at the cracked ceiling. His head started to feel a little better. His anger level beginning to leave. Dean didn’t want that. He wanted to stay angry, at Ellen and the world. But so much had happened. All he could think about was Ellen and the kids.

Ellen.

It was over, really over. It didn’t matter how many times in the past they pulled away from each other. When Dean thought of home, he thought of her. She and the kids were his family. His entire life. And what made matters worse for him was, he didn’t even know when and if he’d see his family again.

The door knob to Dean’s room clicked once. A lantern illuminated Robbie as he walked in. “Dean?”

“Yeah?” Dean glanced over, his voice more somber.

Robbie slid a chair over to the bed. “I told you I like you. I have nothing against you. I’ll never forget how you stood up for me when they ousted me.” Robbie brought his hand up and set a radio on the table next to Dean’s bed. “I don’t know exactly what you are feeling. But maybe if you talk to her it will clear your mind enough to make this situation tolerable for you.”

Dean looked at the radio. “You’re just handing me your radio?”

“How did you put it before? It’s not Joe, it’s Ellen.” Robbie relaxed back in the chair. “Go ahead. Channel six, they’ll pick you up.”

Dean swung his legs over the bed and sat up. He picked the radio up from the table, and held it close to his mouth. He thought about what he would say before he called out to her.

“So you see . . .” Joe picked up Billy and placed him on his lap. “Daddy’s on a business trip. That’s why you’re sleeping in this big room with all these kids. Most of these kids, their parents are on trips. But your dad, his business trip will keep him away for awhile. He’ll be back.”

Billy tilted his head sideways. “Pap? What’s a business trip?”

Joe laughed and hugged Billy at the same time George stepped into the doorway.

George looked shocked. “Ellen?”

Ellen turned around smiling. “Done already George? Radio working?”

“You could say that. Ellen, someone’s on there wanting to talk to you.”

Ellen quickly looked at Joe, then George. “Who?”

“I’d rather not say in front of the kids. Come on.”

Ellen placed Alex down, as Joe did with Billy, and they followed George out in to the small front office.

George pulled out the chair at the desk for Ellen, and sat her in front of the radio. He handed her the microphone. “Go on.”

Ellen depressed the button. “Hello?”

“Ellen,” Dean spoke softly. Her name rolled off his tongue almost as a sigh of relief.

“Dean,” she called excitedly. “Dean, are you O.K.?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Dean’s attitude was much different than when he had spoken to the community earlier. He was calmer. He sounded more depressed. “How are the kids?”

“They miss you.”

“Tell them . . .” Dean released the button, regained his composure, then spoke again. “Tell them I love them and I miss them.”

“I’ll do that. Dean, I know this may not be a good time. I have to tell you something. I want to tell you I’m sorry. Really sorry.”

Ellen’s words made Dean’s heart beat stronger, so strong he could feel the emotion in his throat. “You’re right, El. It’s not a good time.” He paused. “But . . . the only reason I’m allowed to radio is to talk to you.”

“Then talk to me.” Ellen whispered in a beg. “Tell me anything. Yell at me. Scream. Please.” Ellen beckoned anything other than the demeanor Dean projected.

“I’m angry, El. Really angry. You said . . . you said you’d marry me. You never said you wouldn’t. Was the baby, was that the problem you had to deal with.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you come to me?” Dean asked with passion. “Huh? We could have worked through it. We could have. I would have tried.”

“I wanted to. But then . . .” Ellen emotionally searched for the right words.

“But then Frank got shot and you realized who you really loved. I have to go.”

“Dean, no.” Desperation laced Ellen’s voice. “Be careful. We need you.”

It was slight, but it was still an emotional chuckle. “You know what would have made tonight bearable. If you would have just . . . just said, instead of ‘we’, said ‘you’ needed me.” Dean turned off the radio and handed it back to Robbie. “Thanks.”

Robbie held his thumb up to Dean. “Way to lay on the guilt.”

Dean ignored him, and lay back down.

“Dean!” Ellen called into the radio. “Dean?”

George took it from her hands. “He’s gone.”

Ellen covered her face with her hands. “Oh, God?”

Joe hovered over Ellen. “Stop.” He helped her from the chair. “This is a good sign. They let Dean call. They trust what he says,. We can use that.”

Ellen stood up slowly. “Let’s just hope our using that doesn’t get him in trouble. I’m gonna go say goodnight to the kids.” Ellen reached for the door to the hallway that was still open. She paused, and her hand tremble as she pulled it back.

“What’s wrong?” Joe put his hand on her back.

“Oh nothing.” Ellen shook her head. “I feel a little dizzy.”

“When’s the last time you ate?” Joe noticed the clueless look on her face. “I thought so. Let’s get the kids down and how about I fix you one of my famous Joe’s egg sandwiches. Huh?”

“Sounds great.” She moved slowly down the hall and spotted Alexandra standing in the doorway of the skills room. Ellen waved and Alex took off running to her. “Hey sweetie.” She bent down and scooped her daughter up in her arms. As she lifted Alex waist high, a intense pulling pain occurred from her stomach up, causing Ellen to immediately put down her daughter, and gasp aloud.

“Ellen?” Joe moved to her.

Ellen lifted herself from the half huddled position. She held up her hand to Joe. “Please get them into bed for me.”

“Ellen what’s wrong?”

“Please Joe.” Ellen turned away and saw her office a few feet from her. With every step she took the pain within her increased. She went into her office and shut her door. “No.” She spoke softly. “Please stop.” She took slow deeps breaths, trying to calm herself, trying to pass off the pain. It was useless. A cramp stronger than the last struck her, and Ellen cringed in pain loudly, grabbing hold of her desk for support. Her legs felt weak as the pain emanated down through them. The cramping grew stronger in her abdomen. She couldn’t stand any longer. She lowered herself to the floor and pulled her knees close to her as she leaned against her desk. She rocked back and forth, trying her hardest to fight off the pain.

“Ellen!” Joe burst into her office. He saw her huddled at the foot of her desk. “Honey.” He knelt down next to her. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll uh, I’ll be all right.” Ellen reached her arm out to him. “Help me get up.”

Joe helped her to her feet and ran his hand across her pale face. “Something’s wrong.”

“I’m fine. I’m . . .” Ellen began to lose her balance, and she gasped loudly in pain. She fell into Joe.

As he tried to stop her from falling, he noticed it. The blood that lay on the floor where Ellen had been sitting. “Oh no, the baby.” He picked Ellen up into his arms, and carried her out, only stopping long enough to tell George to radio Andrea.

The smell of tobacco and the sensation of fingers running across her face, woke Ellen. Her eyes felt heavy as she opened them to the brightness of the clinic room. Joe sat next her. His face close to hers, his hand grasping tightly to her hand. “Joe?”

“Hey.” He ran his fingers over her hair.

The room was so quiet. Looking around, Ellen saw Andrea. She stood at the other side of her, tucking in the white blanket that covered her from the chest down. “Did I pass out?”

Andrea smoothed out the blanket. “You’ve been out for a little while, yes.”

The look. The look on their faces. Something had happened. Ellen knew. “Andrea?”

Andrea lowered her head and rested her hand on Ellen’s knee. “I’m sorry, you’ve lost the baby.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “No.”

“Ellen it was too late. There was nothing I could do. You were bleeding very badly. I had to do an extraction to stop the hemorrhaging.”

“No.” Ellen brought her arm over her eyes and fought back the tears. “What did I do?” She bent up her knees and rolled into a fetal position toward Joe. Ellen’s words cried out with her every heartache. “What did I do? I lost Frank’s baby. How can I face him with this? We just heard the heartbeat.”

Joe covered her with his arms. Trying to calm her, holding her tight as her body shook while she wept.

Andrea rubbed her hands down Ellen’s arched back. “There was nothing you could have done to prevent it. With everything you’ve been through, it could have been physically worse on you. I want you to rest here tonight. I’ll give you something to calm you.” Andrea didn’t know what to say to Ellen. Her heart ached for her. Deciding to leave Ellen and Joe alone, Andrea turned from the room. Henry stood in the doorway. She approached him. “What is it Henry?”

“I need to speak to Joe.”

Andrea pulled him to the hall. “It’s not a good time. Ellen lost the baby. Can it wait?”

Henry looked into the room, he saw Ellen breaking down into Joe’s arms. He wanted to leave them to their moment. He knew Ellen needed Joe. But what he had to talk to Joe about was vital. “It really is important, Andrea. I would leave if it wasn’t.”

“I’ll get him.” Andrea slowly walked into the room, she bent into Joe and whispered in his ear. “Joe. Henry needs to speak to you.”

“Tell him not now.”

“He’s says it’s very important.”

Joe lifted his head and looked at Henry who paced back and forth in front of Ellen’s door. “It must be. Can you stay with Ellen?”

“Sure.”

Joe stood up. “I’ll be back.” He kissed Ellen, then walked out into the hall to Henry. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Joe.” Henry peeked into the room then pulled Joe further down the hall. “I wouldn’t bother you if this wasn’t extreme.”

“What’s wrong?”

Henry was apprehensive about telling Joe, and Joe sensed it. “I, uh, I figured out how Robbie broke into the community.”

“This is what you call extreme? My daughter is in there and she needs me. You came to tell me you know how Robbie dug himself in?”

“No, Joe. We’ve been looking in the wrong direction. All along we were kicking ourselves for thinking he crawled in under our noses. And while we covered almost every square inch watching for him, he walked right in the front tunnel gate.”

“He what?!”

“Look.” Henry pulled a sheet of paper from his back pocket. “Just on a hunch I pulled a history on the perimeter to see if it was overridden and shut off. It was, four times. Twice to let him in. Twice to let him out.”

“That’s impossible. Only five of us have the key to do that, none of us would have done that.”

“Take a look.” Henry showed him the paper.

Joe read over it carefully. “Henry, it was your key that opened the perimeter.”

“I know, but I didn’t do it. Someone got a hold of my key.”

“How in the hell did someone do that?”

Henry put his head down, shaking it back and forth. “Let’s just say I was vulnerable to this person.”

“You know who it is?”

Henry nodded.

“Take me to them. Now!”

Without knocking. Without thinking. Without even trying the doorknob. Joe, with a fury, kicked in the front door of the second

house on the third row. Wood splinters went flying, as a shriek of surprise was heard coming from the dining room.

Joe pulled out his gun and charged in. With his weapon extended in front of him, Joe pointed his revolver at Michelle who sat at her dining room table, a spilled cup of coffee now before her.

“Oh my God.” She tried to stand.

“Sit down!” He pointed the gun at her. “Now!”

Michelle nervously held up her hands. “What’s going on? What . . .”

“Shut up!” Joe motioned his gun to Henry. “Get in here, Henry.”

Henry walked into the room. He stared long and cold at Michelle.

With a frightened look on her face, her eyes pleaded to Henry. “What did I do? Please tell me.”

Henry shook his head at her and walked behind her chair. “I guess you’re the one who’s fucked now.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Henry just stepped back from her.

“Joe.” Michelle nervously called to him. “Please. I need to know.”

“Don’t you dare sit here and tell me you don’t know what’s going on. We have a witness. This person saw you in the security room.” That’s all Joe needed to say. The expression on Michelle’s face said it all. “That’s what we thought.” Joe spotted a radio sitting on the table. “Is this how you’re communicating with him? Are you?”

“Yes.”

Joe picked it up and placed in front of her. “Get him on whatever channel it is!”

Michelle knew she was busted. There was no lying. She picked up the radio, turned it on, and spoke into it. “Robbie . . . Robbie?”

There was a few moments of silence, then Robbie's voice emerged. "I told you not to radio us."

Joe grabbed the radio from Michelle's hand, never moving his aim from her, as he stood above her. "I guess you're not getting into this community anymore. Are you?"

"Son of a bitch." Robbie responded.

"That's what I thought."

"Do you think this bothers me Dad? I expected you to find her out sooner or later. She's a stupid bitch. She's expendable. Do with her what you want. I've no use for her anymore. Because the next time I walk in that community, it will be under your invitation."

"Never. End this now Robbie. You are warned."

Robbie made no final comments, no final speeches. He had to disconnect the transmission. He didn't want to take a chance on his anger being heard or felt by his father.

Joe pointed his gun closer to Michelle. "I want to know everything."

"Are you gonna shoot me?"

"I'm going to give you a chance to live. You tell me everything. What you know of their plan. And I will oust you to them. Tell me!" His aiming hand remained steady.

Michelle had nothing loose. But she did have her life to gain if she told the truth. "I'll tell you. It was a few weeks ago. He . . . he came to the gate. Frank turned him away. Robbie didn't give up. He kept checking the perimeter until he found someone. He found me. He told me he had a plan. He said what was happening here, the oustings and such, weren't fair. He asked for my help. Saying if I could just get a key to the perimeters, I could turn the gate off long enough for him to get in and out. He only wanted to borrow a few people. He wouldn't hurt them. He said that you would see the errors of your ways and let them back in. He promised he wouldn't hurt anyone. He promised"

"Did you tell him Frank is alive?" Joe asked.

“No.”

“The truth!” He shouted.

“No!” She covered her head.

“Why Michelle? Why did you do it?”

“I just wanted things to be fair.”

“Fair?” Joe shook his head. “Five children are gone from their families. Our life line is kidnapped. My son is fighting for his life after taking a bullet. Ellen lost my grandchild she was carrying. This is due on part to you. None of this would have happened if you didn’t let him in. This community is suffering greatly and you sit there and speak to me about fair?”

“I’m sorry Joe. I’m sorry.” Michelle began to cry. “Are you still going to let me go?”

“I will.”

“Thank you.” Michelle breathed in relief. She had been holding her breath since Joe stormed in. Though she knew she was leaving the community, she knew at least she’d be alive. She felt relieved that Joe would keep his word. Her security in that soon vanished when she heard the clicking of a gun’s chamber not far from her ear. Michelle slowly turned her head to Joe, only to face the barrel of a gun, and the vision of a finger firmly on the trigger. She lifted her eyes to him. “No. You said you’d let me go.”

“I am letting you go. Straight to fuckin’ hell.” With all his rage, Joe depressed the trigger. He fired one deadly, close range shot into Michelle’s forehead. Like a burst water balloon, everything above Michelle’s neck sprayed in bits and pieces about the room.

Henry jumped back with the discovery that he was now covered with Michelle from head to toe. “Jesus Christ Joe.” He held his hands away from his blood saturated shirt.

With the back of his gun-holding hand, Joe wiped the blood from his own eyes. “Let’s go, Henry.” He placed his gun away. “We’ll deal with this mess later.”

Without looking back at what he did, Joe left the house with Henry. He had to get back to the clinic. He had to get back to

Ellen. He also left Michelle's house with peace. The peace in knowing that He, Frank, and their men didn't fail the community. Michelle did. And the community could now sleep in peace knowing that Robbie and his band could not sneak in again. Once again, Beginnings was safe. It was time to move on. Time to reclaim what is theirs, and take it back. Joe would begin that plan, and if it took everything in him, he would see that plan through. In Joe's mind, he wanted nothing less than to see the fall of Robbie.

It was quiet in the clinic as Joe made his return. Joe was so bitter, bitter that his very own flesh and blood could bring about as much pain and suffering as was happening. Joe tried telling himself, his true son, Robbie, died in the plague five years before. And the Robbie that lingered outside the gate was a different man, a man that Joe no longer knew.

He had been gone longer than expected. And as Joe entered Ellen's room, he knew the instant he walked in, that it didn't matter when he returned. As he laid his eyes upon the empty bed, Joe realized that no matter how close to her side he was, he was not what she needed. He knew exactly where Ellen would be.

Turning the corner into Frank's room, Joe saw that his instincts were correct. Ellen was there. A chair pulled closely to Frank's bed. Her head tucked deeply between Frank's chin and shoulder. So still, it was obvious Ellen was sleeping. How desperate for Frank she must have been, Joe thought. How much she probably wanted to share her pain.

Joe moved slowly into the room, Ellen didn't budge. He gently picked her up into his arms, lifting her from the chair. With his lips lightly pressed to her forehead, he carried her back to her bed and stayed by her side the rest of the night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

June 22

The commotion just outside his door, the loud voices shouting back and forth, made Dean jump straight from the bed. What was going on? It was early morning, the sun was beginning to shine, but not too bright. His head was feeling better, and though he had just awakened, he didn't seem quite as much in the fog as he had been the day before.

Stumbling to the door, and knocking over the wooden chair as he did, he alerted those outside his closed door to the fact he was awake. Dean pulled the door open. Robbie and Moses were facing off. They both turned at the same time, as Dean stood there looking up at them. Dean smiled. He loved the dissension. "Whenever you two are done arguing I'd like to see the children." He closed the door and headed back to his bed, Not a foot away from the door, he heard Moses yelling.

"Your plan is failing, Robbie. They got your person."

Springboard action, Dean lept back to the door and flung it open. "Who?" Dean asked. "Who was it?"

Robbie shook his head as if it didn't even bother him. "Michelle."

Dean gasped. "Michelle? Frank's, 'bitch took the van' Michelle'?"

"One and only."

There was a little bit of relief for Dean in his kidnapping situation. A part of him was glad he wouldn't be around for the gloat feast Frank would throw in town. "Wow."

"Wow?" Moses shook his head and looked back to Robbie. "They aren't letting you in. Send a warning, send a drastic warning now."

"No." Dean interjected. "You can't do that. No."

"You stay out of this." Moses instructed strongly.

"I will not. Robbie." Dean pulled Robbie's views away from Moses. "A drastic warning means the kids. You send one of those

kids you open yourself up to total annihilation from Beginnings. I know how you can get in. Don't use the kids."

"Why should we listen to you?" Robbie asked. "It could be a trap."

"It could," Dean said. "But it could be my sincere way of protecting these kids here. How can I go home and face their care givers if something happens to them. I will trade the way for their safety."

Moses saw the debate on Robbie's face. "Robbie, no. Don't listen to him."

Robbie still held eye contact with Dean. "Go on."

"Your word." Dean insisted. "You're a Slagel. Give me your word."

"If I like what you have to say and go with it, I give you my word not one of the kids will be harmed. Talk." Robbie stepped in the room, and shut the door leaving Moses outside.

Dean did a double take at the just shut door then he readied himself to talk to Robbie. He was in a catch twenty-two. He knew Beginnings needed time. Time for Frank to get strong to pull a rescue operation that only Frank could. But that time meant not only losing contact with Beginnings but risking the health and welfare of the children held captive. So Dean gave it his best shot. "You have to play the waiting game."

Robbie laughed. "This is not a news flash, Dean. You said something like this before."

"I know. I know. But I'm very serious. Waiting is the only way. Right now, they're pissed. They're not going to budge at all. They may even retaliate and take a chance right now, just to eliminate you. But . . . if you make them wait, they start to lose. Health-wise, I'm not there. I make the meds. What they have won't last. The care givers, they'll want their families back. The first survivor who violently tries to get in will do more damage than he would have had Frank been alive. These are all factors that will happen. They will play a role in them getting desperate

enough to let you in. They will emotionally be spent and willing to listen.”

“I don’t know.” Robbie said indecisive.

“I do.” Dean kept trying. “But aside from what you hold, you have to show them your final intentions are good, whether they are or not. If they see that maybe they were wrong, and that you can be trusted, they will eventually, in a few weeks, let you in.”

Robbie laughed. “Um, Dean? I took you and the kids. I don’t think I can get their trust.”

“If you show that you don’t want us harmed, you will. Ask Beginnings for the supplies I told you. Set up a meet. Your men meet two of theirs midway somewhere. Peaceful exchange. They won’t risk harming your men. Not with us under your thumb. Keep in contact. Set up an every two or three day update.”

“How are they going to believe I’m not just keeping the supplies? How they gonna know, I’m not actually harming you guys.”

“Let me be the radio contact. Let me be the contact person.”

“No way.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “I will give the updates. They’ll hear in my voice if something’s wrong. I’ll give the list. You monitor the transmissions. And . . . I speak to only Ellen. OK? Ellen.”

“I get it.” Robbie grinned. “Dean, I’m impressed.”

“Thank you,” Dean spoke in relief.

“You sold out for purely selfish reasons.” Robbie gave a swat to Dean’s arm. “You told me how to manipulate Beginnings. You made it seem like it was for the sake of the kids, when actually it was so you can talk to Ellen. Very good.” Robbie nodded. “O.K., I’ll give it a shot. I was gonna wait anyhow, but with this little Dean thing. No pun intended to your size. It can work. Thanks.” Brightly, Robbie smiled again and tall he walked from Dean’s room.

Dean was left alone to wonder. Did he do the right thing? He had to keep telling himself ‘yes’. Had he been in Beginnings and someone else was kidnapped, he’d expect the same. He had to

keep Beginnings updated, as he hoped they'd find away to update him as well and convey their intentions. And he hoped that one of the messages Beginnings conveyed to him was they had intentions, but none of them were about giving in to Robbie.

Ellen finished dressing, and brushing her hair. She sat weakly in a chair next to her hospital bedside and stared down at her folded hands as she clasped the brush tightly. She just wanted to get rid of the sadness. The sadness opened her up to feeling pain she would rather not. So many years she had kept pain and heartache away. In doing that, she was protected from everything. But the moment her walls came down, everything went wrong. She thought of the baby she lost. How much pain that was causing her. It was nothing compared to the heartache she felt every time she remembered that look on Frank's face when he heard his baby's heart beat merely five days before. That look, Ellen couldn't even recall anything ever causing his face to light up like that. His eyes to be happy instead of mean, and that I'm-so-proud-of-you, look he gave her. All of that happening the moment Frank looked up at her when Andrea placed the fetal monitor across her stomach, and the sound of a beating heart was heard loud and clear. . . Now it was gone.

Joe didn't want to do it, but he had to. Especially when he saw her sitting there, head down, staring. Disturbing Ellen was the last thing she needed. But the community needed her. She was the only one who could help. With Henry, Joe walked into Ellen's room. "Ellen"

Ellen turned to him. "Hey Joe."

"I hate to bother you but . . ." He held up a hand radio. "We've got a situation on our hands."

“What is it?”

“This is Robbie” He showed her the radio. “They want some things from Beginnings for the children. He said Dean will tell us what they are. The only thing is, you’re the only one Robbie will allow him to talk to. I need you to do this. I also need you to tell him we need time.” He snapped his finger back to Henry. Henry handed him a notebook and he relayed it to Ellen. “I wrote down what I need you to say.”

Ellen took a deep breath as she read over the words and nodded.

“And . . .” Joe knelt down before her. “Whatever you do, don’t mention the baby. I don’t want Robbie to know we suffered another blow.”

Ellen reluctantly took the radio Joe handed her, she looked down at the words, and called to Dean. “I’m here, Dean.”

“Ellen.” Dean nervously fiddled with his own list. “Before I tell you what we need. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Ellen said sadly then paused and lifted the note. “No, I’m . . . I’m weak with worry? Worry.” She quickly looked up to Joe and mouthed the words ‘I am not weak’.

Joe nodded and waved his hand to hurry her along.

Ellen continued. “And I need to tell you something. I need you to listen.”

Dean was still stuck on the fact that Ellen called herself weak. It had to be a clue that whatever she said were just words. Dean hoped there was some sort of message in them. “Go on.”

Ellen began to read. “With Frank gone now, I just wished we had the time to work things out. We need time to do that. Start to cry right. . .” Ellen stopped, she quickly realized she wasn’t supposed to read that. She caught herself and covered. “I mean I start to cry right away when I think of what I did. When you get back, can we take that time we need to work this out? Can you understand why I’m asking this?”

“Yes, Yes I do.” Dean spoke soft. “You need time. I’ll give us that. Just so you know I understand, I want you to know that I totally forgive your affair. I don’t blame you. I was never around.”

Robbie heard enough mush to last a lifetime. “Dean, move on with it. Cut out the love talk.”

Dean released the button. “You said I can talk to Ellen. Give me that. I need this to move on.”

“All right, but enough right now, give them the list!”

“Ellen, I have to go. Do you have a pencil to write this down?”

Ellen held out her hand to Joe. She began to write down the items Dean told her. Things ranging from clothes to medicine. All of them to be placed in two days, at noon, at the highway’s intersection not far from the back gate. Dean told Beginnings that they would contact them every three days. And they weren’t to try anything when they dropped off the supplies. Ellen finished with the list and gave Dean Beginning’s agreement to it all. The list told Ellen and the others that at least the children were safe and Dean had some sort of control, even if minor, over the situation. After saying her goodbyes to Dean, Ellen handed the list to Joe, who looked pleased. “Did we do it?”

“I’m certain we did.” He kissed Ellen on the cheek. “Good job.”

“Are we sure though, Joe?” Ellen asked.

“Oh, I’m positive. Besides this list.” Joe smacked the small notebook off his hand. “He said he forgives you. That alone tells me everything.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

June 24

The three days had passed and injections into Frank's intravenous to keep him unconscious had stopped. Time would awaken him, and Ellen spent that time, right next to him waiting. A part of her wished he would sleep a little longer. Not that she didn't want to see Frank, she did. But he needed time to heal and Ellen knew what would happen the moment he woke up. Frank would want to push it, get well, get out of bed fast and end the Robbie crisis. Especially when he found out, the more time, how everyone in town anxiously awaited his awakening, as if he were some sort of second coming.

It angered Ellen. The same people who ridiculed Frank in the beginning of the crisis for over reacting were the same ones who talked about him as if he were going to be the big hero. The same people who used to imitate Frank when he cringed and grunted about Michelle, praised him for his keen insight. All of the sudden Frank wasn't dumb, jumping the gun, or immature. He was the man they awaited on to charge in and save the day. The thing that worked in Ellen's favor was Andrea's adamancy to keep Frank calm and in the dark for a few days. And when Andrea complained or ordered, people listened.

She prepared Frank for his resurrection into the land of the non-sleeping. Washing him from head to toe, combing his very short hair and shaving him and it was all while Frank laid totally oblivious to the fact he was like a baby doll to her. Ellen fussed over him, he couldn't argue. She spoke to him and he couldn't tell her to shut up. She even griped about things to him that he had done years before, just because he couldn't argue back.

Ellen sat at his side. The bed railing was down, she held tightly to his hand, staring down at it, as her head rested gently on his thigh. The room was silent and Ellen's eyes began to feel heavy. She wanted so much to be alert when he woke up. Just a few minutes of rest. She thought. Just a few minutes and then there

will be the second wind. Knowing she couldn't hold herself awake any longer, she let herself relax. She parted her lips and kissed Frank's hand, laying her cheek against it. "I will see you soon, Frank." She whispered. "Very soon." As she drifted, slumber just moments away, into the half dream phase, she felt it. The twitch of the fingers of the hand she held, followed by heavy feeling of a hand pressing against the back of her head, sliding down her slowly. Was she dreaming? Afraid to look for fear of disappointment, Ellen slowly lifted her eyes to see.

Frank looked down at her. His dark eyes slightly parted and groggy. "You know, El." Frank cleared his throat, and moistened his lips. His voice was hoarse, almost strained as he tried to speak to her. "If you stay down there any longer, you're gonna excite me."

He was back. Frank was back. The smile he gave, the perverted sense of humor. All of which made Ellen's heart jump from within her, as she flung herself from her chair closer to him. "You're all right." She ran her fingers across his face, feeling it. She touched his lips with her fingertips before she kissed him. "Say something again, please."

"My throat hurts." He tried to clear it again.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry." Ellen reached to the stand next to the bed. "I have it all ready for you." She held a glass of water before his mouth. "Sorry about the Mickey Mouse straw. I pulled it from my nostalgia box." She put the purple straw to his lips. "Slow, drink it slow."

Frank sipped the water, then lifted his hand to her. Ellen pulled it away. "It's warm."

"Sorry, I got it ready for you last night." She smiled at him. A huge, real smile. She placed her face close to his. "Frank Slagel you don't know how much I've missed you."

"You did?" Frank's eyes began to roll, he was still so groggy. He rested back. "I must have been out for awhile."

"You have. Two years." She stroked his face.

"Two years?" Frank's half closed eyes opened wide.

“I’m kidding. A few days. We were worried.”

Frank grunted, the soreness of his body was beginning to hit him. “You had me written off, huh?”

“Not me. Never me.” She kissed him again. “Shit. I have to get your dad and tell him you’re up. And Johnny. They’re waiting.” She ran to the door and stopped. “Andrea too.” She ran back to Frank, kissed him and excitedly darted to the door again. “I’ll be right back.”

“El?” He called out, his voice not too loud. But it was too late. Ellen was gone.

Andrea gave an approving look as she stepped back from Frank. “Well Mr. Slagel, I’d say you are on your way to a full recovery.”

Ellen squeezed his hand tight as she sat in her spot. Joe stood on the other side of the bed.

Andrea moved to the foot of Frank’s bed. “We were all worried that you wouldn’t be all right when you woke up. You did die.”

“No way.” Frank shook his head.

“Yes way.” Andrea stated. “Your heart stopped beating for eight minutes.”

“Fuck.”

Joe held out his hand. “There you have it, he still has his extensive vocabulary. And we all wondered if he’d be the same Frank. Do you remember getting shot?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded with seriousness. “I remember hearing the noise and running down. Robbie was there. I wanted to shoot, but I couldn’t. I don’t know why. And all I thought was getting El out of the . . .” His eyes widened and he turned his head to Ellen. “Bedroom. Did we get . . .”

“Oh yeah, busted.” Ellen told him. “But that’s another topic for later. Quit gloating.”

Frank swiped his hand down his face to get rid of the grin.
“Sorry.”

“Frank.” Ellen softened her voice and moved closer into him. “You had me scared. It was . . . it was the first time in five years that I was . . . Please.” Ellen closed her eyes tight. “Get that gloating look off your face.”

“Sorry.” Frank fought his smile. “It’s just that, you know, the busted thing and now you’re sapping out. Go on.”

Ellen really debated, but continued. “I was worried. I thought I lost you. And I thought . . . I thought I wasn’t capable of feeling the pain I felt when I watched you die. And I realized . . .”

“You really love me.” Frank grinned and nodded.

“Can I say it. Please?”

“Go on.”

“Frank, I realized that I really . . .”

“Ellen!” Their peaceful quiet moment was interrupted as Henry burst in the room. “Ellen.”

Ellen turned from Frank. “What’s wrong?”

Henry realizing that Frank wasn’t to know anything yet, quickly calmed himself down. “Oh . . uh.”

“Henry!” Joe snapped. “Spit it out.”

Running his fingers through his longer black hair, Henry nervously stepped back. “I just wanted to let you know. Um, Dean would like to speak to you.”

Ellen jumped up from her seat. “Frank I’ll be right back.” She kissed him quickly and took off running from the room. Joe joined her.

Frank was lost. Baffled. He shifted his eyes to Andrea who stepped to the bed, patted his hand and smiled.

The energy began to leave Ellen about half way down the hallway as Joe had long since passed her in their run. An overwhelming feeling of dizziness stopped her cold in her tracks, and she grasped the wall for support. She could see Joe pushing

for the front doors. How long would it be until he noticed she was no longer following him closely. “Joe.” She called out to him. She couldn’t go on. “Joe, please.”

Joe stopped, turned around and looked back at her. “Ellen what’s wrong?” He ran to her side.

“I’m gonna pass out.” Ellen slid down to the floor and rested her head on her knees. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right. I’m getting Andrea.”

He didn’t have too. Andrea emerged from her office, saw Ellen on the floor and ran over. “You are doing way too much.” Andrea knelt down beside her. “Can you stand up?”

Ellen shook her head. “I’m too dizzy. And . . . I’m bleeding. I can feel it. Bad.” She said weakly.

“This is not good.” Andrea stood up. “Joe get her into the examining room. This talk with Dean is going to have to wait.” She began to walk down the hall.

“Where are you going?” Joe called to her as he lifted Ellen up.

“I need to speak to Dean. He has something that will help her.”

“They won’t let you. He can only talk to Ellen.”

“Wanna bet!” Andrea’s head moved as she talked and she flew from the clinic. It did not take her long to arrive at the containment center. Henry stood from behind the radio the moment she walked in.

“Andrea where’s Ellen?”

“Ellen sick.” She reached her hand out to him. “I want to talk to Dean.”

“They won’t let you.”

“They will. I need to talk to him. He was working on a drug that can help Ellen.” She moved behind the desk and picked up the radio’s microphone. “Do I just press this button?”

Henry nodded. “They won’t . . .”

“Dean.” Andrea called to him. “I have to talk to you.”

“Andrea? Where’s Ellen?” Dean was bewildered. He did not expect to hear her voice.

Robbie took the radio. “Andrea. You are breaking the rules. Either Dean speaks to Ellen or we end this now.”

“Dean can’t speak to Ellen. She’s sick. She’s very sick. He can help her.” Andrea stated strongly. “I need to speak to Dean about this.”

“Nope. No can do.”

Andrea lost it. She didn’t know what caused her to do it, but she went out of control. “Robert Linus Slagel. You will put Dean on this radio and you will put him on this phone right now. I know your father raised you better than this. I thought you cared about Ellen, obviously not. Now, if I do not speak to Dean I swear to God I will get in a jeep, head my ass on over there and slap you myself. And sweet Jesus help you, you don’t want me there. I’ll take down the whole lot of you.”

“Andrea! All right!” Robbie snapped. “Make it short. God!” He nearly dropped the radio and rubbed his temple.

Dean picked it up. “Andrea?”

Andrea’s body totally relaxed as she sat back down in the chair. “I’m still here.”

“Tell me what’s wrong with Ellen.” Dean hung his head low, and his heart dropped as he listened to Andrea tell him in a delicate medical terminology that Robbie couldn’t interpret. Using words such as, ‘spontaneous’ and ‘menorrhagia’ all but told Dean, Ellen had lost her baby. “Second shelf, third med fridge.” Dean informed Andrea. “PHS. It’s marked. Fifty-milligrams every four hours.” Dean set down the radio and rubbed his eyes. As much as it angered him that Ellen was pregnant to Frank, the miscarriage bothered him. It happened again. The cruel hard world had taken from Ellen, yet another child.

They had left Frank alone in his medicated healing state to ponder why Ellen rushed from the room. And also what had been happening with the crisis situation. Joe didn't even want to think where Frank's demented mind would travel. His son was not the brightest of men. Outside of the brilliant military strategist that Frank occasionally turned into, like some sort of transforming Mr. Hyde, to Joe, Frank was a short-bus candidate. But Frank needed to know. Joe absolutely, without a doubt hated to be the one to tell him. Despite Andrea's strict, 'let his body and mind rest' policy, Joe prepared to inform Frank.

"Dean . . ." Joe cleared his throat as he sat next to Frank's bed. "Dean . . . Dean is gone."

"What do you mean Dean's gone? What is he dead or something?"

"Christ no, he's not dead. He's gone."

"I don't understand." Frank began to smile. "Did he run away from the community? Ha! He couldn't take it and ran away like a teenager. This is funny."

Joe rolled his eyes at his son. "What the hell is the matter with you? Use the goddamn brains given to you. No, wait, you are. That's why you said that. Dean didn't run away, he's gone. Someone took him. Robbie took him."

"Wait a second." Frank tried to lift himself, it pained him, but he managed to sit up. "If Robbie took him that means you didn't get Robbie after he shot me."

"No we didn't."

"No?" Frank huffed and hit his hand on the bed. "What the fuck, Dad."

"Frank. Christ." Joe held up his hand. "I'm not supposed to be getting you excited."

"I certainly hope not."

"Get your mind out of the gutter. We didn't get Robbie, because we didn't look in the right spot. We were checking for

where he would escape back out, but he uh . . . he walked out the front gate.”

“He what!”

Joe cringed. “Someone on the inside was letting him out.”

“Who?”

“Now you can’t say I told you so.”

“I won’t. Who?” Frank questioned again.

Joe had to just blurt it out. No beating around the bush. “Michelle.”

“Ha! I knew she couldn’t be trusted. I told you so.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Joe rubbed his eyes.

“Wait. There are only five keys that can override the panel. How did she do it if she wasn’t working security.”

“Let’s just say she seduced one of the council and stole his key.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Fuckin George. I knew he was a dirty old . . .”

“Frank. It wasn’t George.”

“Oh, my God, Dad. Don’t . . . Don’t tell me it was you. I don’t wanna have to call you Joe.”

“It wasn’t me.” Joe’s voice raised more with his irritation. “It was Henry.”

“Henry? Henry? Henry!” Frank shouted.

“Hey, Frank.” Henry, bubbly, walked in.

“Henry!” Frank yelled. “You slept with . . . with . . . with . . . it!”

Henry turned and walked back out.

Joe slapped his hand on his own knee as he stood up. “Thank you very much Frank. I was waiting on a radio update. You scared the man away.” Joe moved to the door. “We’ve, we’ve been receiving radio messages from Dean. And he can only speak to Ellen.”

“That’s why she ran out.” Frank said. “Is she coming back?”

“Frank . . . Ellen, she’s been tired.”

Frank nodded. “I understand. Tell her to rest. All this can’t be good for our baby. Our baby, Dad. Hey!” Frank snapped his finger. “Did I tell you we heard the heartbeat? It was so great.”

Joe closed his eyes briefly. “Frank I have to tell . . .” He had to stop himself, Joe just couldn’t do it, he couldn’t tell Frank about the baby. “I have to go. I’ll tell Ellen you said to rest.”

“Oh Dad?”

Joe turned around. “Yeah Frank?”

“Could you tell her I love her. Tell her I love them both.”

Frank’s words struck him hard. It made his heart ache and drop to his stomach. Joe couldn’t say anything, it hurt too much to. Head down, Joe lifted his hand in acknowledgment and continued to leave the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

June 25

He was calling it the Ellen fog. A haze that took over Dean’s mind and clouded any focus he should have had on other matters. How was she feeling? Was she physically recovering? Dean couldn’t stop thinking about her. He couldn’t believe how heavily she was on his mind, especially when he should have been concentrating on how, with the limited ‘love talk’ subject matter, he was going to convey to Beginnings that Robbie was preparing. Constant training drills took place on the streets of Egypt. Exercises that were preparing Robbie’s men for a Beginnings sneak attack. Robbie had an unshakable confidence that, combined with the skills Dean watched Robbie display, worried him.

“Hey!” Moses burst through Dean’s door. “That tall skinny kid.”

Dean, who sat at a small table, hands covering his eyes, peered slowly backwards to Moses. “Must you make the huge entrance every time?”

“Yes.”

“Figures. Using brawn to make up for lack of brains are we?”

“I’m not here to trade insults doctor. You know that tall skinny kid?”

“You mean Denny?”

“Yeah, whatever you call him.” Moses walked closer.

“What about Denny?” Then it hit Dean, what had Moses done to him. Dean jumped from his seat. “You didn’t touch him did you?”

“No. Not yet. He tried to escape last night. Climbed through the window. Talk to him doctor, talk to him now. The next time we may not be so nice. Got it?”

Dean’s nerves were rattled. He took a few breaths to calm himself. “I’ll talk to him. Who caught him?”

“I did. Pissed me off too.” Moses lifted his pants, as if to act like a big man. “I was in prayer, reading my bible.”

Dean, shook his head. He wondered what bible Moses was reading. He never got any passages correct. Then it struck him. Passages. “Moses.” Dean turned solemn. “I really miss reading my Bible. I can understand your anger at getting interrupted. As, uh, one religious man to another. Any chance you can find me one to fill my nights? Nothing like it to comfort you.”

Finally Dean had said something to Moses that didn’t perturb him. Though he wasn’t quite the religious man he prided himself on being, it only happened since he adopted the name, he was impressed. “I didn’t know you were religious.”

“Please. Me? I went to services twice a week with my kids. I read to them from the bible.” Dean spoke the truth, all truths. “In fact, Ellen and I would cuddle in bed with the Good Book. So what do you say Moses? God would shine favorably on you for this one. Please?”

“Well, I suppose I can get you one. Only because I’m a Christian man. But you take care of that kid when you see him. Got it?”

“Got it.” Dean watched Moses storm out. He clenched his fist tightly in excitement and pulled them to himself. “Yes. I am so

smart sometimes. The Bible.” Dean knew the Bible well. He knew it enough to be able to find the passages that would say what he needed. He could even use dates and such to convey where Ellen could find the readings. “Oh no. Ellen.” He whispered out loud to himself. Ellen could give Moses a running for his money on bad Bible quotes. Dean knew what he had to do. He had to warn her first that he was going to use the Bible. Then Dean would have to pray that Joe or Henry was listening when he radioed. Because, if left up to Ellen figuring out the passages, Beginnings would be kept in the dark, no matter how much information Dean passed to them.

Rest was what Ellen needed and rest was what she was given . . . against her will. Heavily sedated and completely knocked out caused her to be irritated when she awoke, but she did feel a lot better. She spent time with her children before they went to school and then she went back to the clinic. It was time to see Frank. It was time to make up an excuse as to where she was. Because she wasn’t ready to give him the truth.

“Look at you.” Ellen called out enthusiastically as she entered Frank’s room. “All sitting up.”

Joe, who stood by Frank’s bedside, immediately pulled a chair next to Frank for Ellen to sit in. “He looks all spiffy doesn’t he?”

“Sure does.” Ellen sat in the chair, and grabbed Frank’s hand. “What’s the deal? I know you don’t feel that much better.”

“Who me?” Frank waved her off. “I feel fine. Look, my Dad shaved me.” Frank lifted his chin. “My goatee isn’t crooked is it?” He watched Ellen shake her head no. “Actually, there’s a reason I’m all . . . spiffy as my Dad said.”

“What’s that?”

“I have to ask you something. Remember, remember before I was shot, I asked you to marry me?”

“Yes. And . . . Frank, don’t worry. It was an emotional time, the kids had just been taken and . . .”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “I was serious. Very. In fact, even more so now, I want you to marry me El. With this baby coming . . .”

“Frank . . .” Ellen tried again to interrupt.

“El please, I have a whole speech.”

Joe wanted to step in. He wanted to stop Frank. Had he known he was shaving his son for a heartache, he would have refused.

“As I was saying. With the baby coming it makes even more sense to get married.” Frank spoke with sincerity to Ellen, even though she kept staring down at his hand. “Now I know you’re probably so worried about me and this baby. Let me tell you, this is a new beginning for me. I want to do this right. I want something to come home to. With you, I’ll have a family. I want to be there. I don’t want to miss anything. I’ll do good El, I will. I promise. I’ll marry you today if you like, tomorrow, it doesn’t matter. I love you. Will you marry me?”

Ellen had to face him, she had to answer him. Her emotions had taken over. When she lifted her head to look at him, she showed what she was feeling. Her face was streaked with tears, and she continued to cry.

Frank was shocked when he looked at her. She didn’t seem to be crying tears of joy. His mouth dropped open. “Oh my, God, El, what is it?”

Ellen shook her head as she cried.

“Did I say something wrong? What?”

“You don’t have to marry me, Frank.” Ellen released his hand. “I’m sorry . . . I lost the baby.” Without waiting for a response from Frank, she flew from the room.

Ellen's words went straight to Frank's stomach. He was speechless as he watched her run from the room. "El." He tried to call out, but she was gone. Without thinking, he flung the covers off of his legs, swung his feet to the floor and slid from the bed. As the soles of his feet touched upon the linoleum, a sharp burning pain emanated up his legs and to his gut. He lost his balance and grabbed for the bed.

"Frank. What the hell are you doing?" Joe reached to him to help.

Frank swung him away. He didn't need any help. "I have to find her." He tried to move his feet, the pain worsened.

"Stay put. I'll get her." Joe raced after Ellen. Out the door Joe flew and knowing Ellen wasn't moving fast. He caught up to her. "Stop."

"I have to calm down."

"You have to go back in there and talk to him." Joe pointed back. "The man jumped out of bed to go after you."

"Joe, I can't face him."

"You will face him. This was his baby too. You will talk to him . . . now." Joe stared sternly at her pointing back at Frank's room so much like a scolding father. "Now."

Hyperventilating in her breaths, Ellen slowly returned to Frank. When she stepped back in the room he was seated on the bed. She hurried over to him and reached for his legs. "What are you doing? Lay back down."

"Stop." He grabbed her hands. "El. I'm sorry." He connected his eyes with hers. "I am so . . . sorry."

Ellen's head dropped to his legs and she buried her head against his knees. "I'm sorry too, Frank. I didn't want to lose the baby. I swear. I swear to you."

Frank ran his hand over her hair to her chin. He lifted her views to him. "Baby or no baby . . . I will not rescind my proposal. Got that? And I will not take 'no' for an answer. El, I have loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you. We spent the last twenty

years missing our chance. Don't make me grow old waiting for you, because I will. I just would rather grow old . . . with you."

Ellen didn't answer. She wiped her hand across her face removing her tear and she dropped her head back down to his legs. Hands gripping to him in desperation, Ellen just held on to Frank.

"You see, Den." Dean sat chair to chair with the scared teenager. Dean folded his hands in front of him, trying to be a guidance for Denny. "It was not smart, not at all to try that last night."

"I know that Dean, I do. But earlier on I heard Robbie talking. He said Frank was dead. Frank is our chance, is he dead Dean? Is he?"

"Why would that make you want to escape? It was very dangerous."

"I have to know. See I'm beginning to know this camp. If Frank is dead and I sneak out I can help our people to break in here. Is he dead Dean?"

"Don't worry about Frank Denny. You can't. You have to worry about yourself and the other kids. You know they won't let me in here more than three times a day. We have to protect these kids. How can we do that if you escape and I'm locked in another room?"

"Why aren't you answering me about Frank?"

"Did you hear what I just said to you?" Dean's beating around the bush wasn't flying with Denny.

"Yeah I heard." Denny stomped his foot and stood up pouting. "I know exactly what you're telling me. No more trying to escape, O.K., I won't do that. But Frank is dead, isn't he?"

“Some things are meant to be a certain way.” Dean also stood. “I think my time is up in here.”

“Why don’t you care Dean? He was the only one who could help us. Who’s gonna help us now?”

“Joe will figure that out, don’t worry.”

“I liked him Dean. I know you didn’t. But I liked him. What happened to him, can you tell me that?”

Dean hung his head low, hesitated, then answered Denny. “Frank was shot.”

The news of what happened to Frank, pummeled young Denny. He stepped back, reached for the chair and sat. “Frank was shot? Did my mom try to help him?”

“She did everything she could.” Dean wanted to tell the distraught Denny the truth. He knew he couldn’t. Even innocently, Denny could let it slip that Frank was alive, and that could not be chanced. Misleading Denny was better than lying to him. “Look Den, I have to go. If I don’t, they won’t let me back in here later. I’ll be back, I promise.” Dean opened the door and stepped into the hall. “I talked to him, Robbie. He won’t try it again.”

“Good.” Robbie walked with Dean back to his containment space. “There’s something I want to tell you. What happened yesterday. The Andrea reaming me out thing. It can’t fly. How’s Beginnings suppose to know what they lost if they can just ask you, so . . . end of radio transmissions.”

Dean stopped in his tracks. “What! No. You told me I could communicate with Ellen.”

Robbie snickered. “There you go again, Dean. Selfish, selfish, selfish. Man I like that. Anyhow, the list you gave the other day. That can be standard. We’ll have a meet every third day and . . . because I am a caring man.” Robbie laid his hand on his own chest. “I’ll let you communicate with Ellen, but . . . in the old fashion way. Get that penmanship in order Dean, you have to write her letters now.”

Dean didn’t show it, but he liked the idea of writing letters better. He wouldn’t have to verbalize things he really didn’t want

to. And , Joe and Henry could write Ellen’s letters for her. Minimizing any chance that Dean would have a hard time translating them. Transferring of massages would be easier. The only problem laid in the three day time lapse between responses. Hopefully any correspondence made, would allow for that time lapse.

“No.” Ellen squeezed the corners of her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. Distraught she raised her views to Joe as they stood in the hall by Frank’s room. “They can’t do this.”

“I’m sorry.” Joe laid his hand on her shoulder.

“I have to be able to talk to him. Besides this message passing thing. I need to hear him.”

“You can’t. Robbie said they won’t answer. He says they call the shots. Every third day a drop off and your note from Dean.”

Ellen closed her eyes and shook her head. “This isn’t good Joe. Not at all. Dean’s going to try to send the messages in his notes.”

“I would hope so. Why don’t you think that’s good?”

“Because it’s one thing for Robbie to eavesdrop on a mushy conversation. It’s another to have it in writing. He’s going to read, and let’s hope, not between the lines.”

Andrea re-covered Frank with the blanket after she finished examining him. “Looks like you’re healing fine. You didn’t cause any problems making that jump from your bed.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about Ellen.”

“Ellen will be fine. She needs to take it easy. She took it easy yesterday that was a bonus. Just so you know, there shouldn’t be any reason, you two can’t try again down the road.”

“We’ll see. Whatever she wants to do.” Frank took a deep breath. “So I’m doing good, then. Good enough to take a walk down the aisle.”

“I hope you’re gonna wait until Dean gets back.”

“Well, I wasn’t plan . . .”

“You realize how wrong. Wrong that would be. Sweet Jesus, Francis, tell me you aren’t that callous as to marry the woman from under his nose, while he’s been kidnapped.”

“What if it’s uh, El’s idea?”

“Francis.” Andrea folded her arms.

“Andrea, please.” Frank scoffed. “Would I do that?” He watched her raise her eyebrow at him. “I’m a changed man. I died. I’ve seen the light.” Frank winked. “I won’t marry Ellen until Dean is safe and sound.”

“Oh good.” Andrea let out a breath. “She’s still wearing his ring.”

Frank grumbled.

“And it just is the right thing to do. Let him see it coming, don’t you think.”

“Absolutely.” Frank didn’t let Andrea see him roll his eyes. “Now, me, I’m doing good right?”

“I think you’re little demonstration of fortitude tells me, I want to try walking tomorrow.” She moved to the other side of the bed. “A little walking around this room tomorrow. Then the next day more walking. If you show me you can do it, I’ll let you go home and finish healing.”

“Excellent.”

Andrea gripped the bed railing. “But you have to take it slow and do it right Frank. We need you to heal properly. I’m putting my faith in you Francis Slagel.” Andrea dropped her voice to a passionate whisper. “That you personally, will bring my son to me.”

“I promise you, Andrea, I will.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

June 28

Robbie folded up the note Dean had written and handed it back to the awaiting men who stood before his desk. “You can pass it on. It is fine.” The note, the one Dean scurried the town looking for paper for. The note was written on the back of some acknowledgment page of some huge children’s picture book. It was blank, and served its purpose. Robbie read over the note. It struck him odd at first that Dean made no attempt to pass any information at all to Beginnings. None. It was a love note. Plain and simple. Too mushy for Robbie’s taste. Robbie himself would not be writing love notes if he were kidnapped. But what someone once said held true in the Dean account, ‘what some people won’t do for love’. And Dean was doing his best, since Frank was gone.

Frank. Robbie hadn’t thought of him much since he shot him shortly over a week prior. Did he die right away? Did he suffer? None of it mattered. Frank was dead. Beginnings’ best chance of sneaking into Egypt and rescuing their people was gone. Robbie had an edge. In a Joe Slagel tradition, Robbie wrote everything down. Tearing half empty pages from books. Finding index cards from the library, anything he could use. He wrote down every man he could remember from Beginnings. He wrote down their strengths and weaknesses. Know your enemy. Know them well. Robbie’s best advantage was that he spent time in Beginnings. He knew how it worked and everyone there. Robbie was certain his plan would work too. Though he grew tired lately of explaining it over and over to Moses and anyone he brought into Robbie’s office, he remained certain that he would prevail.

Robbie checked over his notes. Notes on Beginnings, and notes on Egypt’s men. One problem person lay within Egypt. That person was Moses. For some reason Moses had the ability to upheaval the men, make them question Robbie. This was beginning irritate him. Moses’ time was running short. Moses truly believed that once Robbie’s time frame was up that he’d take

over, and would handle things his way. Robbie knew better. He also knew he wasn't about to let Moses reclaim his leadership position. It was his and it would be his when he claimed Beginnings. Moses was a threat to Robbie, and Robbie was certain that Moses would be one man who would never see the inside walls of Beginnings again.

“Home.” Ellen opened up the front door to Frank’s house. She held onto him by his waist as he made his way through the door. “You all right?”

“El, I can manage.” Frank hobbled in holding tightly to a cane for support.

“A few more steps to the couch.”

“El, please.” He stopped walking. “I can make it over there. Besides, you holding onto me is not going to help. If I fall, you’ll fall right along with me.”

“Sorry, you’re right.” She held her hands up. She didn’t want to take a chance of landing on the floor.

Frank made his way to the couch and slowly lowered himself to it. His stitches pulled a bit, but not as bad as they had two days earlier. He grunted as his rear rested down. He laid the cane next to him and looked around. “What’s up with my house? It looks different.”

“It’s just my stuff in here.”

“So you’re really moved in with me.”

“Yes. The twins are pretty excited about staying with Uncle Frank until their dad gets back. Especially since Joe sees no need for them to sleep in containment anymore.”

“Wait . . . they aren’t staying when Dean gets back? Are they living with him? Why? I thought we talked about being a family.”

Ellen plopped down next to him. “I thought we’d talk about this . . . all later.”

“All right. Later.” Frank blindly felt for her knee, then leaned sideways to her. His glanced up to her as his head rested near her shoulder. So tired, Frank moved his lips to kiss her.

“Oh knock it off you two.” Joe slammed the door as he waltzed right in and stood before them. He plopped the armful of papers he held on the coffee table. “Ellen, move your ass, Frank and I have work to do.”

“Work?” Ellen stood up. “What do you mean work? And what is all this shit that just made a mess of the living room?”

“These are maps.” Joe grew tired of waiting on Ellen to move. He walked to her and gently led her away from the spot where he was going to sit. “Maps of the region.” Joe sat next to Frank and spoke to him. Ignoring Ellen completely. “Aside from setting up our attack mission, we are going to have to make an ammunition run. We have to figure out what we need. Where we are . . .”

“Excuse me!” Ellen shouted to get their attention. “Joe, what are you doing?”

“Ellen.” Joe slammed his hand against his knee. “I have very little time to do this. Its pork rations day you know? Leave us alone for an hour.”

“No. Leave Frank alone. He has to rest.”

“Frank is sitting on the goddamn couch, how is that not resting?”

“Working his mind is the same thing as working his body.”

“Christ, Ellen listen to you. Working Frank’s mind? Leave us alone. This is important.” Joe opened the maps and began to point out things to Frank.

“And his getting better is important too. Frank doesn’t need to be worrying about this right now.”

“Yes Frank does. Don’t you, Frank?” He looked to Frank who just shrugged his shoulders. “Now please, I can’t express to you how important this is. All right?”

Ellen shook her head. “I can’t believe you won’t even let him be home one day and already you are bombarding him with work.”

“This is not bombarding. This is extremely crucial. He is resting. He’s not moving. I refuse to argue any further with you on this. I do. Now . . .” Joe waved his hand at her. “Go.”

Ellen gasped. “Fine. I will not condone this.” She walked away knowing her efforts were futile. Just as she opened the front door, Henry stood there with a raised hand getting ready to knock. “Henry.”

Henry smiled and held up a folded piece of paper. “For you.”

With a slight shriek, Ellen snatched it up. “I got mail!” She raced back into the living room. “Henry’s back.”

Joe stood from the couch. “All go well at the exchange?”

Henry shrugged. “As expected. Give the supplies. No talking. Dean’s letter.”

Joe peered over to Ellen who was unfolding the note. “Give that to me.” He reached for it, but Ellen snatched it away.

“No. It’s written to me.” She stood from the chair backing up.

“Give it to me now.”

“No.” She kept waving it out of his reach, frustrating Joe even more.

“For crying out loud Ellen, this is not a game.”

“And this is my note. . . I get to read it.”

“Fine.” Joe could have rubbed the skin off his forehead his hand grazed his skin so harsh. “Read the Goddamn note.” He watched her happily unfold it and start to read. “Out loud!”

“You are too mean to me.” Ellen sat down in the chair.

“And you are on my last nerve.” Joe quickly pulled the note from Ellen’s hands.

“That’s mine.”

“And you can have it when we’re done.” Joe’s eyes skimmed the note as he mumbled. “Dear El. Seems like weeks. Kids are fine. Eating. No illness. Treated well. Bible . . . Christ he’s turning religious.” Joe shook his head.

“Dean’s very religious.” Ellen stated. “Christian really. Reads the bible all the time.”

“Now he wants you . . .” Joe said. “To share passages of inspiration.”

Ellen jerked back in her chair with a tilted head look. “That’s a weird request. I only know where the doomsday parts of the bible are.”

Joe slightly rolled his eyes. “That’s real inspiring. I’m not seeing anything.” Joe shook his head. “Maybe Ellen just has me frazzled. But after the kid part, and request to share Christianity with Ellen, The answer has to be in this quote.”

“Quote?” Henry stepped forward. “What quote?”

“It’s the only thing that doesn’t seem to be in a list format.” Joe read it. “And I know we’ll get through this one day. Like my Aunt Esther always said, it’s not the height of a man that measures his courage, it’s the heart.”

Slowly Ellen’s head swayed. “They have to be breaking him Joe. He knows I don’t read the bible and . . . he doesn’t have an Aunt Esther. I don’t think. Not that he ever mentioned her. Weird.”

Henry let out a long frustration breath. “Joe, are we stupid. Esther. Esther.”

“The book of Esther.” Joe said.

“Bible passages.” Henry pointed to the note.

Joe snapped his finger. “Get Reverend Bob.”

The bushy, gray haired Reverend paced about the living room with his easy to read Bible. “It would help if we had numbers.” Rev. Bob flipped a page. “Any numbers at all in the letter.”

Joe lifted his hand up as he read the letter. “Weeks, maybe it means three. No. Wait. One day. He says one day.”

“Esther, one.” Rev. Bob stated.

“Didn’t . . .” Frank spoke up. “Didn’t he say something about size.”

“Yeah.” Henry smiled brightly. “The height of a man.”

Frank arrogantly sat back. “Must mean me. I’m six three.”

Joe shook his head. “As much as like to think that, the number sequence it wrong. He’s not gonna give a six before a three. Wait, how tall is Dean?”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Four foot two.”

“Frank, Christ. Sorry revered,” Joe looked to Ellen. “How tall is Dean. Five-six?”

“Joe.” Ellen gasped in offense. “He’s taller than that. He’s five seven.”

Reverend Bob held up a finger. “Now that makes sense. Chapter one, verses five through seven Listen.” He began to read them. “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down and show him respect, he was filled with rage. So he decided it was not enough to lay hands on Mordecai alone. Since he learned Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to destroy all the Jews throughout the entire empire of Xerxes’ . . .”

“Stop.” Joe interrupted. “Let’s break that down first. Who’s Mordecai and who is Haman?”

The Reverend began to answer. “Well Biblically speak . . .”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Barring the story that we’re reading. We have to look at the words as a message. Henry?”

“Simple Joe. Mordecai is you or Frank. Haman is Robbie.”

“And you know this how?” Joe asked.

“Think about it.” Henry began to pace. “Haman was outraged. He wanted to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews. If we were Haman that would make no sense. We had no intention to destroy everyone ousted. Just oust them. Robbie took our children, and Dean. What I think he’s trying to tell us is. Taking out Frank or you is not enough. He wants us all.”

Joe nodded. “I think we know that though. All right Reverend continue. If there’s more.”

“Just a bit . . . ‘So in the month of April, during the twelfth year of King Xerxes reign, lots were cast to determine the best day and month to take action. And the day that was selected was

March 7, nearly a year later.” The Reverend closed the bible. “That’s the last verse he gave.”

Joe rubbed his chin. “Best time to take action. And that passage gives a time frame. But a year? No way.”

“Dean mentioned an amount of time.” Henry said. “His letter stated it seemed like weeks.”

Frank interjected. “So that means they are gonna strike again in weeks, or we’d better do something in a few weeks. Which we can. Simple enough.”

Ellen’s one long word interrupted the tactical thoughts. “Ooh. It’s a word game. I get it.” She tossed her hands up and stood. “I’ll be back.”

Joe’s eyes shifted. “We’re are you going?”

“Back to my house to get Dean’s bible. I have to pick out a return message you know. I wonder what I can tell him.” With a complete look of ponder, Ellen hurried from the house.

With concern, Henry, Reverend Bob and Frank looked to Joe. Very reassuringly Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. “No.” He peaked at the door, opened his mouth to speak, shut it and shook his head again. “No.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

July 2

Dean basked in the warm sun. On his back, arms folded behind his head, he rested flat on the dirty, weed overgrown street. He just lay there, waiting. Robbie sat on a crate to the left of him, Moses walked guard at his feet. Dean had to laugh at them, watching him like he was some sort of huge threat to him. Yeah, big five-foot seven, one hundred thirty pound, Dean was gonna take them all on. But then again Dean knew that he could, he knew very simply that he could. He could wipe out Moses and twelve others of them in about three minutes. Dean smiled at that thought. If he had to do it he would. The sugar cookies. The cookies that Beginnings sent for the children were grabbed suddenly by all of Robbie's men. They opened the bin full of supplies, found the cookies and ate them right away. If only Dean could convey to Ellen to sprinkle some of the substance they used for rabbit control on top of those cookies, Robbie's men would experience extreme stomach discomfort almost immediately. Projectile vomiting, convulsions, and then Dean would exclaim, "It's the plague again!" Who would doubt him? He was the scientist and they knew it.

Dean's face must have been very visibly expressing his thoughts. Moses stomped his foot close to Dean's head to snap him out of it.

"Hey Doctor! What's so humorous?"

Dean opened his eyes, and Moses came into focus. The vision of Moses shaking on the ground, screaming for his pitiful life made Dean smile more. "Nothing Moses. I was just reflecting."

"Seem awfully happy. Quit it."

Robbie just shook his head. "Moses leave him alone. He's waiting for his letter."

"You see, that's what I don't get Robbie. He's been kidnapped. If I'm not mistaken he has two children at home. Why

is he not concerned with them? Why is he only concerned with this woman Helen.”

“Ellen! Please.” Dean called out from his laying position. He wanted Moses to shut up. Moses was making sense and it wouldn’t help any if he started putting any doubts in Robbie’s mind. “Obviously you were never in love. Then again, who could love you?”

Moses cried out, a gut cry of anger. He raised his knee, lifting his boot directly above Dean’s head. “I could squash you in a heartbeat.”

Dead didn’t flinch. “Go ahead. What do I have to lose? Besides, it won’t make you look better Moses. It will make you look dumber. If that’s possible.”

“Uh!” Moses’ boot came pummeling down to Dean’s head, rearing to smash it like it was an unwanted insect.

Robbie, with quick reaction, flew his hand forward, clasped Moses’ ankle, stopped it from its submergence, and sent Moses flying backwards, joining Dean on the ground. “You will never take physical force on this man without my permission. Do you hear me?”

Moses jumped from his feet and lunged over Dean for Robbie. Dean, realizing it was soon to be the Clash of the Titans, rolled his body out of the way of the two men.

As Moses came flying hands first, Robbie, without fear, without moving, stopped Moses with one single, heavily thrown right fist. Moses’ head snapped back and he flew to the ground. Robbie charged to him, lifting him by his collar. “This is my choice right now Moses. I choose not to kill you for attacking me. Next time you won’t be so fortunate. There were many others before you who weren’t as lucky as you are right now.” Robbie dropped him to the ground and reached his hand down to Dean. “And you. You have to stop getting on him. I’m not going to always be able to protect you. How am I supposed to stop him from coming into your room while you sleep and breaking your neck?”

Dean swallowed, perhaps a little in fear. That thought hadn't crossed his mind. "I'll give that some thought."

"Good." Robbie turned his head to the trotting horses that had entered Egypt. "Now maybe you can stop pouting. Your letter has arrived." Robbie waltzed with arrogance to the men who dismounted the horses. "The note?" He held out his hand.

The one man slapped the note into his hand as he untied the box from the saddle of his horse. The other man with him did the same.

At the sight of the boxes hitting the ground, other men in the camp began to charge the unopened care packages. They knew what they sought. They were scavengers.

Dean ran to them. "Wait!" He called out. "Robbie, make them stop. Now."

"Stop!" Robbie caught the attention of the lunging men. "Why did I just stop them?"

"Because. These supplies are for the kids. This is the deal. This is the third box and your men are stealing their food. The cookies, Robbie. Let the kids have the cookies."

"Get away from the food." Robbie ordered. "It's not ours."

"Thank you." Dean walked over to the boxes, he picked one up, he glared at a man who tried once again to reach for it. "Go head, steal the cookies. How do you know. . ." Dean stared at the men who encircled him. "How do any of you know that they aren't figuring that you men are eating the cookies? What if they know you are? What if they are slowly poisoning you? Maybe I'm just saving you because I know it. Any stomach problems lately?" He began to carry the box away. He stopped one more time to look back. "Ever hear of Flowers in the Attic?"

Hurrying about was something Ellen just didn't want to do. She finished up her last counseling appointment at the containment center, checked on the twins at school, and raced back home.

"Sorry I'm running late." Ellen called out to Frank as she ran into the house. "I'll get your lunch for you, Frank?" She looked up the steps. "Frank?" He wasn't on the first floor. "This is weird. Maybe he's in the shower." She walked up the steps and continued to call out his name. After checking every room, the big revelation that he wasn't in the house, hit her. Where was he? Then she heard her answer. "No. He wouldn't be." The sound of steady gun fire could be heard coming from a distance. Ellen knew the return of Joe and George with the huge amounts of ammunition would signify shooting practice. But would Frank be there? "I'll kill him."

Walking heavily, and at a quick pace, Ellen stormed through town to get to the training area by the tunnel where the shooting dummies were set up. Passing Joe's newest addition was the only thing that made her chuckle in her anger. A huge board sign sat erected in the center of town. Like a score board, it read 'hostage crises, day 13'. Joe was making it his point, every morning he changed the numbers. Like Beginnings was the center of some sort of high media incident and Joe wanted to display it.

Closing in on the roadway near the tunnel gate, she spotted him. Frank stood ten feet behind a row of men. He stood there leaning on his cane with one hand. Wearing his usual green military pants, and white tee shirt. She could see him waving his cane in the air at the men, and hear his huge thunderous voice shouting.

"Hey!" Frank shouted. "What the fuck. Yeah, you'll hit your target if it weighs seven hundred pounds. Son of a bitch! Hold it up. Hold it up! Christ!" Frank slammed the end of his cane on the ground and shook his head in disgust.

"Frank!" Ellen, out of breath called to him.

“Oh. Hey, El.” He hobbled over to her, seemingly more straight than he walked a few hours earlier. “What are you doing here?”

“I came up here to ask you the same thing.”

“Shooting drills. I didn’t want to miss it. I have to teach these guys precision, you know.”

“Hey, El.” Johnny who took his short cut between them on the way to shooting practice, slowed down. “I saw Rev. Bob. He said you two are pestering him to marry you.”

Frank’s mouth dropped open. “Doesn’t he have a vow of silence.”

Miguel who was right behind John, stopped and placed his big body in between Ellen and Frank. “I hope that the Lord will make you see the error you will make if you marry before Dean returns. It is time, now to be honest. Open. No more lies.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “Yeah, go grab a gun or something.”

Ellen was shocked at Frank’s behavior toward Miguel. “I can believe you were that rude.”

“And I can’t believe you’re still wearing Dean’s ring.” Frank grabbed her hand.

“At least it’s not rude.”

“You don’t think?”

“Frank.” Ellen said his name with irritation. “The man is kidnapped. Allow me to have a sentimental attachment.”

“To Dean?” Frank questioned one hand on his hips “I’ll tell you what El, why don’t I just keep you warmed up and when he gets home, you can run back to him.”

“Stop this . . . I don’t want to fight.” Ellen reached up and grabbed his arm. “I want to bitch at you instead.”

“What?”

“Why are you here, Frank?” Ellen’s tone raised. “I hope it’s just to teach your sharp shooter abilities to these men. You aren’t really going to go out on the mission are you.”

“El.” Frank nearly laughed. “Of course I’m doing the mission. What do you think?”

“I think you’re fucked up.” Ellen started to walk away.

Frank in a wobble, followed. “Wait a second.” He reached out and stopped her. “You don’t want me to go?”

“No.” Ellen pulled away and turned around. “I don’t.”

“This is what I do.”

“Then let someone else do it.” Ellen argued. “Why does it have to be you. Why do you always have to be the one to rush in. Frank, something could happen to you. I watched you die once, I won’t watch you die again.”

“Fine.” Frank nodded slowly. “Fine. And I can’t believe you of all people are saying this. You would think, with precious fuckin Dean’s life at stake you’d want me to. El, I’m sorry.” He stepped to her. “But I have to do this. I want your support here. But to be honest with you. Whether I have it or not, I’m still going in.”

“I understand. Go back to training.” Ellen said softly, turned and started to walk.

“El?” Frank called out. “Your support?”

Ellen kept on walking.

Robbie dropped the other box on Dean’s desk. It landed with a loud thump. “Here’s your note. I read it. You can too.”

“Thanks.” Dean took the ripped envelope and smelled it. It smelled like Ellen and that helped. “Could you guys have at least not ripped the envelope? We work very hard on maintaining all of our paper products.” He pulled out the note.

“My stationary apologies.”

Dean didn’t laugh at Robbie’s humor, he unfolded it and began to read. “Dean, you’ve been on my mind so much since I last got your letter. You and the children. You are in all of our prayers. Have courage Dean please. I know we’ll work this out

between us. Even if I have three more days to wait, at least your letter will reassure me, during these past thirteen days of terror, that apart, we can use this *tim* to at least bring out some good in all this. Keep reassuring me Dean. I miss you. Come home. All my Love. Ellen.” Dean kept staring at the note. Finally, after a long glance he laid it on his night stand. His mind raced. Where was it? The bible reference? Did Ellen actually write this letter, not Joe? She had too. Dean knew if it was in there, the reference, it was hidden. He saw numbers. Three and thirteen. Did she forget it? He’d have to wait until Robbie left to break it down. But what if Robbie took it with him? He had to know. “Robbie can I keep the letter?”

“I don’t want it. I had a hard time reading it.”

Dean didn’t want to, but he had to agree with Robbie. “Her handwriting is atrocious. Her spelling has got to be . . .” Dean tried to hide the instant smile when the revelation hit him. He went over to the stand and picked up the letter again, he gazed over it. He knew he saw it and hews right. Ellen misspelled the word ‘time’. She dropped her ‘e’. Leaving the word Tim. “Um, Robbie. Could I be alone please?”

“I’ll be back. I need you to distribute your supplies to the kids. Five minutes.” Robbie left the room. Never giving a second thought to the note.

Dean scurried for the Bible he hid under the mattress. He pulled it out. Tim. She must have meant Timothy. But which book? Timothy 1, or Timothy 2. Dean glanced at the letter. It read ‘use this Tim to.’ that had to be two. Dean had to hurry. He grabbed the bible and opened up to the section. ‘But evil people and imposters shall flourish. They will go on deceiving others, and they themselves will be deceived.’ “What?” Dean plopped to the floor, shoving the bible back into the mattress. He grabbed the note again. “Come on El.” Dean read over it. “Imposters? Evil people?” Dean thought, and thought hard. And as his eyes laid close to the note, the final sentence grabbed him. She asked him to keep reassuring her. Of what? Of imposters? Of Evil people? If

Dean was in Joe's position, what would he want to know? "Oh am I stupid." Dean jumped up and placed the note back down. "But how to find out, is the question." Dean made the mistake of speaking out loud, he didn't notice Robbie walking back into the room.

"Find out about what Dean?" He slammed the door.

"Oh about Ellen." Dean's racing mind, filled with possible answers, reflected on Dean's ace.

"What about her? Does it have to do with Frank?"

"You could say that. She is having his baby you know. I forgot about that."

"Accidents happen. Don't get any funny ideas about that baby." Robbie pointed. "Whether or not I hated my brother has little to do with the fact that she carrying my family. In fact, I'm seriously considering claiming that child when it's born."

"Oh yeah," Dean spoke sarcastically. "Let's dance one more time on Frank's grave shall we?"

"Go ahead make fun of me. The next time Moses tries to stomp you, I won't be so quick to stop him." Robbie grabbed one of the supply boxes from the desk. "Let's go. I have other things to do besides feed the brats of Beginnings."

Dean followed him, carrying the other box. If he wanted to get anymore information out of Robbie, he'd surely have to stop pissing him off. Maybe now was the time to try to befriend him. As much as it pained him. He had to. Beginnings asked in their letter, and they needed to know. Were there anymore inside people? Or at least that what's Dean thought they wanted. If there were, Dean had to find out. Any plan that Beginnings worked on, would not be sacred if another traitor like Michelle was among them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

July 5

Dean stood above a bleeding Moses. And not very happily. Moses sat in a chair, seemingly impatient while Dean's left hand rested on Moses' forehead and his other hand moved a needle slowly through his skin, closing the huge gash. "Want to tell me how you got this wound?"

"Ouch. . . Yes, Robbie did it to me."

Dean moved very slowly, repairing the open wound. "Why is it that you insist on letting him get the best of you? You're a big guy, you can take him."

"I know that . . . ouch . . . but he still has the dedication of most of the men in camp. If I bring down Robbie, I'll lose their respect, and who's going to want to help me then. No, I'll just wait until he breaks."

"You think he's breaking? I don't see it." Dean stopped for a moment, taking a breather and letting the needle dangle back and forth from Moses' scalp.

"Oh sure he's breaking. He doesn't show you. But with us, his fuse is short. It takes less and less time to fire him up." Moses jumped in pain. "Jesus Christ Doc. Take it easy. Are you sure they didn't give you something to numb the skin in the supply pack?"

"Sorry Moses, all they gave was the sutures. You'll have to grin and bear it." Dean lied, he knew there was a topical in with the supplies. But why use it? He fully enjoyed torturing Moses. Letting Moses feel every bit of the needle as Dean pulled it slowly and tauntingly through his injured skin. "There you go. Done." In his final tie of the sutures, Dean gave a strong tug. Moses screamed. "Sorry."

Moses stood up holding onto his throbbing head. "I'll be all right?"

"To be honest with you, I don't know." Dean gathered up the used supplies and handed them to Moses to take away. "I noticed your pupils. They're uneven. It's not a good sign. You could have

a severe concussion. I think you do. And with a head injury you could very well die in your sleep.”

Moses did not know how to react as he held on to the garbage Dean handed to him. “What do I do?”

“For starters, rest, rest for about five days. Don’t move too much. Tell Robbie that too if he asks you. Also, for the next three days, someone is going to have to wake you up every single hour, just to make sure you’re not dead, or headed that way.”

“Is it that bad?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m also surprised you’re not feeling dizzy and nauseated.”

“Come to think of it. I am. In fact, I don’t think I’m feeling all that good at all.”

“You look bad.” Dean couldn’t face Moses as he talked, if he did he knew he’d give it away that he was lying. “Now go, take that stuff out of here and lay down. Besides I have my letter to get ready.”

Moses, frightened not to listen to Dean, hurried from Dean’s room. Leaving Dean not only with an utter moment of enjoyment, he left Dean with information that had to be passed on to Beginnings.

Elbows on knees, Andrea let out a soft moaning, ‘hmm’ as she rested her chin in the palms of her hands, sitting on the steps to the clinic.

Ellen, did the same. “Glistening?”

“No.” Andrea spoke dazed. “Glimmering.”

“Too God-like of descriptions.”

“Yeah. How about . . . entertaining?” Andrea asked.

“Mind enticing.”

“Better.”

“You know, Andrea” Ellen stared out. “There’s a lot wrong with living in this world now, but there are perks. It’s sort of like being at a buffet, and we’re the select clientele.”

“Good metaphor.” Andrea reached over and patted Ellen on the knee. “Some items are delicacies.”

“Dan.”

“True. Some are liver.”

“Cole.”

Andrea snickered. “Witty come back.”

“What would Frank be?”

“Frank would be that pork dish that requires a special taste.”

Ellen’s head flung back with her laugh. “He’s doing better though.”

“Much.” Andrea said. “I saw him running this morning. His speed is picking up. Won’t be long.” Placing her hands on her legs, Andrea stood up with a groan. “Well, I must get back to work. However I did enjoy this little break. Coming?”

“Nah. I’m gonna stay out here and watch the men train a little more.” After giving a smile to Andrea, Ellen resumed her spectators position on the steps, watching the security men of Beginning, all sweaty, most shirtless, working out in different aspects of training, right in the middle of the street.

George shook his head as he stood in the church, reading Dean’s letter. “There is so much I wished I could assure you of, but I can’t. I can’t even count the number of times I thought about where we went wrong. Love can be such a gamble, like a game of black jack. Every turn of the card is a turn of fate. I just hope fate sees me though until the twins’ next birthday.” He walked down to the third pew where Henry stretched out. “Too simple. It’s all plain and clear.”

“How do you figure?” Joe asked. “Unless they actually bust the quote, they won’t know. He’s fine.”

Reverend Bob agreed. “If you don’t know you’re to look for one, it’s not obvious. But I’m not picking up any numbers to reference to.”

Henry released a loud yawn. “Easy. Book of Numbers, chapter twenty-one, verse five.”

“How did you get that?” Rev. Bob asked.

“Black Jack is also called, twenty-One, and the twins will be five. Not to mention I’m very smart.”

George opened the Bible and swiped Henry’s legs from the way so he could sit. “Move over Einstein. Here’s the passage. ‘And they began to murmur against God and Moses. ‘Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?’ they complained’ . . . there, the key word,’ complained’. So simple. Dean is telling us that the dissension is building there in Robbie’s camp. The men there are complaining. It must be tense. And as far as the question we asked. He answered that. He can’t assure us of that. Meaning he can’t find out shit . . . sorry Reverend.” George closed the bible. No one looked impressed. “Guys this is good news. Robbie is losing control. His men may desert him.”

Joe shook his head in disagreement. “It could go the other way. They could start to act before they think. Or, before we are ready. We have to just give Frank a bit more time. Speaking of which. Reverend, did he pester you about marrying him.” Joe shifted his eyes to Henry who giggled. “What?”

Like a school girl, Henry face was red. “The reverend and Frank. What a nice couple.”

“Asshole. Sorry reverend.” Joe looked back to Rev. Bob. “Did he?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I keep trying to tell him how morally wrong it would be to perform the nuptials prior to Dean’s return. He doesn’t see it. I can’t not marry them. However, they do argue, so I suggested counseling to make sure they really were

compatible. Just because you roll in the hay for twenty years doesn't mean you can roll through life together."

Joe held up a finger with a crooked smile. "That is very profound, now let's see . . ." Joe's words were interrupted when the church doors slammed. He turned around to see Ellen racing down the aisle. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She smiled. "I did it." She stood straight and proud. "I really did it. I'm so excited. Not to mention impressed with myself." She held up a piece of paper.

Not wanting to, Joe questioned. "What did you do?"

"Well, you wanted to get across to Dean that we're near ready. And . . . you were searching a passage. I found one, and I found a clever way to hide it in the letter. Can I?" Ellen held up her note and received the apprehensive nods. "Good. Now the quote I used to convey the message was, 'For the great day of wrath has come, who will be able to survive.'"

Joe winced. "That's a little strong. Let's hear how you hid its location in the letter."

Ellen cleared her throat. "You'll love this." She grinned. "Dear Dean. I had a revelation six days ago about us. I've thought of it at least seventeen times . . . hey." Ellen lowered her note as everyone stood up and slowly left. "Hey." She held it up. Shrugging after the door closed behind Henry, the last to leave, Ellen looked back down to her note. "I thought it was good."

The quiet of the late night in Egypt was not enough to ease Robbie. With a trembling hand he opened his desk drawer, fumbled through, and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. With one hand he unscrewed the cap, letting it fall off to the side and lifted the bottle to his lips while holding onto his neck, just under the

chin, with his other hand, Robbie took one long swing of the alcohol, placed down the bottle and wiped his mouth. The old whiskey burned all the way to his stomach, it made his glands salivate from the bitterness of it, it did not slow his pounding heart.

Robbie removed the other hand that held with pressure on to his neck. Blood covered his finger tips. The wound would not stop bleeding. He would have to awaken Dean. He picked up the bottle and took another drink. He had to ease himself, calm down.

It was just a drill. Just an attack exercise. They had been practicing them for weeks. Getting ready for any sneak attack that could occur, either on them or on Beginnings. The exercise concentrated on taking someone by surprise. Quietly trying to cut their throat when they did not expect it.

It was Boyle's turn for the drill. He was having the most trouble with it. Robbie wanted to work with him, he liked Boyle. So he kept him later, after everyone had finished. But, was what happened intentional? Did Boyle actually mean to cut him?

Robbie knew the answer to that one, he knew Boyle was not like the others. He was young, innocent, barely nineteen, and the type of man that Beginnings would love to have on their side. Unfortunately, Moses found him first. Boyle was one of the few men not to have been ousted by Beginnings. Skinny, tall, naive, and quiet. Boyle was not a killer. But for fear of his life, and fear of looking less than a man, he worked the drills Robbie taught him.

Perhaps Boyle got over zealous. Perhaps Robbie should have known that. But how did Boyle get the best of him? The instant Robbie felt that knife dig into his flesh just above the jugular something snapped. Boyle was dead. His limp body lay twisted at Robbie's feet on the deserted far corner of Egypt. No screams, no noise, just one snap. It was a reaction, an instinct that took over Robbie. Years of struggling to survive, that proved to be Boyle's brutal and unexpected end. An end that came at Robbie's hands,

while no one watched, no one was there to help, while all the others slept, in the dead calm silence of Egypt.

Robbie's neck throbbed and burned at the same time. He had felt worse pain. He checked out the color of the blood, it was dark red. That was a good sign. Bright red was arterial blood. This was venous blood, a few stitches would stop it immediately.

With one more swig of whiskey, Robbie compiled the courage to seek out Dean. He grabbed his lantern, already lit, carrying it as his torch to light the way. He opened Dean's door, the creaking sound awakened Dean.

Dean sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. "Who's there?"

"It's me." Robbie walked in and set down the lantern.

"Oh, I thought you were Moses again. Thank God you aren't. He was in here last night again. Just staring at me." Dean swung his legs over.

"He's debating on killing you. I've asked him not to."

"Thanks. Can't I at least lock my door?"

"If he wants to kill you, that door won't stop him. I may not be able to stop him." Robbie sat down in a chair, far from Dean.

"I feel much more secure." Dean picked up his glasses from the night stand, placed them on, and ran his hands through his hair. "Why are you here? Are you debating on killing me too?"

"I need your help, as a doctor. I've been cut. It's deep."

"Moses get to you this time?" Dean stumbled over to him. "Where's your cut?" Expecting to see another head wound, or limb injury.

Robbie, removed his hand, the blood still flowed.

"Jesus Robbie. Someone tried to slit your throat?" Dean quickly grabbed for the medical supply bag, and retrieved one of the sterilized cloths from it. He doused the cloth with a numbing solution and pressed it to Robbie's neck. "Hold it there." He grabbed a suture kit, opened it. "Want to tell me what happened?" Dean pulled out the already threaded needle, adjusted the light on the lantern and leaned Robbie's head to the side. "You're playing with fire. Someone's actually gonna do it next time."

“It was a drill. A simple drill. I was training a man, he was supposed to jump me from behind and kill me.”

“For a drill he almost succeeded.” Dean grabbed the cloth and dabbed away the blood. “Another eighth of an inch, you’d be dead. Did you explain to this man it was only a drill, or do you think he really tried to off you?”

Robbie didn’t answer.

“I’d be worried.”

“I’m not worried.” Robbie grew angry and tried to get up, Dean shoved him back down.

“I think . . . I think it’s Moses. I think that Moses is telling his men now to do this.”

Robbie wanted to rip Dean’s hands away. He tried to remain calm, but Dean’s words were getting to him. “Moses had nothing to do with this. This was an accident. I do not appreciate you trying to play mind games with me Doctor. Playing me against Moses. Not a smart move.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” Dean’s voice was calm as he finished his procedure. “I’m just about done. There. Just let me snip these.” He reached for the scissors. “Does the man who did this to you, realize now how to do a drill correctly? I fear if he would have done this to Moses, Moses would have killed him.” Dean snipped the sutures. “Done. I’ll bandage that for you.”

“No need to.” Robbie stood. “Thanks.”

“I’d give you something for the pain. But you’ve been drinking.” Dean placed his instruments back in the box. “Why were you drinking before you came to me?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Sorry just asking. What’s the matter Robbie, want to tell me?”

“Why are you acting so concerned all of the sudden?”

“You seem on edge. You’re never on edge. It’s almost like you just killed some . . .” Dean paused. A look of fear took over him, his voice went shallow. “Never mind.” Dean quickly moved his box to the side, and went back to his bed. He lay down. “If

that's what you did, I don't want to know. But if it is what you did. Watch your back, Robbie. I won't be the only one Moses will be debating on killing."

Robbie grabbed the lantern and walked slowly to the door of Dean's room. He opened it. "As far as you are concerned. As far as Moses and myself are concerned. Boyle ran. He ran when I yelled at him, deep into the woods. I couldn't find him. He wasn't fighter material anyhow."

Dean took off his glasses and laid them down, he could feel the tension begin to grow at the base of his neck. This wasn't a good situation. Things were getting bad as they were without this happening. "Suppose they want to look for him?"

"He was useless. He couldn't pull his weight." Robbie stopped talking, he walked from the room. "They'll never find him anyway." Shutting the door behind him, he moved down the empty corridor with his lantern. Robbie wanted that moment to be the last time he thought about what happened. He promised himself it would be. It had to be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

July 11

Perhaps it was a combination of everything that gave Ellen her reality awakening when she opened her eyes. Ellen sat up in bed. How long was she sleeping? It couldn't have been too long, it wasn't even eight o'clock yet. She had tossed and turned all night. Ellen sat dazed. She tried to determine whether her stomach was knotted from the dream, grogginess, or all the things that she paid no attention to the past almost three weeks.

The dream cinched it. The horrible dream she had just awoke from was a painful reminder that everything was not all right. Dean cried out to her in that dream. His hand bloody, reaching for her. He crawled to her telling her. 'I thought they wouldn't hurt me. Don't let them hurt me.'

Were all the little things that were happening suddenly, signs from fate telling her to not take for granted anything? The twins. Alex's crying through her sleep two nights ago. Waking up and telling Ellen, 'Daddy's dead. Daddy's dead.' Andrea's incestuous hounding. Johnny. Why was Joe having Johnny work on Dean's computer five or six hours every day? Breaking Dean's codes. Learning Dean's medications. Joe knew everything. His getting prepared 'just in case', tested Ellen's faith in what was going to happen to Dean. She did care. Contrary to what everyone thought, how could she not. It was Dean.

She had to know, she had to find out answers. If anything else, she had to speak to Joe. He would at least ease her mind. A father to her, and the only other person besides Frank that she trusted with her whole heart and soul.

Ellen immediately got dressed and headed off to see Joe. She figured he would still be in his office. He always was until eight. This day was almost an exception. As Ellen rounded the bend to the receiving center where Joe's office was, he was walking out.

"Joe." She ran up to him. "I really need to talk to you."

“If it’s about my son. I’m not in the mood to hear any bitching.” Joe looked at his key chain which he held in his hand. He rummaged through the keys, looking up occasionally at the sky as if trying to remember something. “If you don’t mind Ellen, I’m in a hurry.”

“This is important Joe. It really is.” She reached and grabbed his arm, stopping him. “Please.”

Her voice. Something about her voice made him stop. When Joe finally took a second to look at her, he knew. “What’s wrong?”

Ellen folded her arms close to her, rubbing them with her hands. She hesitated to speak, not out of fear, but out of the lack of the knowledge of how to phrase her concerns.

“Ellen . . . If it’s important, spew it. If not, save it. I’m a busy man.” Joe’s concern over Ellen was overshadowed by his little patience.

“I want to talk to you about Dean.”

“What about him?”

“Do we have to stand out here in the middle of everything and talk?” Ellen felt uncomfortable.

Joe looked around, all around, then faced her again. “There’s not a soul around, how much more privacy do you want?”

“Just forget it. I thought I could come to you.” She hung her head down and walked slowly past him.

“All right.” Joe reached out and stopped her. “We’ll go inside.” He opened his office door, and motioned his hand for her to enter first. “Have a seat. Father is now in.”

“Thank you Joe.” She pulled out the chair and sat.

Joe walked around her and leaned on the edge of the desk, hands folded on his one leg. “So talk to me. What about Dean?”

“I need you to tell me something. Anything. I’m afraid, Joe, I’m afraid that something’s going to happen to him. I have this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. That’s why I came to you. I figured you could either ease my mind, or tell me why all of the sudden you have Johnny practicing to be the next Dr. Hayes.”

Joe stared at Ellen, his one leg that rested on the desk, swung back and forth, a look of being in self debate was upon him. “I need to know something. Is this sudden concern out of guilt, or is it genuine? And be honest with me Ellen. Remember I know you. No bull shit.”

“I’m so concerned. If you know something, tell me. He is the twin’s father, he is my friend. If there’s a chance that I’ll never see him again I have to be honest with him. I have to tell him how truly sorry I am, and I have to let him know he’s not just a nothing to me. He doesn’t know this. I didn’t get to tell him this. Please Joe.”

Ellen was sincere, as sincere as Ellen could be. Joe had his plan, and he had it in his mind what he thought was going to happen. There were several ways it could go. He didn’t want to get into details with Ellen. “First let me start by telling you I’m going to be painfully blunt right now. Can you handle it?”

Ellen nodded. There wasn’t much at this point in her life she couldn’t handle.

“Good. Now as far as Robbie is concerned, and what his plans are with Dean, I can’t be sure. I will tell you, the longer Dean is there, the less Robbie will remember of his importance. Dean will soon become just one of the hostages. Our men will be ready in less than two weeks. Frank will be in Frank condition by then. We have a plan, no one except Frank, me, and Council, knows what that plan is. Not even the men we are training will know what they will be doing until the exact moment. That’s for security purposes. Now barring any attacks from Robbie, or any unforeseen circumstances, we hope to put that plan in motion soon. It’s a good plan. It’s the best one we could come up with to ensure the safety of the children.”

Ellen’s heart began to pound after hearing Joe’s last sentence. “Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

Joe took a deep breath. “Never.”

“But you didn’t mention, ensure Dean’s safety.”

“No, I did not. We were going to tell you when we were ready to make our move. There was no need to tell you any sooner. But . . .” Joe hesitated. “Ellen to be honest, there’s a chance, though it’s slim, there’s a chance Dean may not make it. He has to be our sacrifice if it comes down to it. It sounds cold, but you know as well as I do, if it was put to Dean, he’d agree, the children come first.”

“Yes he would.” Ellen lowered her head and raised her eyes to Joe. “Joe, you’re sending another note today. Can I . . . can I write.”

“You did last night.”

“No, Joe.” Ellen shook her head. “Let me write Dean a letter.”

“Ellen, we don’t have time to figure out how you can put the passage in the . . .”

“Screw the passage, Joe.” Ellen stated strong. “What are you telling him. Be patient. Don’t worry. We’re almost ready. He knows that. He’s not stupid. What Dean doesn’t know is how I feel. If he needs something to hold on to, let me give him a smile. I know of a way. Let me just reach out to him . . . please.”

Joe lifted his hands. “You’re right. You’re right. Go on. I’m sending Henry in three hours, so hurry.”

Ellen sprang from her seat and bolted to the door. “Thank you, Joe.” She stopped retracted her footsteps and ran back to Joe embracing him. “Thank you.”

Moses stomped around heavily, searching for Robbie. His red hair drenched with sweat from the hot July day. “Robbie!” He called out in his most boisterous voice. “Robbie!”

“You don’t need to yell.” Robbie sat behind his desk. “You know I’m right here.”

“You have some explaining to do.”

“To who? To you? I doubt that. I take it the search did not go well?”

“Not at all. What did you say to him? He was a kid. Boyle wasn’t even a man yet.”

“I told you I yelled at him when he cut me. I may have been a bit harsh, but no harsher than with any other man.” Robbie never once looked at Moses. He kept staring down to scraps of paper on his desk.

“I just don’t understand where he went. It was late at night. How far could he have gotten in the middle of the night?”

“Pretty far if you can’t find him.”

Moses, frustrated, slammed his hands into Robbie’s desk, sending it a foot into Robbie and almost knocking him over. “You have my word Robbie. My men will not participate in anymore of your exercises until I find Boyle.”

Robbie stood in defense. “Your men will do the exercises. Do you hear? We haven’t the time to be looking for a sniveling boy.”

“I liked that sniveling boy. I don’t want to give up on him.”

Robbie knew if he fought Moses any harder it would be even more obvious that he didn’t want Moses to know any more about Boyle. “Moses, I’ll be nice. I’ll give you till tomorrow morning to find him. If he’s not found by then, we resume our operation.”

Moses took the opportunity. He didn’t verbally agree, he just turned sharply and stormed from the office.

Robbie sat back down, he placed his face in his folded hands. He hoped he hadn’t made a mistake in giving Moses another day. Though he remained certain that Boyle would not be found, there was always the slimmest chance that he would.

Joe was right on time, he always was. He told Paul he would meet him at the social hall. Paul had something to discuss with him of extreme importance. A barrage of criticism would be thrown at Joe for trusting Paul and he knew it. But Joe still trusted him, despite the fact others stopped and Paul was Robbie's best and closest friend.

Joe entered the social hall, waved as usual to 'Sam' the mannequin, and spotted Paul sitting off in a chair practicing his guitar. "Hey, Paul." Joe walked up to him.

"Mr. Slagel, hi." Paul stood up.

"Practicing for tonight?"

"Nah. No one listens to me play anymore. Heck, no one talks to me anymore."

Hands in pockets, Joe looked at the floor then back to Paul. "Let me see what I can do about that."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." Paul set down his guitar. "I was thinking that maybe I should leave Beginnings. Maybe all of you would feel safer if I did. I didn't have anything to do with what Robbie did, I promise you that. But if people believe I did. How can they feel safe with me living here?"

"I can't feel safe without you living here. I need you Paul. You are an asset to the community. Besides, even if you really wanted to leave, I couldn't let you. I know Robbie has someone lurking out there, watching. If you walk out, they'll either grab you, or kill you. I won't let that happen."

"I appreciate those words." Paul finished off his drink.

"I'm glad I could help. But . . . I really have rounds to make and have to go. We'll talk." Joe winked. As he turned to walk away, he stopped. "You know Paul, speaking of appreciating, since you're not playing, I would sure appreciate use the extra help on the hill. What do ya' say?"

Without hesitation, Paul stood up. He should have gone to Joe sooner. Joe was fair, Joe listened. And when people saw him

with Joe, then maybe they would believe that he truly was on the side of Beginnings, not Robbie.

What was it about the note? Dean wondered as he stood alone in his room staring at the envelope. What made the note so special that Robbie looked guilty handing it to him and telling Dean, ‘this one’s the best’. Noticing that Robbie hadn’t ripped the envelope, Dean carefully pulled out the note. As he unfolded it, the biggest smile, and the first real smile, brightened his face. He had to sit. Blindly he pulled out the chair and sat. The note was great.

The big huge letters, some of them dyslexic looking, some of them normal, caught his attention. Simply put, sincere, and from his son. ‘We miss you Daddy. Love Billy.’ A lump formed in Dean’s throat from the overwhelming missing of his family. He just wanted to stare at Billy’s message forever, then he saw something else that got to him. The slant in the handwriting, the not-so-perfect penmanship, the different tone. Ellen added words that Dean did not expect to see. ‘I just wanted to add something to this simple note. Billy’s words say it all, a child’s honesty. No hidden meanings. I need you to know how truly sorry I am for hurting you. I just need you to know, especially now. You are and always will be more to me than just a father to the kids. I have never felt any other way. Please realize, that not just we, I need you back. Ellen.’

The note could have crumbled, like his heart, in his hand. There was no bible passage and that was all right with Dean. He got more than he would have, in an ‘update’ message from Beginnings. He received a momentary break from an intolerable situation. From his child’s note and Ellen’s words, Dean received . . . hope.

The evening drills of Beginnings seemed to be carrying on longer than they anticipated. Along with weary bodies, tempers were flaring also. It was hot and dry and not one breeze blew about. The men who worked out only wanted to go home to their cool houses. Relax, and worry about getting things right the next day.

It was getting to that point that calling it a night would be the best words to speak out loud. Joe knew this, Frank knew this. But they cut the drills short in the afternoon because of the heat, and they had just a bit more to work on. It was a difficult task getting everyone that was not working on drills to stay off the street. Frank and his men took over the center of town. For safety's sake, everyone else had to get lost.

Joe tossed his head from side to side as he watched his son try to remain calm while working on hand to hand combat. No one wanted to grasp it. At least not on this hot evening. Joe placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled one of those ear piercing shrieks at Frank. "Over here!" He motioned his hand.

"What's up Dad?" Frank jogged over. He ran his hand, up his sweaty forehead, dragging the moisture across the top of his growing hair.

"Call it a night?"

Frank placed his hand on his hip and rubbed his goatee. "I hate to do it, but I'm gonna have to. They can't concentrate. They're uptight, they're hot."

"Maybe tomorrow then."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Hey . . ." Joe smiled pleased when he noticed a very rough hand to hand style combat erupting between Paul and another

man, Cole. Cole was taller than Paul, but skinnier. Cole worked the fields and was one of town's mouthier individuals. "Looks like Paul and Cole are finally getting this thing right."

Frank looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, it's about time." He turned back to Joe. "Figures. When it's time to call it quits. I have to get home anyhow."

"Now look at that. Why in the world would Henry stop it?"

Frank looked back over. Henry had stepped between the two men, trying to extend his arms to separate them. Henry was failing at his attempt. His small built body was being jolted back and forth. Frank shook his head and huffed. "Fuck."

"For real?"

"Fuck . . ." Frank charged over in disgust. "Break it up." He hollered out. No one paid attention. Henry still flew about. "I said break it up!" Frank reached in between the two men, pulled out Henry, stepped into the flinging arms, and roughly extended out his huge reach. Cole and Paul were both knocked backwards, but saved as Frank's hands gripped both of their shirts. "What's the problem here!?" He yelled, his voice almost as frightening as he was. "We're on the same side." He glared at Paul, then at Cole.

Paul, with the back of his hand, wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. "I didn't start this, Frank. I swear. He struck me. He said I couldn't be trusted to do these drills. I'm sorry, I was just defending myself."

Cole stepped out of Frank's grip and straightened his shirt. "I'm not gonna lie to you Frank. I told him that. This is bull shit. I shouldn't have to work with him. It's because of him we're in this mess."

Frank finally released Paul and faced Cole. "Look, I know things are tense right now. But lashing out against someone that's done nothing, is wrong. You hear?"

"Yeah I hear. I hear you defending him. I see Henry defending him. How can you trust him Frank?"

"I trust him. Just like I trust every one of you men. We have to trust one another. We watch each other's back." Frank's

arguments were in vain. Cole was just not seeing his point. “Now you’re the only one who has said this to me so far. Don’t you think you might be a little off base?”

“I’m the only one who said something because I’m the only one who’s not afraid to say anything.”

“Well thank you for your honesty, but I’m going to suggest right now you go home, cool down and we’ll talk about this in the morning. All three of us.”

“I will not sit with you Frank, especially with him. I want proof that he’s not one of them. And if you believe he’s not, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought you were.”

Henry saw it. He didn’t believe Cole did. That blue vein just above Frank’s temple. That vein that started to grow and crinkle as his temper began to boil. The warning sign that Cole was not heeding. Henry, being the peacemaker that he was, could not stand by and watch it. He had to do something. “Cole look, it’s hot out here.” Henry very calmly spoke and reached his hand to move Cole away. “Take a walk . . .”

Cole, red faced didn’t want to calm down. Without thinking he abruptly smacked away Henry’s arm. “I don’t need to walk. Stay out of this again.”

“Hey!” Frank yelled as he stepped closer into Cole’s face. “Back off now pal. I’m warning you. Don’t you ever let me see you touch another man in this community again. If you want to be the big guy. If you want to strike out against someone. Strike me. Because I can give a shit. Now I will suggest to you one more time. Go home before I carry your ass home. Is that clear?”

“Clear.” Cole, embarrassed, and not about to let Frank make the fool of him, made his night’s big mistake. He clenched his fist tightly, revved it back, and with all that he had, he sent his fist flying into the side of Frank’s face.

Frank barely flinched. His head barely jolted from the blow. And with the one gasping ‘oh shit’ that emanated from Henry, Frank seized Cole by the front of his shirt and jerked him toward

him. Frank smiled at him then with one quick Frank-jab, it was goodnight Cole.

Cole's knees buckled, his eyes rolled back, and his body went limp. Still holding onto him, Frank saved him from falling completely to the ground. He lifted him up, and tossed Cole over his shoulder. Being the nice guy that he was, Frank figured he might as well make good on his word. He was gonna carry his ass home.

What to write. Dean sat at the table in his room. A blank piece of paper lay down in front of him. He sat tapping his pencil from eraser to tip, sitting there thinking. He had to get this letter ready it was to go to Beginnings the next day. But should it go to Beginnings? What Dean wanted to do was write Ellen a letter. A real letter, no Bible references. No secret codes. Just a plain honest letter like she had written him. Dean needed a friend. He needed someone to tell he was getting scared. His fears grew every day. Ellen would be perfect to tell, he always told her everything.

It had been three weeks since he was taken from Beginnings and so much had happened in the past. A strong situation slowly fell apart. When Dean was first kidnapped, he was strong, he was angry, and he was bitter. Robbie held off on him, Dean was protected. He had much more say so and he took care of the children. Being allowed to see them allowed three times a day. But like time passed for Robbie it passed for his men. And it seemed everyone, including Dean grew numb.

But Dean had stopped being angry. There was no more reason to be. It was a wasted emotion. He had to put his energy to better use. He was growing weak. His mind wasn't as sharp and he hadn't eaten in two days. The food rationing sent by Beginnings

was eaten by Robbie's men and Dean gave the rest to the children. The medical supplies barely held up the three days. He now was treating more throat wounds and head injuries than he did in the entire five years in Beginnings. And as far as the children went, Dean was lucky that Robbie let him in to check on them at all. He hadn't seen or felt the sun in six days. That was the last time they let him out of his room.

Moses came in nightly and watched him sleep, if Dean awoke, Moses would stare and tell him how easy it would have been to kill him while he slept. How Beginnings would soon get their warning and Dean should not be so comfortable.

Placing the pencil into the section of the Bible he chose his passage from, Dean stood from his chair and stretched. The yelling and screaming just outside his window was unbearable. Robbie's exercises were turning into daily tests of strength and anger. Men pitted against each other, seemingly forgetting often why they were there in the first place, and who their target enemy was. It was the one good sign for Beginnings. Robbie's men were losing focus. Dean prayed that Beginnings wasn't also.

He had to finish the letter. The fear of never seeing his children again, of never seeing Ellen again, grew stronger by the minute. And through that fear Dean figured out how to kill two birds with one stone. He knew exactly how to write Ellen and get across to Beginnings that they'd better send help.

As he scribbled his thoughts on the blank sheet of paper, he scribbled with the certainty that this would be the last letter that he would write to her. His instincts told him that it would be. His gut spoke to him loud and clear through the nightmare of facing his very own death. The words he wrote had to be his goodbye, and they had to be his thoughts and emotions. His thoughts and emotions, not some poets, not some messenger's, but his. They had to be . . . Just in case.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

July 14

Robbie stared down at the completed letter. His eyes barely lifting from the page as he looked to Dean. His face was stern and expressionless, and he resembled so much what his father may have looked like at his age. “You want to tell me the meaning behind this letter. It sounds like you’re saying good bye.”

“In a way I am. Just in case. Please let this one go out.” Dean sounded tired and desperate. “Those things in that letter needed to be said. If I never make it home, we just . . . we just need a little resolution.”

Robbie tapped the letter on his hand in momentary debate. “Maybe it’s a good thing.” He folded the note up. “If they think you’re scared perhaps they’ll see how serious we are. Heighten their consideration on whether they let us in there or not.”

“However you see it Robbie, it has to go to Ellen.”

“I’ll let it.” He opened up the door to Dean’s room. Moses stood outside waiting. “Here give this to our men.”

Moses grunted, he hated feeling like Robbie’s slave. He especially hated how the door slammed straight in his face.

Robbie stared at Dean who slumped in the chair at the table. His thin body, looking thinner. The clothes he wore, were much too big. Dean’s hands trembled. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I haven’t eaten in three days, Robbie. What little food is left from Beginnings after your men get done with it, I give to the kids. I’m scared. I miss my kids. You want a list?”

“I see nothing has stopped you from losing the attitude.”

“How would you know?” Dean turned and faced Robbie, his hand held up his head. “You come in here once every couple days now. If you meant to break me, you are doing a great job.”

“I’ll get you some food.” Robbie saw it, not only through Dean’s words in the letter, but on his face. Dean was weak. Keeping Dean alive was what he had to care about especially with his new plan. If Beginnings didn’t make their move in the next

week, Robbie was going to. His men were ready. They were waiting. The first warning signal would soon be sent. Without Dean knowing anything about it.

Andrea walked alone in her dream. But was it a dream? Though she slept, it was a flashback to a painful reality that brought about the happier changes in her life. She walked the empty streets of New York City. Katie, just a baby, was tight in her arms. Andrea's voice calling out, 'Hello? Is anyone there' echoed through the deadness. Rats that swarmed the streets creating a blanket, darted and antagonized her, but she trudged on. Calling, hoping. And then she heard him. He asked for help. So small, so innocent. Denny waved from across the street to her. He had followed her voice.

Andrea extend her free hand to the boy who refused to cross the street without his mother's permission. So much like it actually happened, so much like that day, until that blanket of rats erupted up as Denny crossed. They covered him, swallowed him. Denny was gone.

Andrea jumped out of that dream and saw where she was. She had dozed off while resting her head on a clinic counter. Rubbing her eyes she knew she had to pull herself from the bad feelings of that disturbing dream into the real life bad feeling of what surrounded her. She had so much to get ready. A clinic to prep as if she were preparing a MASH unit. Sutures, syringes, bandages. But that was O.K. for Andrea, because the preparations meant one thing. It would be over soon and she would have her children back.

“Can I, Joe?” Henry asked like such a kid as he paced around Joe’s office.

“No.” Joe just looked up to him from behind the desk. “Ellen will be here any second and I promised her she could read it.”

“All right.” Henry whined and plopped in the chair. He didn’t hear the sighs of relief that came from George and Rev. Bob, but he did hear everyone’s moans when he sprang back up. “Oh! I didn’t tell you, Joe. We have a problem.”

Joe’s attention was caught. “A problem. A problem slipped your mind? How bad?”

“Very.”

“Christ Henry . . . Sorry Reverend. Where the hell’s your mind. What’s the problem.”

“Well.” Henry exhaled. “I was going through the generator manuals because that door won’t stay closed and I saw something we’ve never done. We’re supposed to Joe, which we haven’t, pull a power transfer to make sure the other three generators are working.”

“Henry.” Joe stated calmly. “We divide the power usage amongst the generators. Of course they work.”

“But . . .” Henry held up a finger. “We don’t know if each can handle all. So, I transferred all power from the generators. Here’s the problem Joe. Generator one would not release two percent of the power. It held on to two percent. I could not shut this generator down completely. It wouldn’t let me.”

Joe’s hand slammed hard on the desk causing Henry to shriek. “That’s the problem! Christ Henry! Sorry Reverend. We have bigger problems.”

“You may say so now Joe, but what happens if we’re maxed and we need that two percent. I don’t even know where that two percent is going.”

Joe rubbed his eyes. “If this bothers you so much then find out where’s it’s going.”

“Oh, my God Joe.” Henry sat down. “Do you realize how many power lines run underneath the community? My God if I . . .”

“Henry!” Joe shut him up. “If it bothers you, find it. If not, drop it.”

The moment Henry let out his gasp of offense was the moment Joe’s office door opened and Frank and Ellen walked in.

“Hey, Joe.” Ellen, looking tired, stepped inside. “Tell me you have one.”

Without saying anything, Joe lifted the folded piece of paper and handed it to Ellen.

She caught her breath and opened the note. Her lips parted as she started to read, buy she didn’t. She looked at the faces in the room.

“What’s wrong?” Joe asked.

“He starts out, this is for my eyes only.” Ellen said with sadness.

“Then . . . then perhaps only your eyes should read it.” Joe said as he sat back.

“Or at least first.” Ellen walked across the room to find a private moment. Her heavy breathing was heard in the silence as she read the note. And then, after gaining her composure, she turned around, reading it out loud as she did. ‘El, this is for your eyes only, Ok? This is from me to you. There are just a few things I need to say. I need to talk about the twins. If something should happen to me, please make sure they know who I am. Let them know I love them and will always be watching. Teach them love and compassion, I know you still have these things in you. And El, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all the times we fought. For all the bad things that were said. I’m sorry for not being the one you could

turn to when I should have been. But I'm not sorry for our time together. I do and always will, love you very much. Tell the kids I love and miss them. Goodbye . . .” Ellen lowered the note. “Dean.”

No words, not even a sound was spoken in that room. No one wanted to say what they heard or felt from Dean’s message.

Ellen refolded the note. “That’s it.”

Joe ran his finger over his top lip in thought. “Nothing’s in there. No bible reference, no passage . . .”

“No there is.” Ellen said. “At the bottom. It’s one of Dean’s favorites. Which . . .” She tilted her head to the side. “Makes no sense. It says, Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. But he wrote Joshua and he knows this is from Corinthians.”

Joe jumped quickly and reached for the note. His eyes skimmed it and he handed it to Rev. Bob. “Find the Joshua passage.”

The Reverend lifted his glasses, read the note and opened the bible. “Joshua, 18:3. ‘Then Joshua asked them, ‘how long are you going to wait before you take possession of the remaining land God has given to you?’”

Joe hung his head down. “It all makes sense. He’s asking us to hurry. And things must be getting bad, judging by the sound of his letter, that man is scared. I’m scared now too.” He looked up the those in the room who looked upon him curiously. “I’m scared because he may have slipped up big time with that one. Putting the reference on the bottom was not good. Let’s just hope because we got the letter, it slipped by Robbie. If it didn’t . . . God help Dean.”

Robbie sat outside on the street. It was cooler outside since the sun had set. A lantern lit the space next to him where Moses

sat reading his bible. It was calm in Egypt. The fights of the night slowed down. Even Robbie and Moses were being civil.

“Moses. I want to ask you something.”

Moses flipped a page. “What? I’m reading.”

“I’m thinking of stopping those letters. Drop off a little communication with Beginnings now. What do you think? I hate to ask your opinion, but I’m torn. On one hand they know everyone is fine. But on the other hand, like today for example, that letter may have scared them into making a decision.”

“I doubt that. That letter made me laugh.”

“The letter made you laugh? How is that? It was very serious.” Robbie bent his knees up and rested his arms across them. “That letter showed how scared Dean was.”

Moses licked his forefinger and turned another page of his thick, huge, hard backed, red Bible. “It showed how stupid he is too. Of course, I may be the only who knew it.”

“What are you talking about Moses? Dean is not stupid. Where in the world did you get that from?”

“The man may know medicine. Though he can’t stitch a wound without killing you. But he doesn’t know his Bible. There he was getting in my shit about bad bible quotes and he did the same thing.” Moses spoke very nonchalantly as he turned another page.

“What bad Bible quote?”

“The one at the end of the letter. I recognized that one. In fact I’m getting pretty good with the Bible now. It’s my companion.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get on with it.” Robbie stood up, Moses peaked his curiosity. Something told Robbie the letter was not quite right.

“Well here.” Moses stood up and showed Robbie the open book. “Here’s the passage he used. But it’s under Corinthians. Anyone would know that’s New Testament stuff. But underneath, it he had it listed as Joshua, I think eighteen. Yeah, eighteen, verse three. And you would think he’d be better at it. I did give him a Bible.”

“You gave him a Bible?” Now things were coming clearer to him. “Find that section for me.” Robbie waited impatiently for Moses to find it. He did. He handed the Bible to Robbie and held up the lantern for him to read. Robbie read the passage and his eyes widened when he finished. It hit him. Dean had sent a clear cut message to Beginnings, and it probably wasn’t the first time. “Son of a bitch!” Robbie slammed the Bible and tucked it under his arm. His blood began to boil, his head throbbed. “No one makes a fool out of me.” He stormed off toward the direction of the library. The place where they kept Dean.

Moses ran behind him, still not sure of what was going on. He carried the lantern for light.

Robbie didn’t make a gentle entrance into Dean’s room. He kicked the door opened, it flung and slammed the wall. “Dean!”

Dean jumped from his chair, knocking it backwards, his heart began to race. He knew something was wrong.

Robbie held up the red Bible. “Recognize this. You do know what this is don’t you?”

The words ‘Holy Bible’ faced Dean. “Yes.” He swallowed.

“It’s the last one you’ll see.” Robbie with every bit of strength he had, he struck down at Dean with the Bible. It slammed him in the side of the head, and Dean went flying back. “Get up!”

Dean laid face first on the floor. His head foggy, he couldn’t even see. He began to lift himself and before he could bring his hands to raise his body, Robbie’s foot landed in his gut and rolled him on his back.

“You made a fool out of me! You will not have that chance ever again.” Robbie pointed down to him angrily. “I put my trust in you. I befriended you!”

Dean could not let Robbie see how much he hurt. He squirmed his way reaching for the bed, and weakly stood. “How could you think I’d be your friend? After what you did to Beginnings? After what you did to your brother? Or how about

Ellen? I hope to God you burn in hell. And I hope my people send you there.”

Those were the last words Dean would speak that night. Robbie lunged at him, picking up his frail body, and hurling it across the room so hard, the plaster in the wall cracked loudly as Dean smashed into it. Robbie would not stop. He could not stop. His rage took over. He was going to show Dean through all of his emotions how angry he was. Physically Dean would feel it. Though he knew it was not in the best interest to kill Dean, he would do everything short of it to make him pay.

Robbie jumped over the bed and dove on Dean, picking him up, and banging his head to the wall. Somewhere between the first and second punch thrown by Robbie, Dean lost consciousness. It was a good thing that he did. Dean did not feel the rest of the beating that his fragile body took at the hands of an outraged Robbie Slagel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

July 17

Frank made his way down the steps into the living room. The light from the dining room was the only one on. The couch had not been slept on, Johnny was working late rounds. He turned the corner and saw Ellen. She looked frazzled. She sat at the table, head propped up by her hand, holding her hair straight up from her eyes. She held a pencil in her hand and stared down at the paper before her.

“El? You think you may want to consider coming to bed soon?”

Ellen turned her head to look at him, her face was tired. “I’m sorry. What time is it?”

“Late.”

“Late? That tells me a lot.” She tossed down the pencil and rubbed her eyes.

“It’s three-thirty. I go up stairs you said you’d be right up. I fall asleep and wake up four hours later and here you are . . . still. What’s going on? Henry gave you the letter to write. Why aren’t you using it?”

“I want it to be from me. I have a bad feeling, Frank. Something is wrong.”

He reached across and grabbed her hand. “It’ll be over soon. I promise.”

“I’m just scared. And to top it off I hate feeling scared. It makes me vulnerable. That drives me nuts. I’m afraid for Dean, I’m afraid for you, for our home, our land, our children. Everything. What makes it so bad is, I don’t know anything. You won’t tell me anything. All you guys say is, ‘get the clinic ready. When the time comes, we will tell you what you will do’, that doesn’t help any.”

“Do you trust me?” Frank’s hand slid up and down her arm rubbing it.

“Yes, more than anyone.”

“Good. Then listen to what I’m telling you, I give you my word that I will do my best. I can assure you this plan is a good one. If I could tell you to ease your mind I would. But I can’t. A part of me doesn’t think anything will ease your mind. Not even that letter you’re trying to write. Let it go, Ellen.”

“I can’t, Frank.” She rested her head on his hand. “I feel that I have to write to him. Tell him something, anything to make him feel better.”

“There is nothing that will do that. He’s in a bad situation that seems to be getting worse. What will help is the bible passage my Dad and Henry decided on. That will help him. Get that to him and that’s all you can do. That and wait. Now come to bed with me, finish that letter in the morning.”

“I guess I can do that.” Ellen stood up. “I’m sorry I was down here so long.”

“That’s fine, El, but why you were down here dealing with all of this yourself is what I don’t understand. I’m here to help you. Let me in on what’s bugging you. Like tonight. Did I help?”

“No, not really.” She scuffed past him, pulling him along by his hand.

“Thanks. What can I do to make you feel better?”

Ellen stopped and turned around, she took hold of both his hands into hers. “End this thing. End it without you getting hurt or killed. Bring Dean back. I know you can do this. Get us back the old Beginnings. Please.”

Frank wrapped his arms around her. He wished he could promise to do all those things she asked. But he couldn’t. The best he could do was try. Give it all his heart and try hard.

The floor. He was still on the floor when he finally opened his eyes. Dean was surprised that after the beating he had taken

that he was still alive. He stood up slowly. There wasn't a spot on his body that didn't ache. His face hurt, his eyes hurt, his mouth hurt. Dean reached his fingers to his lips, they felt puffy. He rolled his tongue around the inside of his mouth to feel for his teeth. Relieved that they were all still there, he made his way to the bed and sat down. His room was torn apart. The Bible binding lay on the floor and the pages of it scattered about. Robbie must have gotten the letters that Ellen had written. Dean kept them in the Bible.

His glasses. Dean needed his glasses. He could barely see as it was but with his right eye swollen completely shut, it made things worse. He was only too glad that they weren't on his face when Robbie lost it on him.

Dean knew it was coming. It was a chance he had to take. He knew the moment Robbie caught wind that any deceit was going on, Dean would feel the wrath. And he did. At least his letter made it to Beginnings, or so he hoped.

Reaching over to the night stand for his glasses, he noticed a cup of water, a cloth which wrapped a section of bread and an apple. Like his mouth could handle that apple. They were feeding him, they didn't want him to die. Dean felt close to death. His body hurt so much he was surprised he wasn't dead.

His stomach hungered; it was so empty that it hurt. Of course he didn't know if that was from having it kicked in or not. Shaking, his hands reached over for the water and bread. Gulping the water first so quickly, he could feel it knotting in his stomach. Then the bread. The Beginnings' bread. He broke off small pieces, shoving them into his mouth, it was stale, but tasted good.

The sun was shining, he had made it through the night. That was always a good sign. But Dean wondered why the streets were so quiet. Were there no drills, or work outs? He was growing accustomed to the constant bickering and scrapping just outside his window.

Dean finished his bread and water. He debated on trying that apple. His teeth were so sore they couldn't even bite it. He

couldn't even use his fingers to break off a section, even they hurt too bad. But things could have been worse. And he was right. The door to his room opened and Robbie walked in, shutting the door and immediately pulling a chair to Dean's bedside.

"I see you're finally awake."

"How . . ." It was hard for Dean to speak. He could barely move his lips. "How long was I out?"

"Days. You opened your eyes a few times. But that's it."

Dean avoided looking at Robbie. Besides not wanting to see his face, he didn't want Robbie to know how much the beating took from him. Dean wanted to appear strong and not fazed by it all. "What do you want now ,Robbie?"

"Answers. I've been reading the letters that Ellen sent. I'm having a hard time finding the messages. You're gonna help me."

"There are no messages in there. There just letters." Dean had the salty taste of blood in his mouth, it must have been dripping back from his nose. He leaned over and spit on the floor. "If there was any. Why would I tell you?"

"Let's just say it would be in your best interest." Robbie arrogantly sat back. "You are lucky I'm not still angry."

"Really? Well, I know nothing. You can do what you want to me. I don't give a shit. My body is numb now anyhow. You think another beating is gonna faze me? No. It will kill me, then that's your loss, my salvation."

"I'm not going to beat you again, Dean. You're right. It's not in my best interest. But I have the kids." Robbie raised his eyebrow. "Think about that."

"You won't hurt the kids. As mean as you are, you don't have that in you."

"Wanna bet? I don't want to hurt them, but if I have to I will." Robbie stood up and moved the chair out of the way. "Today the first of many warnings go off against Beginnings. There's nothing you can do to stop it. But you may stop the second warning. I'll give you until tomorrow afternoon to tell me what Beginnings is planning."

“I don’t know what they are planning. I swear on my kids I don’t.” Dean held on to his side, it began to hurt whenever he took a breath.

“Think about my offer, Dean.” Robbie turned to leave the room. “Oh . . . Just because I’m that type of guy, I left the medications unharmed. Perhaps you have something in that box that can help you.”

Dean rose from the bed the moment Robbie left. He did have something in the box, he had pain medication. That would only help the physical side though. He had nothing in that box that could help his heart. The heart that began to worry about what Robbie was going to do, and whether or not his people would be ready for it.

Joe was never one to jump the gun. Everything was always planned down to the very last and minor details. Always priding himself on having a keen foresight, Joe felt odd for feeling strange so fast. He stood before the back gate of the community staring down at his wrist watch. It was twenty-five minutes after one. He had been standing there ever since Henry and Paul were ten minutes late from returning from the supply drop off. Doing a radio check to the tower every few minutes asking, ‘see anything?’ and always getting the same response back, ‘nothing yet’, added to his worries. Never were Henry and Paul more than a few minutes late, let alone the forty-five they were.

Usually he would wait, but it was time to do something. Knowing the tension and problems that Robbie was having at his camp, and remembering the desperation in Dean’s letter, Joe left the gate. He had to find Frank. He had no other choice.

“Frank we have a problem,” Joe said as he walked into Frank’s office where he and Ellen were having lunch.

Frank couldn’t believe his ears. His father sounded desperate. “What’s wrong?”

“Henry and Paul are really late. I want two of your best men armed and sent out to look for them. With all that’s going on, we can’t chance it.”

Frank immediately stood up. “Go find Greg, he’s behind the fields, I’ll get the weapons together.” Frank reached for his keys from his belt. “I’ll meet you guys at the back gate in let’s say ten minutes?”

“Whoa!” Joe halted him. “You said Greg, who’s the other man?”

“You wanted my best two men. Greg is one, I’m the other.”

Ellen was still standing there hearing it all. “Frank, you aren’t going. Joe didn’t mention you.”

“She’s right, Frank. Not you. We can’t take a chance on Robbie’s guys seeing you alive.”

“I’m going.” Frank opened up the office door. “I’m heading to ammunition. I’ll meet you at the back gate.”

Joe stopped him. “Frank, listen to me, I can’t allow this.”

“Yes you can.” Frank scolded back. “Even if it means taking a chance on them seeing me alive, I’d rather do that. I’d rather know that I’d been seen, than know that I could have done something to help Henry and Paul, but chose to be hidden. I’m the one who goes. I have to do this.” He looked over at Ellen. “I have to do this.”

Joe didn’t want to agree but knew he had to. “Fine, I’ll get Greg.”

Frank saw the look on Ellen’s face, her eyes were closed, her head turned from him. He moved to her and lifted her chin. “El . . . I have to, you know this don’t you?”

Ellen opened her eyes. “I understand.”

“I need your support on this. I have to have it.” He kissed her lips. “Please.”

“You have it.”

“Thank you.” He slid his hand from her face and ran from the office. He had so much to get and so little time to get it.

Joe examined Frank and Greg as they stood outside the jeep at the back gate. “You have your rifles, hand guns, six grenades each, and enough ammo?”

Frank checked both he and Greg out. “Got it.”

“Your radio is working?”

Frank turned it on. “Fresh batteries.”

“Good luck. You know what I want, look for them two. Don’t go near Robbie’s camp. If you don’t see them we’ll assume they’ve been taken. Any sign of trouble, get your ass out of there. Got it?”

“We have it.” Frank motioned to Greg to get into the jeep, he had one more thing to do. Frank walked to Ellen who stood off to the side, she looked sad. Her back faced him. “El, I’m going, I won’t be long.”

Ellen’s head nodded.

“El . . . your support?” He turned her to face him. “I will be back. That I promise you.”

Ellen wrapped her arms tightly around him. “Be careful.”

“Always.” He stepped back from the embrace. “I have to go. I’ll be back before dinner.”

“Frank.” She grabbed for his hand. “I love you.”

“I needed that.” He leaned in and kissed her quickly and mouthed the words, ‘I love you.’ Frank had to go, the jeep was running, the perimeter was shut down, and the gate was open. He charged back, shook his father’s hand and jumped in the jeep.

With the sound of gears shifting and wheels screeching, Frank and Greg quickly left the community.

Joe grabbed for his radio, as he watched Frank drive off, he spoke into it. “Perimeter sixteen, back on. Keep this channel clear.” He left the radio on. He didn’t know how long it would be

before he heard from Frank. He hoped that only a few minutes would go by and he would see both jeeps returning. But a part of him knew that wasn't going to happen.

The jeep moved as fast as it could down the empty interstate. Frank kept his eyes straight ahead as he drove, Greg sat next to him. "Keep your eyes peered for anything around."

"Got it." He pulled out the binoculars, looking side to side. "How much further?"

"The exit is about ten more miles up . . . What the . . ." Frank shifted gears and pressed his foot harder to the pedal. "Come on move." He beckoned the jeep.

"What's wrong?"

"Up ahead. Smoke. See if you can see what it is, and if we should stop here."

Greg lifted the binoculars to his face. "Shit."

"What?" Frank held out his hand to him, wiggling his fingers for the binoculars. When he felt them hit his hand he brought them up to his eyes. "Fuck!" He tossed them back to Greg. "No. No. No." He beat his hand on the steering wheel, leaning forward as if that would make him get there sooner. He reached down his hand for the radio, and handed it to Greg. "Tell them we have a problem. Tell them we can't chance being heard on the radio. We'll get back to them."

Greg, hesitant, pressed in the button. "This is us. Joe, are you there?"

"I'm here." Joe's voice crackled through the static. "What's up?"

"We're breaking contact. Can't chance being picked up. We have a problem, we'll get back to you. Stay close."

As Joe began to inquire what they found, he got a response he didn't want to receive. Before the radio went dead he heard the gut

wrenching sound of Frank crying out with all of his emotions and the sound of screeching breaks.

“No!” All of Frank’s weight pressed to the break as the jeep skidded sideways before making its complete stop. “No!” He grabbed his rifle and jumped from the jeep. “Cover me!”

Greg got out of the jeep and stood behind the door. He aimed his rifle and kept his look out.

The flames were intense; they engulfed the jeep that once belonged to Beginnings as it sat at the exit of the interstate. It was the jeep Henry and Paul had taken to meet Robbie’s men. It sat at the place they were to meet. The boxes of supplies crushed and their contents scattered about the road way.

The thick black smoke and heat did not hold back Frank from making an attempt to reach the vehicle. With one arm raised protecting his eyes, and the other covering his mouth, Frank choked and coughed as he neared the jeep. His vision was somewhat clouded by the smoke, and a foul stench plowed forth bursting at him with the power of the flames.

He knew that smell, and though the smoke was like a wall of darkness, it did not stop him from seeing the sight that lay before him. The vision that formed a lump so big in his throat he could barely breathe. The horrific site of one body in the jeep, three burning arrows protruding from the chest, the head flung back as if he were screaming for help. The one body burning, burning so bad Frank could not see who it was.

He tried with all he had to reach the man. Was it Henry? Was it Paul? He didn’t know, but it didn’t matter, he still tried, though the attempt was in vain, to reach the man. He tried that was, until he felt a hand pull him back and a voice, Greg’s voice, call to him.

“Frank you’re too close.” Gregg pulled him back.

“I have to try.” Frank reached forth.

“It’s too late. It’s too late.” Greg pulled harder, dragging Frank a little further out.

It killed Frank at that moment. He knew there was nothing he could do. The fire was too intense and it was obvious that the man, Henry or Paul, was already dead. The arrows in him told Frank he was hit before they burned him. But where was the other one? Clearing his way out of the smoke Frank ran to the jeep. Trying to catch his breath, trying to cough out the black gunk that gathered in his lungs, Frank leaned against the jeep.

“Sorry, Frank.” Greg pressed his hand on Frank’s arched back. “You could have been killed. Whoever that was is already dead.”

Frank lifted his head and turned around. It was then that he took in the whole scene of what had happened. Blood spewed forth about the ground, one body, burning in a jeep, the scene of an obvious ambush. Beginnings walked right into it. Beginnings sent two men straight into it.

Frank knew he and Greg had to make a run for it, they had to leave before they were spotted, or ambushed themselves. They couldn’t leave without looking into the wooded area quickly just to see if they spotted another body, they didn’t. Viewing the tragedy just one more time, they jumped in the jeep and headed back. They had questions to answer and no answers to give. There was one body. One man. Who was it?

Frank received his answer to that question as he drove frantically back home. He had to hit the brakes again, but this time he did it with relief.

When jeep stopped, Frank gripped the wheel, first dropping his head then lifting it with a wide smile. Henry stood in the road waving his hands.

CHAPTER FORTY

July 18

Joe's hand fell hard to his desk at the same time he called out. "Henry. Do you know how close I am to just . . . just putting a muzzle on you."

"I'm hyper, Joe." Henry buzzed, not paced about. "I haven't been to sleep. I had a traumatic experience yesterday."

"Yes, we know. So you've been up for twenty-four hours, how much coffee have you had."

"Not much Joe, it gives me gas."

"Swell."

"But I had lots of tea. Anyhow, I had all night to do this . . ."

"Henry." Joe stood up. "Is this really important."

"But you said to find it."

"Find what?"

"Where the power is going."

"This . . ." Joe pointed at him. "Is an obsession."

"Oh, no, Joe. How can you say that?"

"Because you bring it up all the time. You're looking here. You're looking there."

"I think I narrowed it down."

"Good for you." Joe walked to the door.

"I've pin pointed it to transformer eight. Which covers a three mile area starting at . . ."

"Three mile area?" Joe opened the door. "Pin pointed? When you find it. Tell me."

Henry reached into his back pocket and pulled out a map. He unrolled it and looked down at it. "Now, I'm, really starting to believe that it could be a source that is . . ." He looked up when the door closed. "Hidden." Joe was gone. "Shit." Rolling the map back up, Henry raced from the office. He wanted to make sure Joe heard it all.

Robbie walked in circles around Dean's chair. An interrogating look on his face. "Victory Dean. One small blow against Beginnings. What do you make of that?"

Dean stared forward not answering.

"We will take them. We'll be ready for them. Tell me what they are planning."

"Nothing. They aren't planning anything."

"Bull shit." Robbie kicked the legs of Dean's chair sending Dean to the floor. "Tell me."

Dean picked himself up, his face emotionless. He sat the chair up. "If I sit again will it be a vain attempt?"

Robbie's hand reared back to strike him.

"Go ahead. Do it. I don't care." Dean began to stare him down. When he realized he won that small battle, he sat down again. "How much longer, Robbie? I've been sitting here twenty-four hours. I know nothing. I've been thrown to the floor nineteen times. How much longer?"

"When I get my answers."

"You're not getting them from me." Dean folded his arms waiting to be sent to the floor again, it didn't happen. "I can't tell you what I don't know."

"Then Beginnings will." Robbie marched to his desk. He turned on the radio, the radio that hadn't been on in a week. "You will tell them what has happened to you. Tell them that they wouldn't recognize you if they saw you."

"You tell them if you want them to know." Dean's tone was firm.

Robbie placed the radio close to his mouth. "Come in Beginnings. In five minutes I have someone who wants to speak to you." Robbie put the radio down. "You have five minutes Dean to think about it. If you don't tell them, I'll let them hear. I swear to you."

Ellen was working in containment when she heard Robbie's message loud and clear. The main radio was still placed in containment to be centralized. She monitored it while Greg summoned Joe and the others. It wasn't long before Frank showed up. He picked up Robbie's message on his own radio. Together with Joe, Henry and George, they waited for Robbie to return.

When Robbie did there wasn't any introduction, one word opened the lines of communication, it was one word he spoke to Dean. "Talk."

"No." Dean argued.

Joe could hear a struggle, then a thump. He looked about at the faces who stood quietly around him listening, hearing what he did. "Robbie, come in."

Robbie lifted Dean back up to the chair. "I'll start it for you. There's some things I want to say first. Then you will tell them the hell you are going through."

"Never."

Robbie grew angrier, he began to see red, Dean was being too obstinate, too sure of himself. Not frightened enough. "Listen up Beginnings. Did you like my little warning to you? You Dad, sent your men right into a trap. Trusting the wrong people again I suppose. I heard we got two of your men. That's what my men reported. We already out number you. I bet now you're wishing you hadn't ousted so many good men huh?"

"Make you're point Robbie. What is it that you want?"

"In. And your head."

"You're gonna have to take my head. And I'll never let you in."

"We'll see. Notice how the letter writing stopped. Want to know why? Tell them Dean."

Dean's voice was heard in the distance. "Fuck you."

"Tell them!" Robbie shouted then struck forth at Dean, letting the sound of a hard slap be heard through the airwaves.

Ellen heard, her body jumped at the sound. “Oh, my God. Joe, do something.”

Joe was helpless, there was nothing he could do at that moment but listen. “Dean, tell us what he wants you to tell.”

Robbie grabbed Dean by the hair and lifted him to the seat. “He still won’t talk. But he talked enough in his letters didn’t he? I have to give it to you people that was a clever one. Bible references. Thought I wouldn’t catch on. I did. Your boy screwed up. But he paid. Didn’t you Dean. He paid with his body. Right Dean? . . . Still not talking, try this.” Robbie pulled out his gun and placed it to Dean’s temple. “Tell him to talk. Tell him now. I have a gun to his fuckin’ head . . . listen.” The clicking of the hammer was heard. “Tell him to talk.”

Ellen shrieked out and flung herself toward the radio. “Do something, Joe.” Frank grabbed her and pulled her back, holding her tightly, he could feel her shake.

Joe’s heart raced, the tension was insurmountable. “Dean for God’s sake do what he wants. It’s not worth your life. It’s not.” Joe knew the desperation in Robbie’s voice. Dean was taunting him, pushing him to the edge. Dean didn’t realize that his value would be lost in Robbie’s rage. At the end of Robbie’s gun. “Dean.”

Dean reached for the radio, the cold gun pressed to his skin wasn’t the reason he was giving in. It was Ellen’s scream. But he wasn’t about to give Robbie what he wanted. He wasn’t about to tell Beginnings how badly he had been beaten. He pressed in the button, took a deep breath and spoke softly. “Joe . . . Joe tell Ellen . . . tell her . . . tell her I don’t think I’m making it back. Tell the kids I love them with my heart and soul.” He handed the radio back to Robbie.

Robbie smiled and finished the contact with Beginnings. “We’ll be in touch. I suggest you prepare for our arrival.” He turned off the radio and placed it on his desk. Dean’s message was better than he anticipated. It said more than even the most descriptive details would have given. It showed Dean’s fear,

whether Dean realized it or not. Robbie signaled his men to take Dean away. He was done with him and he'd get him again when he needed him.

"Nothing. They're gone." Joe threw down the radio's microphone. "Jesus, I thought Dean was a dead man."

Ellen broke away from Frank's hold, her arms swinging. "What are you going to do? All of you?" Her voice was desperate and cracking as she talked. "They're killing him. They beat him. Help him."

Joe wasn't in the mood for it. "Frank handle her."

"Come on El, let's go for a walk." He reached out his hand for her. She moved from it.

"No Frank. You promised me you would try to get him home safely."

"I will try El."

"They're gonna kill him first. You heard it. Didn't you? Or don't any of you care? Go get him and those children. Now. What's with all these drills if you aren't going to attack them?"

Frank had to get her out of the room. "El, calm yourself. Walk out of here with me now!"

"No. Just let me know when you're doing it."

"Soon." That's all Frank could say. That's all he wanted to say.

"Then Dean will be dead. And it's on your heads." She pointed around the room at all of them and stormed out.

Frank followed her. He was faster than her and was able to stop her before she walked too far away. "El, come on let's talk."

"Just leave me alone."

Frank pulled on her arm. "You need to talk."

Ellen ripped from his hold. "And you need to leave me alone! You of all people, you could care less!"

"What do you mean I can care less?"

"It's perfect for you, isn't it? Dean gone."

Frank felt the heat hit his face. He reached out and grabbed hold of Ellen's arm again. "Let's go. Not here."

"No." Ellen pulled, Frank wasn't letting go. She kicked her leg hard into his shin.

"That's it." Tugging her to him, Frank wrapped one arm around her, lifted her up and carried her nearly under his arm to the social hall. Ellen struggled against him the entire way. He burst open the door, locked it and set her down.

With a growl Ellen flung herself at him, slammed her hands hard into his chest with the entire weight of her body.

"Go ahead." Frank taunted with anger. "That's what's gonna make you feel better. Huh? You wanna take it out. Well take it out in here. But don't you dare take it out on those who only want to help you."

"You don't understand what I'm feeling!" Ellen screamed.

"Try me."

"Guilt!" She stepped back and her hand flung into a chair sending it flying over. "Anger!" she threw another. "I'm so . . ." She lifted the table tossing it over on its side. "So mad that the last thing he had to hear from me is how bad I hurt him." Screaming in her outrage again, Ellen spun and grabbed onto another table. She lifted it, then moved to the next.

Though it wasn't how he preferred it, Frank remained calm watching Ellen take it out on all the furniture in the social hall. The crashing, the banging were only physical noises of the emotional turmoil she felt inside.

From her throat she cried out as she threw the last table. Emotionally exhausted she dropped to the floor, brought her knees up to her chest, clung to them and began to rock.

"El." Frank moved to the floor with her.

"It wasn't supposed to happen." Ellen mumbled as she rocked. "It wasn't supposed to happen."

"What wasn't?"

"I wasn't supposed to feel again. I lost it. I lost it five years ago and I didn't want it back."

“I got news for you El. You never lost it.” Frank placed his arm around her. “You kept it deep, deep inside of you. You didn’t want to feel. You didn’t want to hurt. Well, tough. Tough. We all feel. We all hurt. Welcome to world of being human.” He heard her cry. A soft single sob as Ellen’s head dropped again. And scooting even closer to her. Frank wrapped both arms around her and held her. There was too way to make her feel better out beyond the walls, beyond the sanctity of Beginnings, laid a piece of their lives, a piece of everyone’s lives and hearts. And until those pieces arrived home safely, no one in Beginnings would ever be better.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

July 19

One of his men said they spotted it, not far from the highway, off deep in the wooded area. Moses was delighted to hear that, he wanted to hear that. The burnt man in the jeep was proof of one death, yet they hadn't found the other Beginnings' man. They had been searching for two days and nothing had turned up.

Following the word of the man who said he saw what appeared to be a body, Moses set out to the spot on horseback. It wasn't far from Egypt, but it was far from Beginnings. And if it was Beginnings' man, then Moses wanted to keep on riding straight to the back gate. He wanted to return their lost soul, with a huge smile on his face.

Robbie insisted to him that it didn't need to be done. That Beginnings knew of their loss and it was foolish and dangerous to be wandering off alone. Moses didn't care, at six foot eight he was bigger than any man he had encountered. He could handle anyone.

He dismounted his horse in the dense wooded area. Look for the tree with the white flag. That is where his men marked where they believed they saw a body. The white cloth called to him, it drew excitement. As he neared it he saw the feet, they stuck out from beneath a brush. It struck Moses as odd, the body appeared to be hidden. Perhaps the Beginnings man ran and hid, only to die before being found. It was definitely a body laying there. Moses covered his mouth, the foul smell of rotting flesh sickened him. It was not a smell he had not been familiar with before. But what got Moses was why the body was so badly decomposed. Two days would not do it. Moses turned over the body to see who it was. Upon his recognition of the man, Moses filled with rage. He fell to his knees in disbelief. How did it happen? How did it come that one of his very own men lay before him, his neck seemingly broken. Moses cried out loudly, his voice echoing through the woods. He picked up the body to take it back with him. He came

to the woods to find an enemy. He never expected to find the body of the young man he became so fond of, Boyle.

“Robbie!” Moses kicked open the door to Dean’s room. He knew that’s where he’d find Robbie. The door flew open, and Moses rushed forward toward Dean, lifting him by the collar and slamming him to the wall. “Your people will pay!”

Robbie grabbed onto Moses’ arm. “Release him.”

Moses didn’t respond.

“I said release him!”

Moses dropped Dean to the floor, he covered his red hair with his clenched fist and bellowed out a loud chesty scream.

The cry went through Dean. What was happening? Was Beginnings striking back? A sense of pride hit him, it was quickly followed by fear.

Robbie knew it had to be bad, he tried to calm Moses, that was the only way he could find out what his enemy had done. “What happened Moses? What?”

Moses huffed rapidly. His exhales carried sounds of heartache. “I want revenge!”

“And you shall have it, but first you tell me why.”

Before explaining his rage to Robbie, Moses took one more look at Dean. “Remember that kid that ran away? Remember Boyle, the one we couldn’t find?”

Robbie’s heart pounded, he swallowed harshly. “Yes.” His voice began to quiver. “What about him.”

“I found him. He’s dead. They killed him.” He pointed his huge hand at Dean. “Your people killed him. They found him wandering around and they took his young life.”

Dean shook his head. “No Moses, they didn’t kill Boyle.”

“Shut up!” Moses held his hand out towards Dean’s neck. What he wouldn’t give at that moment to break his neck the way that he thought Beginnings broke Boyle’s. He stared at Dean, who

did not appear scared. “Your people will pay . . . Robbie.” He faced Robbie. “I want my revenge. Let me deliver one of them to their back gate. Let me give the second warning. My men are waiting outside for it. Let it come now!”

Robbie wasn’t about to tell Moses the truth. “Take it.”

Dean knew what those two words meant. It meant his life. He wasn’t going to back down, or hover. His time was coming, he was not going down screaming. With his heart racing, he lifted his head without fear, and waited.

Moses stormed toward the open door. “Thank you.”

“What are you doing? Where are you going?” Robbie asked.

“To get him.” Moses answered then looked to Dean. “Did you think I would kill him? It won’t hurt them as much. I want them to feel the pain I feel. I’m getting the kid.”

“Robbie tell him no.” Dean’s voice cried out. “No Moses. Please. My people didn’t kill him. Ask Robbie. Ask him who killed Boyle.”

Robbie, with his right hand, swung back, back handing Dean to silence him.

It didn’t work, Dean continued in his pleas. “Moses listen to me. That night, the night Boyle disappeared, Robbie told me. He told me that he killed him. Don’t do this, don’t hurt one of the kids. I’m begging you.” He grabbed for Moses, and Moses shoved him away.

“Robbie, beat you.” Moses shouted at him. “Do you think I’d believe your lies? They’ll pay. They’ll pay with that boy’s life.”

“No!” Dean charged for him. “If you have to kill someone. Kill me. Don’t kill one of them. Take my life. Please take my life instead.” Dean begged with everything he had. He pleaded like he had never done before. His attempts were futile. Moses shoved him to the ground and stormed out.

Dean picked himself up and raced to Robbie. “Stop him. Stop him. He’s taking an innocent life because of your mistake.”

Robbie turned his head sideways. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Stop him, Robbie. Stop him now!” Dean stopped begging and reaching for Robbie when he saw Moses stomping down the hall. With him, he dragged Denny.

“What’d I do?” Denny asked trying to pull away from the force of Moses. “What’d I do?” He saw Dean as he went past the room. “Dean, help me.”

Dean charged toward the door only to be stopped by Robbie who flung him back to the bed. But he knew he couldn’t just stay there. If it meant his life he had to try, even if it was just to try to help Denny. With the sound of Denny’s call for help fading down the hallway, Dean, with every bit of strength he had, with all of his will, charged forth toward Robbie, knocking him over and onto the floor.

He raced to the hallway, Denny wasn’t there. With no guards around, he flew out of the library, pausing only to grab the huge metal baseball bat that Robbie had setting by his desk.

Out on the street he saw them. Moses and his men began to encircle a frightened and bewildered Denny. The fear in Denny’s eyes. The confusion on his face. Denny kept calling out. “What’d did I do? No. Dean, help me!”

There was no time to think, nor worry about himself. He wasn’t important, Denny was, and Dean had to try with all of his might to save him. With rage he had never known before, he ran to the group of men and began swinging the metal bat. He hit one, then two, both on the heads, both fell to the ground. He had to get to Moses. “No!” Dean cried out as he crashed the bat down upon his back. “Get away from him!”

Moses flinched as he felt the pain of the bat. The pain didn’t stop his outrage. He grabbed the bat from Dean with one hand, and with the other, he literally threw Dean to the ground. “Someone get him out of here!”

Dean was helpless as two men took hold of him, dragging him back. His eyes connected with Denny’s, hand reaching forth as the young boy called to him once more for help. Denny was so young, so unsuspecting, so unaware that Moses stood behind him

like a batter swinging forward with full force down to the back of Denny's head.

Dean's knees buckled and he dropped to the ground as he saw Denny sail forth and land on the concrete. "Denny!" The veins in Dean's neck protruded, his face turned red and he cried with his heart and soul to a boy who so desperately needed the help he could not give. The young boy who was surrounded by every single man in Egypt who wanted their revenge on Beginnings.

Dean's cries, his tears, his efforts, could not save the thirteen year old boy, an innocent, who would die so violently at the hands of the savage beasts. Their arms swung forth, their legs moved about.

First there was the painful heart wrenching sound of Denny's cries. Calling out for help, begging for them to stop, like the little boy he so much was. Then the worst part of all came to be. It made Dean want to die, his anguish too much to bear. There were no more sounds, no more cries, there was only silence.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Frank was pissed at himself. He held in his hand a metal trap. How brainless he could be at times, he thought. First he wanted to finish up his rounds early, he promised Ellen he would. It sounded easy enough. Finish the rounds, set new traps outside the back gate, go home. He had it all mapped out. After rounds he went to the back gate, he called for them to shut down the perimeter, he unlocked the gate. But he forgot the most important thing. The trap. Figuring he'd be only a few minutes, he had them turn back on the perimeter. The gate would be fine without its lock. A few minutes is all it should have taken. It would have taken. If it wasn't bad enough that he forgot the trap, things only got worse, while in his haste, he broke the key as he turned the lock on the maintenance door.

As he made his way up the grade to the back gate, Frank grabbed his radio. "This is me again. Shut down sixteen. I'm ready now." He waited for a sarcastic response and was glad he didn't get one.

Frank stopped as he neared within fifteen feet of the gate. "No." It wasn't there before. He'd only been gone fifteen minutes. His heart dropped to his stomach the closer he drew. Beyond the gate on the dusty road way, he saw a pair of legs extended out from the tall grass. "Oh no . . . Dean." He began to move, running towards the gate. The closer he got, the more he could see. The thin bare feet were totally covered in blood. "No." Frank flung open the gate and raced to the body, stopping so fast at the legs, he slid onto the road causing a dust cloud. He reached his hands into the tall grass, grabbing the legs. He could feel the coldness of the flesh, he could smell the death. As he pulled out the body he knew the instant he saw the bloodied blonde hair, his hands were not reaching for Dean.

Frank lifted the limp body out of the grass and onto his legs, he held him in his arms. His heart broke as he stared down at the

young face, beaten so brutally he was barely recognizable. “Oh my God.” Frank held Denny close to him, pulling him to his chest. His huge hand strived to find the pulse that just wasn’t there. Frank reached down for his radio, and emotionally called out. “Dad” his voice was weak. “Dad, it’s bad. They brought back one of our people . . . it’s bad.” Frank held Denny tighter. “I need only you at the back gate.” He tossed the radio to the ground, then secured his arms underneath Denny’s body. With Denny in his arms, Frank rose to his feet, the moment he stood Denny’s arms and legs dangled and his head flung back. Slowly, and in pain almost too much for him to grip, Frank headed to the back gate.

“I thought you were dead,” the familiar voice halted Frank dead in his tracks.

Frank turned around, his eyes glazed over when he spotted the huge man walking from the trees.

“Frank Slagel, boy won’t your brother be surprised.”

Frank couldn’t believe it. This man was taunting him? Right then as he held the body of such a young boy? Was he that fuckin’ stupid? Frank slowly, without giving it away, began to lower Denny’s body.

“Like the little package I gave you, Frank? Did it myself.”

Softly to the ground he laid him. As Denny’s body rested to the earth, Frank’s sadness turned. It turned into something he had never felt before, an uncontrollable rage that sent him forth, barreling towards Moses.

Moses stood waiting for him. He wasn’t afraid of Frank.

He should have been.

Shooting out like a cannon, Frank charged ahead. Though Moses outweighed him, he could never out-strength him. Frank was driven by too much hurt, too much anger, and too much sorrow. Frank’s body hit Moses with such a force, both men flew ten feet back, rolling one over top of each other into the woods.

Moses tried to fight back, but he hadn’t a chance. Frank hovered over him, crashing down with violent blows, one right after another.

With a loud scream of emotion, Frank stood and lifted Moses to his feet. He grasped tightly to the huge mound of red hair and rushed the weight of Moses forth into a tree that stood only a few feet away.

Moses whipped into it. As if the tree had an elastic surface, his body bounced back. He would have fallen to the ground had Frank not stopped him. It wasn't the end. Moses' pleas for mercy at that moment would not be heard, they could never be heard. For Denny, for his baby, for Dean and the children still in Egypt, Frank hurled Moses back into the tree. He crashed his face into the bark. Smashing it with force over and over again.

Frank felt the warm blood sprawl out over his hands with each devastating blow. Just when he felt that Moses had enough, just when he felt that Moses was seconds from death, Frank dropped him, releasing him to the dirt. Moses was alive, barely. He laid face first on the ground, moaning, trying to lift himself in one more attempt.

Slam!

Frank crashed his boot down onto his back and he dropped to his knees hovering Moses from behind. He wrapped his arm across Moses' shoulder. Lifting him some, arching his back. Extending his fingers across the bloody forehead and Frank's huge hand gripped tightly, bracing the entire head.

His nostrils flared as Frank breathed heavily and sweat poured from his brow. He leaned forward into Moses, placing his lips close to his ear. "This is for my people." Frank gripped tighter. "Die you sick fuck." With a single cry filled with agony and strength, and one loud crack, he broke Moses' neck.

It was over. Still huffing and emotional, Frank stood to his feet and ran from the woods. As he hit the road he could see his father racing toward the open gate. He, too, saw Denny, the sadness on his father's face matched his own.

Joe dropped to his knees at Denny's body, his eyes weld up as he lifted his eyes to Frank who stood above. "This didn't happen. Oh, Christ, tell me we didn't let this happen."

Frank knelt down, his hand running across Denny's face.
“They have to pay, Dad. Every single one of them. It's time.”
With his eyes filled with hatred, he stared at his father.

“You're right. It's time.”

“One of them was still here when I found him.”

Joe looked around. “Where is he? I didn't hear any gun fire.
Did he get away?”

“No . . . I killed him.” Frank looked down at his hands, they
were covered with blood. “We have to get Denny in. I'll carry him
to the jeep.”

“Then where Frank?” Joe stood up. “Christ.” He ran his hand
across his head.

“I'm taking him to his mother.” Frank reached down to lift
him.

“I'll head to town first. She's at the clinic. I'll stop by and get
Miguel. Give me a few minutes.” Joe was shaking. He was faced
with one of his most difficult tasks. He had to look Andrea in the
eye and say her son had come home. But not like they had all
hoped and prayed. Joe backed up and ran to his jeep. He quickly
jumped in and drove away.

Frank lifted Denny. He slowly carried him to his own jeep,
and sat him in the passenger's seat. He walked back to the gate
and locked it, then radioed to security to put the perimeter back on.
Before getting in the jeep he took one more look at Denny's face.
Should Andrea see him the way he was? The pain that she was
going to feel would be insurmountable. Frank took off his shirt,
reached in the jeep for his container of water, and doused his shirt
with it. He wrung it out and wiped off Denny's face, removing the
blood and dirt that hid who he was. Cleaning Denny as best as he
could. “I'm sorry, Den.” He dropped his shirt and got in the jeep.
With his right hand bracing Denny in, Frank drove slowly back
into town.

“Andrea,” Joe called softly into Dean’s laboratory where Andrea sat with Ellen. “Andrea?”

Andrea looked up, she was laughing. “Joe, Ellen and I were just laughing at some of Dean’s code names.” She pointed to another one. “Look at this one, Ellen.”

Ellen laughed loudly. “He is such a nerd.”

Joe walked in, he grasped Andrea’s wrist. “I have to talk to you.”

The smile dropped from Andrea’s face. She saw Miguel hovering in the doorway, and she saw something on Joe’s face she had never seen. Tears. “Sweet Jesus what’s happened?” She jumped from her stool. “Tell me, Joe.” She walked past him. “Miguel?”

Joe reached for her arm, pulling her back. “There’s been a tragedy. We . . . I need you to stay here.”

“Something’s happened.” Andrea rushed past Joe, passed her husband and out into the hall. They tried to stop her but it was too late. The glass clinic doors at the end of the hall gave her the answer she so much did not want. The vision of Frank carrying her son across the street. “Oh my God!” She flew down the hallway, flinging the doors open. “No. Not my son.” Her hands reached out to Frank’s arms. She trembled as she touched her son’s cold skin. “Not my baby.” She reached for Denny. “No.”

“I’ll bring him inside for you.” Frank continued carrying him, even as Andrea pulled for her son. Joe opened the doors to let them in.

“Denny.” Andrea took him from Frank’s arms and fell to the floor with him. “What have they done to you?”

Frank couldn’t take anymore. He turned and walked out.

“My baby.” Andrea cradled him close to her breast, pressing her lips to him, rocking him. “What have they done to you?” She resisted and fought off anyone, including her husband, that tried to come near her. She sat in the hallway holding her boy, sobbing from her soul as she held his lifeless body. “I love you.” She lifted her tear streaked eyes to Joe. “Look what they did to him. They

beat him. What did he ever do to them? Look what they did to my baby.”

Ellen backed away, her hand covering her mouth, her face streaming with tears. She had been where Andrea was. She had felt that pain that she was feeling. She too had held her own son in her arms wishing it was her. Ellen couldn’t bear to watch, she too had to leave.

Joe reached down to Andrea. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“He was just a child, Joe. He was my son.” Andrea wiped her face with the back of her hand. “My Denny.” She pressed her lips to him again. “My son.” She held tightly to him for a long while, never wanting to let him go. On the floor of the clinic she cried for her son, for the pain he endured, for the loss of his young life. Andrea’s cries were heard throughout Beginnings.

Ellen opened the door to the dark empty social hall. She saw Frank sitting on a stool, hunched at the bar. “Frank?” She called to him slowly walking to him. She slid on his back. “Frank?”

Frank lifted his head which rested in his hands. His red eyes looked at Ellen. “We lost a kid El, we lost Denny.”

Ellen’s lips quivered, her eyes welled up again. Frank needed her to be strong for him, she fought back her tears with everything she had, a task even too difficult for her. She could only reach to him, hold him in her arms and hope to take even just a little of the pain away.

Frank clung to her as if he were clinging to life itself. He buried himself deep in her chest, taking comfort in her arms.

“Frank!” Henry came running in. “I’m sorry to interrupt. Robbie’s on the radio. Your dad said you might want to be there.”

Frank lifted his head from Ellen. “I didn’t hear it.” He reached to see if his radio was on, and for the first time ever, it

wasn't. "Shit." He grabbed Ellen's hand and pulled her with him. They ran, following Henry, to the containment center.

Joe's hands were red as they held tightly to the microphone; he looked up as Ellen, Frank and Henry, burst in. "It was a low even for you Robbie. He was a kid."

"This I know." Robbie was cocky. "I have Dean right here. I'm sure he'll tell you about it when he gets back. He watched it all."

Dean's shouting came loud and clear through the airwaves. "Kill them Joe. Kill them all."

"Shut up." Robbie shouted to Dean. "I'm on the radio. You had your chance . . . Dad? You still there?"

"I'm still here. You will pay, Robbie. That man that brought our boy back. He's not returning. He's dead. One of our men killed him with their bare hands. Bare hands. End this now, or we will end it."

Dean felt some sense of justice knowing that Moses was dead. And he knew there was only one man capable enough to kill such a large man with his bare hands, Frank. It was a sign to Dean, a signal. Frank was back in full force. The waiting was over. Beginnings was ready.

Robbie laughed at his father's warning, it didn't faze him. Nor did the news of Moses' death. He enjoyed it. "Look I make the calls here. You don't threaten me. Yes it will end, and yes you will end it. You will let us in Beginnings."

"Never!" Joe cried out to him.

"Heed my warning, Father. You have twenty-four hours. Look at your watch. Twenty-four hours I will call back, if I don't get the answer I want I will send another warning. Another one of your people will be at your door."

"You're sick, but I don't believe you'll kill one of those small children."

“You’re right. I don’t want to kill another child. I won’t. If by tomorrow at this time I do not get the answer I want, your Dr. Dean will be our next warning. And this I promise you. I will enjoy taking his life . . . Tomorrow!” Robbie’s words ended with static. He had given his warning. It was now in the hands of Beginnings.

Joe rubbed his face as he stood from his seat, the microphone falling from his hand. “Henry, uh, gather everyone in this community together. It’s time for that talk.”

Standing before the crowded room filled with every single person in Beginnings was difficult for Joe. He had to face them with the news. He had so much to tell them. The room was silent. Though filled, there wasn’t a noise to be heard. They waited to hear what he had to tell them, they needed to hear it. As their leader, Joe spoke with his heart. “Today is a day of sadness. We have fought so hard, all of us, to overcome so many tragedies. We’ve built this community and with the sweat of each of us, we’ve made it work. But as all of you know, there are those who wish to bring us down. They’ve taken from us what is precious, and they hold something of value we desperately want back, our people. Now they tell us if we don’t let them in, they will, without a doubt kill another one of us. All of us have worked so hard in a struggle to defeat them. I commend all of you for your unity. I am so proud to live among you. But the time has come. Now, for the safety and lives of our children, for Dean, and all of you . . . we’ve come to a decision.”

Everyone listened to what Joe had to say. They acknowledged and accepted what he was telling them. The end was near.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

July 20

Frank stood next to Ellen with his finger closing off his one ear.

Ellen held out a gun, aiming at her target. She fired and flew back.

“No. No. No!” Frank stormed up to her. “You shoot like a female!”

“I am a female!” She held out the gun, pointing forward once more.

“You never shot this bad before. Your aim is excellent. But you have to focus.” Frank moved behind her. “Don’t shoot, just hold still. Pretend you’re going to shoot. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Frank popped the palm of his hand upward against her elbow, the gun fumbled in her hands, but she caught it before she lost it. “See El! Lock your elbows! Lock them!” He held them firm. “And your stance sucks! Plant your feet firmly. The weight of that weapon is going to knock you over when it fires. Nothing should be able to knock you over if you have a good stance.” He brushed into her, her body flung forward. “See!”

“Christ, Frank, I can be standing in concrete and your big ass would still knock me over.”

“Let’s try this again.” He stood behind grasping her hands as she held onto the gun. “Hold it tight, El. Stand firm . . .”

“Now that’s what I don’t understand.” She abruptly turned around to face him. The hand that held the gun waved about as she spoke. “If I’m going to shoot someone. It’s not going to be like target practice.”

“Watch the gun, El . . .”

“If I’m in that situation, I’m not going to have time to stand firm.”

“The gun . . . El, the gun.” Frank covered his face, waiting for an accident to happen.

“Nor will I have time to tell my assailant, ‘Excuse me while I lock my elbows’.”

“Enough.” Frank snatched the gun from her hand. Checked the chamber and placed on the safety. “We’ll take a break. We’ve been working all morning.”

“Yes we have. Can you tell me why you are killing me today? First you bring me up here to beat me up.”

“I wasn’t beating you up. I was working on your fighting techniques. It’s been six months since we worked on fighting and shooting. You need work.”

“I don’t understand Frank. It’s not like I’m actually gonna have to shoot someone right? . . . Frank? Frank? I’m not going to shoot anyone am I?”

Frank shoved the gun behind the back of his pants and grabbed hold of her, pulling her close. “You never know. I don’t think anything will happen, but just in case, in case I’m not around, I need to know you will protect yourself. Besides, you and Andrea are the only two women in this whole community that are callous enough to shoot someone in cold blood if needed.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” Ellen pulled away and held out her hand. “Give me back the gun. I’ll work harder for you.”

“Thank you.” He reached behind him, pulled out the gun and laid it in her hands.

“But you can’t yell at me anymore. It’s getting on my nerves, and you tend to forget I’m holding a loaded weapon.”

In his designated office in the library building of Egypt, Robbie stood confident, cocky, aside Dean who sat in a chair. “It’s nearly time.”

“They won’t give in. My life is not worth to them as much as their home is. I wouldn’t want it to be.”

“You sound awfully sure.”

“So do you.”

“I am sure.” Robbie walked around the chair. “I am so sure it’s going to happen. My gut tells me so. Ever have that feeling before, Dean? Do you have that feeling now?”

Dean did not answer.

“I thought so.” Robbie walked to his desk and turned on the radio. “In five minutes it’s times up. If they don’t give me the answer I want, it’s times up for you. My gun is ready, they will hear you die.”

Fear of death was far from Dean’s mind. He sat straight up waiting right alongside Robbie for Beginnings’ answer. He had come to terms with the fact that he would never see his children again. It made him strong. It made him see things a whole lot clearer. Dean waited on his death sentence. It was inevitable that it would come. In fact, if given the choice, Dean would choose death. He’d rather die at the hands of Robbie than see Beginnings give in. That was how strongly he felt against his captures. That was how badly he wanted to see them go down.

Joe sat in the office of containment. The radio perched in front of him, a bottle of whiskey to his right. He poured one more shot and downed it. Feeling its warmth, gasping as it soothed him. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Looking down at his watch, he knew it would be any second and Robbie would call out to him. He was alone as he sat there. It was the way he wanted it to be. He wanted no one around as he gave Robbie his answer. Everyone knew exactly what Joe was going to say. Alone was the best way to do it. No faces staring down at him, no other emotions in the

room except for his own. The waiting was nearly over. The hour was at hand.

“Dad.” Robbie’s voice broke through. Right on time. “Have you reached your decision? Is this all going to stop?”

Joe hesitated as he picked up the microphone. “Robbie, there is something I want to say first.”

“Give me your answer!”

“I will say this first! The death has to stop. We held a meeting last night and a decision was made. I am doing this for my people. I am not doing this for you. Tomorrow morning at eight a.m. be at the front gate. We will let you in.”

Dean jumped to his feet. “No! Joe! No!”

Robbie shoved him back down, pointed his finger and smiled. “Dad, it’s a wise decision on your part.”

“Not so fast, Robbie. If I am going to let you and your men in here it will go a certain way. Understand?”

“No, I don’t. It’s my rules . . .”

“And my community. If you don’t follow my rules, deals off.”

“Then Dean will be dead.”

“It’s a chance we have to take. We have to ensure we aren’t letting you in to ambush us.”

Robbie thought about it, staring at Dean who slumped over in disbelief. “How do we know you aren’t going to ambush us?”

“What I’m about to say will guarantee it. At eight in the morning you will meet us at the back gate. Myself and only two other men will meet you there. This is our home, Robbie, and you will not bring in any guns. Second, we will walk you to the edge of town right where the clinic sits. There you will release the children. After that, your men will remain right there and you and I will go off to talk. We have to sit and talk to figure out a way to live and work together, side by side. Alone, just us. That should give you a sense of security. While we talk, Dean will stand with your men. You may hold him at knife point. That is our word that nothing will happen to you or your men while in our community.”

After you and I have hashed out what we need to talk about, we will return to your men, and go on from there. Deal?"

Robbie had a plan of his own, Joe's did very little to interrupt it. "Deal. We will be there tomorrow at eight. We come in peace, Dad. This war, this situation was not something we wanted. I hope we can live together."

"Tomorrow." Joe shut off the radio and placed his face in his hands and prayed. "Dear God, be with us all tomorrow. I beg of you."

Dean's head looked to the floor, his mouth open, he could barely speak. What did Joe just do? Why did it all go down like this? There were only five of them, though four were children, they should not have folded. They should have at least tried to beat Robbie. They didn't even do that.

Robbie called out the door to his men who waited for the answer. He gathered all of them inside, and they crowded in the small library. "Men . . . they open the gates for us tomorrow." Robbie raised his hands to stop the loud cheers that began in the room. "All of our weapons, knives, and what guns we do have, must be concealed very well. When we hit center town, I will go off to talk to my father. When you see me return you know he is dead and we will commence our attack. We out number them. We will take them. But remember, do not kill Dean." Robbie patted him on the shoulder. "I want him to watch his people die. He deserves that honor." Robbie shot his hand straight in the air in a victory style. "To tomorrow!"

His men began to shout and cheer. They screamed about, working themselves up. Dean let their voices fade to the back of his mind. He didn't want to hear them. It was over. And unless Beginnings had something spectacular planned, they had just signed their own death warrant.

As the night fell upon the community of Beginnings, so many emotions and feelings encircled them. All of them knew, in less than twelve hours, things would be different. Each person handled the waiting in their own way, no one in Beginnings was certain that they would sleep on the eve of the unknown.

Joe went home early that night. Living under the same roof with George was the biggest help to him. George was the one person he could talk to about everything. Only the Council, Frank, and John Matoose really knew what to expect the next morning. The others in the community were merely told that Robbie and his men were being let in. That the safety of the children hostages would be ensured, and after that, there was no guarantees that trouble, or even death, would not commence. That was all they were told. It had to be the way, just on the outside chance that Robbie still had someone else in the camp.

Not being totally open and honest with everyone was a hard decision to make for Joe. The hardest part was keeping some of the originals in the dark. They deserved to know. Yet because of the chance of fear, panic or the slightest foul-up, they could not.

It was the decision Joe had made with the Council. It is something he had to live with for the rest of his life.

Henry paced, as Henry always did. From his house, to the street, around the corner, then back in. A repetitious pattern he did often when things were heavy on his mind. Denny was heavy on his mind, seeing that young boy the day before brought so much pain to him. Denny, Dean's beating, the hostage situation, Frank being shot. Henry could face the next day, but he had a hard time facing the night.

He stopped himself from going into his home to repeat another pacing cycle. He looked to the house next door, Andrea's

house. The lights were on. He wondered that if in their grief they could make time for him. Knowing Andrea and Miguel as well as he did, he knew they would. The ‘originals’ needed each other, they were a family. And families stuck together.

“El?” Frank’s whispering voice carried through the empty chapel. He spotted her, at the first pew, kneeling before the crucifix. The row of candles illuminated her face. “El?” He kept whispering as he walked softly to the front. He genuflected, blessed himself, then scooted in the pew next her, sharing the same kneeler as Ellen. “I looked all over for you.”

Ellen, with folded hands, turned her head to him. “I told you I wanted to be alone. That was only twenty minutes ago.”

“I know, but I figured we can be alone together. So I did that Frank thing and searched you out. Man, was I surprised to find you here.”

“I know.” Ellen lifted from kneeling and sat next to Frank. “I guess I figured I don’t really bother God all that much. Maybe because of that, he’ll really listen to me this time. Because, Frank . . . I’m scared. I’m scared of tomorrow. What if we have to ‘shoot to kill’ what if us women have to escape. And what if something happens to you and I never see you again.”

“Please don’t think that way. I will see you again. If it’s the last thing I do.” He pulled her closer. “Believe that.”

“I could believe that if you promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to promise me, that if things get bad, I mean really bad out there, and there is nothing left you can do, I want you to put Johnny, me, and my kids first. If things get out of control, to the point of no return, promise me you won’t die trying to be the hero in a losing battle.”

Frank gently kissed the top of her head. “I’ll make that promise.” Frank felt her body relax in relief. “Because I know tomorrow will not be a losing battle. But El, if it is, and God

forbid there's nothing I can do, I will find you. If it takes following you out of Beginnings I will. But if I have to die to protect you, know that I would do that, too. Your life means more to me than my own."

Reverend Bob had returned to the chapel that night for one last prayer before turning in. He sat quietly in the back, in the dark last pew of the night's busiest place. There he remained unnoticed and in the silence of his mediation he heard Frank and Ellen talk. He listened to their words and drew a sort of strength. He realized that he was wrong about Frank and Ellen. They may have been wrong about the way they went about being together, but they, in a sense were blessed. He prayed that the Good Lord would bless Beginnings. That God would stand with the righteous in the struggle that they were about to undertake in the next morning's light.

Dean lay on his bed in his dark room. He stared up at the ceiling that held a streak of the moon's reflection through his window. He had spent the entire evening with the children. It was the first time in weeks he had been allowed to do so. Katie cried, she cried hard for her brother and wanted to know where he was. All Dean could tell her is that they let Denny go. Denny was home.

Home. Dean was finally going home, but not the way he expected to. Beginnings was failing him. They had the power and technology to wipe out Robbie, but they chose not to. There had to be another plan. There had to be. Joe was so stubborn, he wouldn't let this happen. And Frank, he could not see Frank just sitting back waiting for it to happen. There had to be something else going on, and Dean held on to that hope.

But what if there wasn't any? What then? Dean wandered his mind of things that could be done. He would take his family and escape. He'd have to. There was that place Paul had come from.

Dean could go there. His knowledge would surely be a welcome addition to any community.

But all of the thoughts that suddenly raced through his mind were hinging. They hinged on what happened after they walked through the gates of Beginnings. Dean dreaded that moment. He dreaded the thought that Beginnings was folding. He prayed with his whole heart and soul that it was not the case. If the knife that would be held to his throat began to slice, then Dean would die knowing that his people, his community, did not go down without a fight.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

July 21

“El . . It’s time now.” Frank walked slowly into his bedroom. Ellen sat on the bed hands folded across her lap. “El?”

“I know, I know. Just give me another minute.” Her face was pale, and she looked more worried than he had ever saw her.

“Everyone is waiting. Johnny took the twins already. Come on.” Frank held out his hand to her.

Ellen reached up and placed her hand in his palm, he gripped her fingers. “I think I’m ready.”

“You don’t have a choice.” He walked with her from the room.

Ellen stopped in the doorway and looked back. “Wait!” She ran back to the bed and grabbed a green knapsack. “I can’t forget this.”

“What is it?”

“If by some chance we have to run, there are some things in here I don’t want to leave behind.” She patted the sack and threw it over her shoulder. “I’m ready.” She took hold of his hand. “Let’s go.”

In silence, hand in hand, they walked to the containment center. No guard stood out front, the streets were empty. Greg was not in his usual post inside the front office. Containment was eerie. The only other male, aside from Frank, was Johnny. He stood at the skills room door waiting for his father and Ellen.

“Dad,” he called to them. “Everyone’s inside.”

“Thanks, Johnny.” Frank moved Ellen into the safety of the room. Just inside the door laid a small crate, inside of it weapons. Frank bent down to it and pulled out the first revolver. He walked to Andrea and handed it to her. “Here. You know how to use this, right?”

Andrea took it. “I don’t think I’ll have to.”

“Good. Let’s hope for that.”

“Francis?” She called to him. “You do good.”

“I will do my best.” Frank reached up and touched her cheek.
“Watch my family.”

Andrea nodded to him, tried to smile, then backed away.

Frank reached into the crate again, the second gun went to Ellen. He cupped it in her hands. “El, be careful it’s loaded.”

“I will.”

“And lock your elbows, damn it.” He leaned into her, his lips touching softly to hers. He didn’t want to say goodbye, but he knew he would have to. There was one more thing to take care of first. “Johnny?”

“Yeah, Dad, are we ready? Let’s go.”

“John . . .” Frank reached into the crate and grabbed a rifle.
“Johnny, you aren’t coming with me.”

“What? No Dad, I am. It’s not right.”

“I need you to stay here. I need you behind.”

“No, you need me out there. Next to you I am the best shot here. I’ve trained Dad, I’ve trained with all of the men.”

Frank didn’t want to argue, he nodded in agreement with everything Johnny had said. But there still was an argument to be had. “Johnny, I know you’ve trained with the men. But you are not a man. You’re still a kid. And you’re my kid. I love you. I need to know that you will be safe, and the only way I can do that is to leave you behind.”

“Dad No. I’m treated like a man here. I have to do this.”

“I can’t let you.” Frank reached out for his son. “I have to be your father now, and as your father, I say no. Do this for me, please. I can’t go out and do what I have to do if I’m worried about you, and if you’re out there next to me, I’ll worry. Please.”

Johnny snatched the rifle from his father. “Fine, I’ll stay. But under protest.”

“It’s duly noted.” Frank embraced his son and kissed him on the cheek. “I have to go.” He turned once more to say his last goodbye to Ellen. He took her in his arms and held her with all of

his heart and he kissed her goodbye as if it were their last kiss. As he pulled from her, his hands ran down the sides of her face, feeling her. “El I have to go.”

Ellen sadly nodded, leaving her hands on his cheek. “Please, please be careful.”

“Always . . . I love you.” Frank looked one more time at Ellen, before his hand slipped from hers. He stared deep into her eyes, his face strong with emotions, his jaws clenching as he took his one last look. Without saying goodbye he left the room, pulling the skills room door behind him.

Frank ran up the hallway to the little front office, pulling the heavy door closed. He then reached under the desk and ripped from it, the buzzer that opened the door. Frank reached into his front pocket and pulled out a key. It was the only key that could open the huge steel door that separated the office from the containment center. Ellen, Johnny, Andrea and the others were safe. They had their escape hatch and a place to go. If by any chance Robbie and his men would want to get in the containment center, they would have to break down the door between the hall in the office or they would have to unlock it with the only key. Frank had that key. And the only way Robbie was going to get it, was to take it from Frank’s dead body.

He saw them standing at his front gate and not an inch of fear twitched inside of Joe’s body. His heart did not beat faster, his blood pressure did not rise. He was calm, almost too calm.

George stood on one side of him, another man named Herb on the other. Joe’s hand reached for the gate that the perimeters were shut down on. His son Robbie stood first in line. “Are all of your belongings twenty feet away?”

Robbie smiled. “They are. You’ve looked us over too, you know we are unarmed. Let us in.”

“I want to speak to Dean, bring him forth.”

Dean heard his summons and stepped forward, keeping eye contact with Joe. Looking for a sign.

“Dean.” Joe looked upon Dean’s now healing face. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

“I could be better.” Dean reached out his hands for the small children. He brought them to his side. “Things could be better.”

“They will be now.” Joe turned the lock on the gate and opened it. One by one, in a long line, ninety-three men entered the tunnel that led to Beginnings.

Dean, with the children close to his side, led the band of men, who were followed by Joe, though the tunnel. They walked down the hill and the half mile hike to the edge of the center of town. They kept a steady pace. No words were spoken.

Dean wondered the entire walk why nothing had happened yet. Why no one from Beginnings had made a move. He got his answer when they stood by the clinic. Not a soul could be seen. He had not seen the town so empty since the very first day he arrived there. The only man in his view was Ralph, an older gentleman standing by the clinic doors.

Joe’s voice was cold as he spoke to Robbie, hatred lingered in his tone. “Before you and I take off. I want to watch the children walk into the clinic with Ralph.”

Robbie agreed.

Joe bent down to the children, checking each one out. “You’ll be with your parents soon. Right now run really fast to the clinic. Ralph is waiting for you.”

The children did as they were told. They knew of no danger, they only knew that they were home.

Joe stood straight and stood nose to nose with Robbie. “Let’s go.” He waited until Robbie walked ahead of him.

Robbie hesitated until he secured the fact that a knife was placed directly to Dean’s neck. Then and only then did he step before his father.

“Where are we going?” Robbie asked as he walked at a casual pace.

“The inventory building at the other end of the block. I figure we could start there.”

“Whatever you say.” Robbie felt that place was as good as any. Nearly two blocks away from his men. And two blocks from the two Beginnings men. No one would hear his father’s screams. “So Dad where is everyone?”

“Not that I wanted to get into idle conversation with you, but no one wanted to see you arrive.” Joe saw the building straight ahead. It was a sign of relief to him. It was his sign.

Dean watched as Robbie and Joe disappeared around the corner. It was over. What were the chances of Joe returning? Robbie had that hunting knife hidden, and Joe’s throat was Robbie’s target.

As all hope began to seem lost, Dean’s eyes noticed something strange. George and Herb slowly backed up. They were already at twenty feet, then at thirty . . . forty. Dean closed his eyes. The calm quiet eerie feeling that hung in the town of Beginnings was then broken.

A single shot, one shot, rang out loud and clear. It broke the silence grasping everyone’s attention. The bullet that had been fired sailed forth taking Dean by surprise. The bullet was intended for Dean. It hit the spot just above his knee, shattering the bone in his thin leg, breaking his balance and sending him crashing to the pavement.

The one lone gunshot was the signal. It was Beginnings’ signal. The moment Dean’s face felt the concrete, a loud eruption of gunfire broke out above his head. It encircled Dean, it came from every direction. It was the beginning of the end for Robbie’s men.

Robbie jumped when he heard the gun fire. He knew. Reaching for his blade tucked in his shirt, he ripped it out and turned to his father only to find himself facing the barrel of a gun.

Joe clenched tightly to Robbie's neck, holding the gun steady to his face as he kicked open the inventory room door. He literally carried his son across the room by a choke hold and threw him in a chair never taking his gun off of him. Joe swiped the knife from Robbie's hand and tossed it far across the room.

"You set us up!" Robbie screamed trying to get out of his chair.

Joe pushed him back. "Did you expect anything less of us? Did you expect us to just let you walk in here and take this from us? You underestimated me, Robbie. You underestimated all of us. Listen Robbie! Listen Good! Do you hear that? The gunfire? The screams? Listen to your people die! Listen to your people pay for what they did!"

Dean covered his head as the noise kept going. Ringing in his ears. He was afraid to look, afraid to move. He didn't know who was shooting who. As his weakened body tried to crawl to a safer place, he was stopped by the dead weight of someone who fell on top of him. Dean was pinned beneath him. He could feel the blood from the man above him, seeping through his own shirt, dampening his own skin. Dean, though trapped beneath the lifeless body, was somewhat shielded from the death that now surrounded him.

Robbie's men did not stand a chance. Rapid gun fire, shot forth at them, from men that hid on roof tops, in trees, in windows. Beginnings fired upon them from every corner, but the gunmen were nowhere to be seen. The gunfire held no mercy as it ripped apart Robbie's men. It cut into their bodies so fiercely, it ripped limb from limb. Blood spewed forth, bathing the ground and turning it deep red. There was nowhere to run, they were completely encircled. Beginnings left no stone un-turned. Nor

would they leave one man of Robbie's breathing. The firing continued until there was not a single soul moving. The shots slowed down, like popping corn, single shots getting further and further apart.

Though not one sound was heard or one moan, it was not over. The men of Beginnings marched down to the street, to the massacre they created. There they stood above Robbie's men. They approached the bodies one by one, and in execution style, fired a single shot into their skulls, sealing their deaths and ensuring the end to their reign.

Robbie could hardly breathe, he knew he was done. Joe had not removed the gun from his face the whole entire time he sat there and felt as his men went down. He listened with anguish to the silence that was just outside.

"It's over." Joe stepped back from him.

"You've won." Robbie refused to look at his father's face.

"Not completely, no."

"I suppose now you're going to kill me?"

Joe shook his head. "No, I couldn't kill you. You're my son."

At the sound of a closing door from the back of the room, Joe put his gun away. "Goodbye, Robbie." He lowered his eyes, stepped back, and walked from the inventory room.

The door closed, and his father was gone. Robbie heard the footsteps. The heavy sound of walking came from behind him. A slow steady walking, it grew louder and louder, then finally stopped. Robbie knew someone was in the room, they stood right behind him.

With the sound of two more steps, that person stood before him, facing him. It was the brother he thought he had killed . . . Frank.

Frank stared down at Robbie, his face cold, emotionless. His eyes, as Robbie had never seen before. With an intense look of calm . . . Frank lifted his gun.

Robbie closed his eyes. “Oh, my God.”

Joe stood directly outside the inventory door waiting. Waiting until he heard it. Within seconds it happened. It made him jolt. One shot followed by a thump, and Joe knew. It was over, it was finally over.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Miguel tried to shake what appeared to be brains from the tip of his boot as he shuffled his feet wading through the pool of dead bodies. “I found him!” Then Miguel lifted a corpse and tossed him to the side. “Hey Dr. Dean? You alive down there? Hey Joe, I found him.”

Dean grunted and opened his eyes. Red, all he saw was red. And it wasn’t anger. He was completely encircled in blood. “What the hell?” Dean tried to lift himself up and the pain shot straight from his injured leg. “Shit, I’m dying.”

Joe reached down and helped him up. “You aren’t dying, Christ it’s a leg wound.” Joe checked it out. “Looks like it went clear through too.” He whistled. “May have some trouble walking. Good thing the clinic is right over there.”

Dean smiled at Joe as he was assisted to the clinic. It was good to be home. It was good to be back. “Thank you, Joe.”

“Don’t thank me, I wasn’t around. Let’s just get you to the clinic and cleaned up so Andrea can work on you.”

“Cleaned up sounds great.” Dean hobbled holding on to Joe for support.

Ellen and Andrea held tighter to the guns they were given. It had been a while since they heard the last of the shots. Whose shots were fired they didn’t know. The children in the room had finally stopped crying. They were clueless to what was going on just outside the door. They couldn’t leave. They didn’t know what they would face.

Making the entrance that only he could make. Frank opened the skills room door slowly, then kicked it flinging forth. He held Katie on his hip, and he was smiling as he stepped inside.

A loud burst of relief, followed by screams of joy filled the room.

Andrea rushed forth reaching to her daughter, “My baby.” She took Katie from Frank and clenched her with dear life in her arms. She mouthed the words ‘thank you’ to Frank as she closed her eyes, tears streaming down, and held tightly to her daughter.

Without saying a word Frank swept Ellen up, swung her around as he embraced her.

Ellen took his face in her hands and kissed his face several times. “Tell me.”

A huge grin came upon Frank’s face. “Dean is fine. He really is fine.”

“Where is he?”

“At the clinic. He has a very minor injury.”

“Thank you! I’ll be back!” Ellen’s words carried and faded as she rushed from containment.

Joe meant what he said when he told Dean he would get him cleaned up. Upon getting him in the clinic Joe stripped him down and threw him in the shower, no matter how bad it hurt his leg.

Dean lay on top of a bed, still waiting for Andrea to return. Joe had bandaged up his leg and gave him a fresh pair of boxer shorts to put on.

“So Dean, you mean to tell me you actually thought we were giving in to Robbie?” Joe pulled up a chair to wait with him.

“You have to admit, Joe, you certainly made it out that way.”

“Oh ye of little faith. As if I would fold. You should know me . . . aside from that, are you doing all right?”

“Yes, I am. My leg is killing me.”

“Eh . . . it had to be done.” Joe waved him off and leaned back in the chair.

“What do you mean it had to be done?” Dean began to get excited. “Do you people realize what I’ve been through? Knowing all this, you shoot me?”

“Aren’t we filled with attitude?” Joe stood up. “I’m trying to be nice here Dean. It was a rescue attempt. A shoot the hostage situation.”

“Was it planned?”

Joe him-hawed about. “You can say it was, yes.”

“You planned for me to get shot?”

“We weren’t gonna shoot one of the kids now, were we?”

“Just tell me who . . .” His voice faded as he looked up.

“Who what?” Joe saw Dean had stared past him. He turned to see who it was. Ellen. “I’ll be back. We’ll talk about this after Andrea gives you something to calm you down.”

“Fine,” Dean said, never taking his eyes off of Ellen.

Joe reached down and grabbed Dean’s hand. “Good to have you back.” Releasing it, he slowly left the room, bracing Ellen’s shoulder as he walked past her.

Ellen leaned in the doorway. “Can I come in?”

“Please.”

Ellen began to move to the bed, she moved slowly almost as if she were afraid. “I kind of feel like I don’t know what to say.”

“We said a lot before I was kidnapped.”

Ellen reached down and took his hand. “I missed you.”

Dean squeezed her hand. “I missed you, too.”

“You look different.”

“I’ve been beat up.”

The ice had been broken, Ellen left out a nervous laugh.

“That’s not what I mean. You seem different.”

“When you’re locked in a room for a month, you have a lot of time to think.”

Ellen hung her head down. “I’m sorry things went down the way they did.”

“Me too . . . and that’s one of the things I thought about. Now, I come home and I know things are different. You’re with him now, aren’t you?”

Ellen hesitated. “Yes . . . I am.”

Dean closed his mouth tightly and rested his head back. “Did you come in here to see me or did you come in here to get my forgiveness and blessing?”

“I came in here to try to make things right with you.” She released his hand. “Dean, I know you won’t believe me, but I care about you. I am so proud to have you in my life. I’ve gone through changes, too. And Dean, check me out. I can say it.” She leaned closer to him. “I love you.”

Dean hesitated in asking. “But not the same way you love him.”

Ellen didn’t answer.

“I didn’t think so.” He reached down and took her hand in his. His tone changed. “I’m all right with it. Like I said I had a lot of time to think. I can handle it, it’ll be tough at first, but I’ll manage. Especially when there’s not that many women to chose from. But I’d like you to know, that we can start over again, this time as friends. This time with honesty.”

“You got it.” She leaned down and kissed him.

“And speaking of which . . . who in the hell shot me?” Dean’s voice began to raise.

“Excuse me?”

“Who shot me? It was this big plan, I’m sure you knew. Shoot me, get me out of the way then fire about on everyone else. Who shot me? I didn’t see anyone with a gun. Now there’s only one person that I know of that can shoot . . . Oh no.” Dean looked up, Frank stood in the doorway walking in. “Please tell me it wasn’t you.”

Frank stepped closer. “Wasn’t me, what?”

“It was. Shit. This is great. This is just great.”

“El, do you think you can give us a minute?”

“Sure.” Ellen slid off the bed. “Dean, I’ll bring the kids by as soon as they get the street cleaned up out there. It’s kind of gross.” She kissed him one more time, waved, then left the room.

Dean watched her leave, never taking his eyes off the door, never seeing Frank pull up a chair.

“You still love her, huh Dean?”

“Yeah I do. Not that it matters much.” He folded his arms. “What is it that you want, Frank? Are you wanting to rub salt in the wounds. No . . . wait . . . here.” Dean lifted his leg up. “Here’s an open one, it should make it easy for you . . .” Dean was obstinate. “I can’t believe you shot me.”

“You know you’re lucky it was me. Anyone else could have missed such a small target.”

“Why are you sitting here, Frank?” Dean grew perturbed. “You obviously want something.”

“Man, do you have attitude? Can we be civil for just five minutes?” He waited until he had Dean’s attention. “What I have to say is very difficult for me.”

“And you thought I’d make it easy?”

“No . . .” Frank tapped his hand on the bed railing. “I need to thank you for what you gave me.”

Dean exhaled. “I didn’t have a choice in that one Frank. I didn’t give her to you.”

“I’m not talking about, Ellen. I’m talking about my life. You saved it. I’m standing here today because of you. You don’t know what that means to me.”

“I’m a doctor, that’s my job.”

“I know that.” Frank stood up and began to pace. “I feel sort of, you know, bad.”

“Bad? No, you don’t.”

“Yes I do.” Frank took a deep breath. “I wronged you. And after all that I put you through, you still saved my life. That takes a certain type of man. And in my book, that makes you the better man. I owe you a lot. I wish I could repay you somehow. There’s nothing more I’d like to do then tell you, that if you wanted, I’d walk away from Ellen. Maybe give you back some of the life you lost.”

Dean rolled his eyes. For a moment, just a brief moment, Frank had him. He actually sounded human. Dean knew him better. “Would you? Would you really?”

“Well . . . no.”

“That’s what I thought. So why say it?”

“Cause it sounds good?” Frank lifted up his shoulder, he was without a good answer “Look . . . is there any way we can get past this? Try to be friends?”

“That will never happen.”

“You’re right. How about being civil?”

“It’ll be hard seeing you two together. I love her, Frank.”

“And I love her too, Dean, with everything I am.” Frank stopped pacing about and moved closer to Dean’s bed. “So what do we do now?”

“Well since sharing her is out of the question, we just move on.”

“You know Dean, I want you to know everyone is proud of you. I’m proud to know you.” Frank extended his hand.

“What?” Dean looked at it. “What’s that for?”

“Come on, Dean . . . shake. I just realized that in the five years that we’ve have been here, I’ve never shaken your hand.”

“That’s because in the five years that we’ve been here you’ve been sleeping with Ellen.”

“I’d really like to shake your hand.” Frank’s hand extended further out.

Dean took it, without looking at Frank in the eye, shook his hand. “There.”

“Thank you.” Frank backed up to leave. “Thank you for everything. For my life . . .”

“For Ellen?”

“That too.” Frank smiled.

“See I knew you couldn’t go without that gloating thing you do.”

Frank waved, and with that gloating smirk on his face, he began to leave.

“Hey, Frank?”

“With all kidding aside. You did good with me today, even if I do end up limping. And . . . For all that was said, thank you for your honesty. That’s all I ever wanted, you know.”

Frank raised the corner of his mouth, giving a half smile. “You have it now Dean. Nothing less.” Somehow he felt better as he walked from Dean’s room.. As he left the clinic, he saw Ellen waiting outside. He stepped out to join her. “Hey El.”

“All done talking with Dean?”

“Yeah, it went well, too.” He stepped down onto the sidewalk, taking in the view of the massacre that had happened. “Man, is it fucked up out here.”

“Tell me about it. So . . .” Ellen took a breath as they walked. “You said it went well.”

“Very, I feel unburdened. I was honest with him for the first time.”

“Me too.”

“It feels good, El, really good to be honest.”

“Doesn’t it.” Ellen spoke in relief. “And I think that we should have that attitude from here on in.”

“Absolutely.”

Ellen slowed down in her walk. “Um . . . by the way. I didn’t really say anything. You didn’t by chance . . . mention that we got married last night, did you.”

“No way.” Frank took hold of her arm. “I think we should just let him and everyone else discover that little one on their own. Don’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

The swish-swish of the echoing push broom paled in comparison to the gags Henry made in the tunnels that ran under Beginnings. “Joe, I’m dying.” Henry lifted his shirt over his nose.

Joe looked at George and shook his head. “Henry. Where would you rather be. Up there with chunks, or down here with streams.”

“That is so gross, Joe. That is so foul.” Henry pushed the broom behind George and Joe who carried the hoses that saturated the tunnels. “All this blood, Joe. We have to seal the street or something. This isn’t right. This should never have . . .”

Joe stopped walking. The pushing broom sound stopped along with Henry’s complaining. He shut off the hose at the same time George shut off his. They both looked back.

The handle of the broom made a loud bang when it slipped from Henry’s hand. “Oh, wow.”

Letting out a huffing sound of irritation, Joe saw Henry standing there. “Henry?”

“Oh wow.” Henry repeated and pulled his flashlight from his belt. He turned it on and shined it on the wall. “Oh, Wow.”

Tossing his hands up, Joe led the way back to Henry. “What in Christ’s name are you doing?”

“I found it. This has to be it.”

“What?”

“The two percent power loss. Look.” Henry shined the light on the wall bringing the beam to the ceiling. He illuminated a grouping of power lines that disappeared into the concrete wall.

“So.”

“So where do you suppose they go?” Henry asked.

“Into that wall.” Joe scoffed at Henry’s glare. “Henry, they probably run through that wall as a short cut.”

“No Joe.” Henry shook his head. “I know the lines. I can’t believe I never saw this. I probably did but didn’t pay attention. I think they’re powering something behind this wall. What do you think, Joe?”

“I think . . .” Joe snatched the flashlight from Henry’s hand and picked up the broom. “I think you’re a goddamn loon, that’s what I think. Let’s go.” Grabbing Henry by the arm, Joe handed him the broom and tugged him along.

The brush against his shoulder by Henry and Joe nearly knocked the flashlight from his hand. Taking a step closer, George, turned on his flashlight and shined it on the power lines.

“George!” Joe called out in the distance. “You coming.”

“Yeah.” George turned off the light. “Right behind you.” Almost in a daze, George side-stepped his way toward Joe and Henry. After looking at the arguing pair, he checked out the lines one more time. Hooking the flashlight back on his belt, George knew, from that moment on, he had a new mission. No matter what it took, he had to do everything in his power to keep Henry from going beyond just looking at that wall.