

STATE OF TIME

by

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CHANGE



HENRY'S JOURNAL

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Sitting here ten years in the past, writing this, waiting, I know this can't continue. The power supply for the Quantum Regressionator is limited. It can't be wasted on fixing any more time ripples. Frank's phone call. He just wanted to get Robbie to Ashtonville at the onset of the plague so he could come to Beginnings and the world wouldn't make him bad. Robbie went Ashtonville early all right. So early he and Ellen got married. But Robbie . . . was still bad. Now I wait for Dean and Frank's return. They are trying to stop the phone call. Instead they plan to mail a letter and try again. Get Robbie to Ashtonville at the right time. Conform Beginnings. I'm afraid to step back through the time machine door and see what Frank and Dean have done to my world. But this is it. No matter what, we must accept the changes and go on. We have a virus in our future to beat. And we have a trail to find, that hopefully, will lead us to the Caceres Society. Find out what we have in Beginnings that they want so bad, they would destroy us for it. No more changing the past. Only the future.

CHAPTER ONE

November 27 - Present Day

Beginnings, Montana

Jason Godrichson worked diligently with Joe on the future time trip. A trip planned, nearing launch, and one with a lot of details, both mechanical and strategical left to hash out. In the quantum lab they worked. Jason by his computer, Joe by the counter. One of Jason's aspects of the team were to make sure that when they went into the future, Dean, Ellen, and Henry wouldn't be unleashed into some black hole that would suck them up and cause for their inability to return. Chuckling at that thought, Jason crossed his arms over his tall thin body, and peered out his window again. He waited with anticipation and excitement for the arrival of the Centers for Disease Control Mobile.

Clearing his throat with a slight laugh, Joe Slagel looked up from his notebook. "What did I tell you. Watching for it won't make it arrive. John said if they can't get it moving by dark . . ."

"I know. Just anxious for my new neighbor. I've been lonely way out here."

"And you're so full of shit." Joe said in his usual gruff way. "You just want to see it before Dean does. Little scientist rivalry."

"Exactly." Jason smiled.

Joe stood up with his notes and headed Jason's way. "O.K. With the stuff the time trio . . ."

"You mean Frankie, Spanky and Cranky?" Jason snickered. "Sorry, go on."

"With the stuff that the three stooges of time . . ." Joe added his own dig. "Brought back from their past trip. I would say the Cleveland Run is our best option. See if we find anything there that will take us on our next trip to the past."

"And the future trip will either give us the virus to work on, or, tell us of no virus. Therefore we will know if our concentration must be divided

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between the two or just on the Society itself. Coinciding the two is a time saver.”

With the sound of a power surge, a bright light and a slight warm breeze to them, Jason and Joe turned in oddity to the Regressionator archway. It lit up and walking through were Frank and Dean pushing the motorcycles with Henry behind them.

Jason nearly flew back in surprise into Joe. “Holy shit.”

“Fuck.” Frank’s towering body stopped cold. His mouth dropped open. “It didn’t work.”

With his small framed body looking buried behind the huge motorcycle, Dean peered clueless to Henry. “What’s going on?”

Henry shrugged and tried to hide that he was laying a pendant on the counter.

Joe took a step forward. “That’s what I’d like to know. What is going on?”

“And . . .” Jason added. “Why are you three walking through my time machine. Right now. At this time?”

“You don’t know?” Frank asked. “Wait . . .” Lost and confused he looked at Jason. “Did you lie?”

“About what?” Jason questioned..

“You said you weren’t going to be here.” Frank said.

“When?” Jason tossed his hands up.

“When you sent us through.” Frank explained. “You said, I won’t be here pull the door . . .” Frank grunted loud when he felt the backhand into his gut by Henry. “Hey.”

“Shut up, Frank.” Henry spoke through his forced smile he gave Jason and Joe. “Let’s just go. Dean?” Henry came from behind the duo and hurried to the door.

Dean followed the lead. “Bye, Joe. Jason.” Pushing the bike, he stopped with Henry by the door. “Frank. Come on.”

“Frank?” Joe looked to him.

“Shh.” Frank held a finger to his lips. “Just pretend you didn’t see us.” He looked up to the moans from Dean and Henry. “What? If they don’t, they shouldn’t know. Right?”

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Again Dean and Henry moaned only they added a cringe of their bodies.

“What?” Frank shook his head, walked a little and stopped. “Oh, Dad? Is Robbie here?”

Blasted. As a warning, both Dean and Henry moaned their loudest yet.

Frank jolted a little, groaned perturbed at them, then looked back to Joe. “Is he?”

“Is Robbie here?” Joe repeated the question then shifted his eyes around. “What the hell is the matter with you Frank. Of course he’s not here. Why would your brother be here?”

“No . . . no reason.” A sadness took over Frank and he walked out of the quantum lab behind Dean and Henry. He pulled the door closed.

Henry grumbled a complaining whine. “I can’t believe you were in there spewing your mouth Frank. It’s bad enough walking through the time machine. We could have made something up. But no, you have to . . .”

Dean’s shifting eyes caught what Henry did not. Frank’s demeanor. “Henry.” Dean said calm. “Enough. It’s all right. No matter how we reacted or what we said, we still came through that machine. There’s gonna be questions.” Dean looked to Frank who was mounting his bike. “I’m sorry. I really am sorry this didn’t work for you.”

Frank only nodded. Solemnness exuded from him. “Well, at least things are probably back to normal.” He looked at his watch. “And since it’s a normal workday. We should slip back to work.” With a slight lift of his body, Frank started the bike and took off.

Dean got on his motorcycle. “I better head back to work, too. See you later Henry to review history?”

“Yeah.” Henry nodded. When he heard Dean start the bike, Henry prepared to hop on for a ride, but Dean took off. “Hey!” He called out. “Shit. Now I have to walk.” In a wincing manner he started walking off. “If my life isn’t hard enough.”

Joe and Jason, they didn’t know how long, but they stared at the

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closed Quantum door. Shocked and speechless.

Slowly Joe faced Jason. “You sent them through? Returning or arriving?”

“My guess . . . returning.” Jason picked up the pendant Henry had laid on the counter.

“Did they have to divert something? Make things different? Like with Dean?”

“Highly doubtful.” Jason said. “If it was a planned trip I would have had the foresight to send a note for myself. No, Joe.” Jason exhaled. “I think our three stooges of time did something and I sent them back to fix it. And if I sent them back.” A long whistle came from Jason. “It must have been bad.”

“Next question.” Joe said. “If our little time travelers just floated into this lab. What the hell happened to the Frankie, Cranky and Spanky that were be-bopping about Beginnings a few minutes ago?”

The doors to the chapel in town banged loudly. But they paled in comparison to the loud, deep screams that came from Dr. Andrea Winters. Hysterical and shrill the shrieks came from her as she ran around frantically, hands waving in the air, zig-zagging through the town.

From her hover over her microscope, Ellen Slagel lifted her dark blonde hair from her eyes when she raised her head to the sounds of Andrea’s scream. “Dean?” She turned her head to the right. Oddly enough, Dean wasn’t there. To her left she turned her views to Johnny Slagel who sat across the lab. “Johnny, where did Dean go?”

“Don’t know.” Johnny continued in his work. “Hey, is that Andrea screaming out there?”

“Yeah.” Looking once more to where Dean was a moment before hand, Ellen shrugged and went back to viewing her microscope.

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Pulling Frank's office door closed, Greg, a bigger and stocky security guy stopped before walking any further. He gave an irritated shake of his body, turned and knocked on the door. "Frank." He called out as he opened it. "Sorry, I forgot my . . ." Greg froze. "Frank?" The small security office was empty. "Um, Frank. I forgot my clipboard." He walked to the desk and grabbed the clipboard he had left behind. "Where the hell did he go?" After wondering if maybe Frank had hurried and slipped into the closet to take a nap, Greg turned around to leave. As he did, in through the office door walked Frank. Greg, again, froze in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Frank asked.

Greg said nothing. He looked at Frank, looked back to the empty desk and took off from the office.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It seemed like massive pandemonium the way military truck after military truck packed with people, were lined up just inside the main front gates. Caceres Society soldiers formed a blockade around the trucks. But it was far from pandemonium. It was the return of the highly successful and highly organized survivor sweeps that the society did. Sweeps that would build the population needed to work the armies and industries the Caceres Society planned to rebuild.

Even though he was the former president of the United States, George Hadly felt like the uniformed flunky leader of the society. He knew what was going on, yet he was far from in total control. Everyone else performed the task. And sequential leaders in the society handed out most orders. George expected that much. After all, the lower ladder leaders were in charge and running things, when George himself was inside trying, but failing, to take over Beginnings.

George watched whom he considered his top men. Sgt. Timothy Doyle, who ran the military portion and training, and Steward Lange. Steward

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was not only the best 'Peace Ambassador' as they called them for the sweeps, but also George's right hand man. Trusted by George because George had known him long before the plague had wiped out the world.

Update time. And George knew the news was good when he saw a smiling Steward head his way.

"Moving them in?" George asked. "Big crew. Are we setting up new sectors?"

"Won't need to." Steward answered. "Camp masters in sectors twenty-four through thirty report they have enough to ship out. Agriculture further west needs hands. Also, we are moving people to industries, both north and south."

"Excellent. What about soldiers?"

Steward smiled again. "Sgt. Doyle is proud to report that he has capable men he can send out to the Minnesota and Alabama installation."

"Who will be in charge out there?"

"Sergeants Mason and Greene."

George nodded. "Any news on our perpetrators last night?"

Steward shook his head. "Definitely they are not coming in packs. Individually. It's easy to slip through our perimeters. How much information is missing?"

"Nothing we don't have back up of. But it's still information we don't want in their hands."

"Do you think it's Beginnings?" Steward asked.

"How?" George tossed his hands up. "Our inside person says they haven't a clue where we're at. Then again it's hard to get good information when we're dealing with Morse Code."

"We're working on that." Steward said. "Phone line computers aren't coming back up. Hey, at least we have power."

George grumbled. "We have to find out who came in here last night. They obviously came in for a reason and got what they sought. Where they are, is the next question."

Sgt. Doyle interrupted. "I may have an answer."

George turned to him. "What do you have?"

"With some concerns we had over the past couple days, concerns

myself and Mr. Lange hadn't taken serious . . ." Sgt. Doyle explained. "When I received this information, it made sense." He read off a clipboard. "Our moving teams reported what they believe is a small camp of civilization about ten miles northwest from here near a town called Bethel. They weren't there last week." Sgt. Doyle raised his eyes. "Whoever broke in here last night was close enough to get here by foot. And check out the numbers. Our people said between forty and fifty . . . all men."

George's attention was caught. "Possibly our recently defected?"

Sgt. Doyle grinned. "My thoughts exactly."

"Ha!" George snatched the clipboard from Sgt. Doyle's hand and looked at it only after smacking Steward with the object. "And you two said they were nothing to worry about."

Steward interjected. "The camp could be the perpetrators, but we can't be sure they're our defectors."

Refraining from hitting Steward again, George shook his head. "The numbers match up. We had forty-two slip out last week." He handed the clipboard back to Sgt. Doyle. "Send a two man team to scout out this camp. Watch for a few hours and get back to us." He received a nod from Sgt. Doyle. "And make sure they know morse code, I don't feel like waiting a goddamn half hour for a four word message."

With a chuckle, Sgt. Doyle stepped back. "Yes, sir."

Pleased and proud, George watched Sgt. Doyle walk off. He then noticed the looks he was getting from Steward. "What!" He barked.

Steward took a deep breath. "I have to get back to work. Just . . . just let me leave you with this." He took a courage filled pause. "Forty-two men you're worrying about. When we have what? Over six thousand right here?"

George didn't flinch at the blast of reality Steward gave him. He was so used to living in Beginnings, forty men sounded like a massive take over. And even though George could have been viewed by others as an overreacting, ranting fool, he kept up the 'concerned and threatened' exterior. He had too. Even if he himself secretly had to pull some of the more stupid society recruits aside, tell them it was a drill and set up a violent raid on Quantico, he would. George wasn't about to be proved wrong. Ever.

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Beginnings, Montana

Hands in pockets, making a jingling sound with his keys, Joe walked down the main corridor of the clinic. He could see Dean standing outside the lab door, looking frazzled. Pacing a little, probably a habit picked up from hanging around Henry. “Dean.”

Dean let out a breath. “Joe.” He tossed his head back. “Thank God.”

“Is she in there?” Joe twitched his head to the door.

Dean nodded. “Hysterical too. I can’t calm her. Andrea says she won’t leave or step outside until she speaks to you.”

“Is Ellen in there now with her?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, but Ellen’s working, so Andrea’s just sitting there . . . crying.”

Joe moaned. “What am I supposed to do?”

Dean just shrugged. “She wants you.”

Another moan and Joe reached for the door.

“Joe.” Dean grabbed his wrist. “She’s really upset, so . . . be compassionate.”

Joe nodded and stepped into the lab. He looked at Andrea sitting on a chair, her arms folded close to her. Sounds of her shivering sobs carried out intermittently with her hysterical, ‘Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus’.

“Compassion, Joe.” Dean whispered then moved to Ellen who was giggling. He nudged her to get her to quit.

Another step, another cry, another wince from Joe. “Andrea.” Joe spoke up. “What in Christ’s name is wrong with you?”

Frightened was how her cry was when Andrea sprang from her chair and leaped at Joe. “Henry’s gone.”

“Henry’s not gone.” Joe said a bit annoyed, removing Andrea’s tight grip. “Sit down.”

“He’s gone, gone. Gone.” She sat down and let out a

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hyperventilating breath. "It's the . . ." Her voice graveled with deepened fear. "It's the rapture."

"The what?" Joe asked.

"The rapture. When the Lord calls us, he calls us and takes us." She snapped her finger. "Took Henry right before my eyes. Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus." She rocked back and forth shaking her head. "I knew he was a good boy. I knew it. And the Lord called him home. Right before my eyes. He turned into blue and silver sparkles, faded then disappeared."

"He did, did he?" Joe asked looking at Dean.

Andrea nodded and seeped another sob. "The apocalypse is upon us."

"Andrea, Christ." Joe snapped. "The apocalypse was upon us six years ago."

"No!" Andrea stood up. "The Lord's apocalypse. It's judgement day, Joe." She grabbed his arms. "Judgement day. He's calling his chosen home."

"Well, he doesn't have that many to choose from so I guess we're all in luck." Joe said.

"Joseph!" Andrea gasped out. "This is not a joke. When you stand before the doors of salvation wondering why you can't get in. Then you'll know."

"Andrea, calm down." Joe tried to sooth her, in his own way of course. "There's a logical explanation for all this."

"How?" She asked. "How can you explain Henry Kusakari disappearing before my eyes?"

Dean calmly had the answer as he stepped to her "Menopause."

"What?" Andrea looked at him.

"Christ." Joe rolled his eyes and stepped back.

"Yes." Dean nodded rational. "Some woman experience hot flashes. Some mood swings. A lot, more than you know of, experience seeing people disappear before their eyes. It's the lower estrogen level causing a chemical imbalance in the brain."

With a hidden, but still heard laughter, Ellen held up her hand. "Excuse me." She covered her mouth and raced from the room.

“Dr. Hayes.” Andrea sounded offended. “Are you making a mockery of my mature woman stature, because you can’t accept the Lord’s judgement.”

“I’m not.” Dean held up his hand. “Henry is not . . .” He raised his eyes and smiled. “He’s not gone. See?” He pointed to Henry in the door.

Andrea turned to look and then she screamed jumping back.

Henry screamed. “What!” He spun looking quickly behind him, fearful Andrea saw a mouse. When he turned back around, Andrea had pelted herself at him and embraced him.

“See, Andrea.” Dean walked up to behind her and patted her on the back. “Menopause. Just be prepared the next time it happens.” He smiled and brushed by her and Henry, as he walked out.

“Dean.” Henry jolted his head. “Excuse me, Andrea.” He pulled her arms from him. “Dean, wait. I have to talk to you about history.”

Slowly Joe approached Andrea.

“I feel so silly.” Andrea said. “Acting like that over a menopause side effect. Running amuck like a fool.”

“Don’t you worry your little menopausal head about it.” Joe laid his hand on her back. “It could be worse. You could act like Frank, Dean and Henry. Then people would really think you’re strange.”

Andrea nodded her agreement.

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Attempts at trying to work were futile. Frank sat behind his desk staring at the stack of reports at least two inches high. But he couldn’t lift one of them. His mind was cluttered, far off. His brain wrestled about wondering where he went wrong. What did he do. What could he have done. Perhaps the failure in wanting to see his brother in the ‘perfect’ light had a lot to do with the fact that they shouldn’t have been messing around with time. If disappointment was his payback, Frank was drowning in debt.

One thing was for sure, he couldn’t work. He had to find Ellen. Surely if things were back to normal, so were they. Walking instead of taking his bike, Frank headed home. His heart nearly skipped a beat when he saw

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Ellen heading toward the living section. “El.” He called out.

Ellen stopped.. Pulling her coat closed, she turned around with a smile and waved.

“Hey.” Frank trotted up to her. “Where you off to?”

“Home. Josh picked up the kids. What are you doing?”

Frank shrugged. “Not much. I wanted to work. I have a little headache. El, this is gonna sound dumb. Are we . . . are we O.K.?”

Ellen hesitated in curiosity before answering. “Yeah, why? Did I forget a fight or something?”

“No.” Frank smiled. “Another silly question. What step are we on in the twelve step plan?” Frank cringed, just incase he was wrong.

Ellen laughed a single syllable laugh and pointed. “Now see who’s lacking in the marriage enthusiasm. Ha!” Ellen tossed her head back. “Six.”

“Six.” Frank nodded. “Just checking.”

“I’ve been reading while you were running around with time machine memory loss.” Ellen gave a ‘so there’ look.

“Can we get together and work on it tonight? I know step six is memories. Can we?”

“Sure.” Ellen nodded. “But I must warn you. If you’re gonna pull the chivalrous act and not put out, I’m not doing open mouth kissing. If you keep getting me worked up, I’m gonna have to go home and take it out on poor Henry.” Ellen giggled. “Do you suppose he likes women? I often wonder.” She noticed his far off look as he stared at her. “Frank?”

“I love you.” He laid his hand on her cheek. “I really love you.”

“Are you all right?” Ellen asked with concern. “You seem down.”

“I am. A little.” Frank let out a breath and tried to change the subject. “God, town’s empty. Where is every . . .” Frank hunched in surprise when the loud rattle, clank, and bangs filled the air. “What the hell?”

“Silly.” Ellen giggled. “Did you forget it’s Friday afternoon? Hence the answer to your question where everyone is at. Hiding from that.”

Frank winced. “Is that . . . drums?”

“I often ask the same question when Denny warms up.”

Frank’s head lifted in surprise. “Denny? Andrea’s Denny is playing drums?”

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“Yeah, Frank.” Ellen said. “He plays with the band? Remember?”

“What band?” Frank asked his enthusiasm rising.

“The Starters. Beginnings band.”

“Who . . .” Frank stepped backward to where the noise supposedly came from. “Who started it?”

“Paul did when . . . hey!” Ellen yelled when she saw Frank take off. She chased him.

Into the social hall Frank flew banging the door open on his entrance. The drums stopped. “Denny.” He gasped out. “Oh, my God.” And when he saw Paul turn around with the bass, he laughed like an excited kid. “Paul!” Frank shrieked in enthusiasm. “Shit! Good to see you!”

Eyes going from guitar to Frank, Paul gave an odd look. “Yeah, you too, Frank.”

But Frank still searched. His eyes shifted. Paul was there. Denny was there. And as soon as he went to ask himself the final question. He felt the grip to his arm and heard the whisper in his ear.

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Glad you came. We did learn the song for you.”

Frank felt the flutter of his stomach. And the swat to his back dropped his heart to the pit of his soul. He couldn’t breathe, especially when from behind, with a wide grin, stepped . . . Robbie.

“No dancing, Frank. We know how you are.” Robbie gave a chuckle and took a step to the stage.

“Robbie.” The words ached as they came from Frank and he reached out and grabbed his brother’s arm. He pulled him back. And when Robbie turned to face Frank, Frank locked a stare onto him. Eyes to eyes, deep. Releasing Robbie’s arm, Frank took a step and laid both of his huge hands on Robbie’s cheeks. He pulled him closer, looking into Robbie’s blue eyes as if he were reaching and looking into Robbie’s soul. “It’s there.” Frank whispered out.

“Uh . . . Frank?” Robbie said with a slight smile. “You aren’t gonna kiss me, are you? I feel a romantic incestuous entanglement creeping up.”

Frank laughed. Hard and filled with emotions. “You bet.” Yanking

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Robbie forward, Frank kissed him on the forehead and released his little brother at the same time his kiss ended with a loud smack.

“Thanks.” Robbie rubbed his forehead. “I have to play now.” He spoke pacifying to Frank as he walked backwards toward the stage area set up in the corner.

“Robbie.” Frank called out. “I’m not drunk.”

Robbie snickered with a shake of his head. “When do you get drunk?”

With a quiet, excited, ‘yes’, Frank clenched his fist. “I’m not the town drunk.” He looked down to the tap on his arm. “El?”

“Are you all right?” She asked.

“Oh, yeah.” He watched Robbie place on his guitar. “Couldn’t be better.”

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“I want to go home!” Trish’s complaining voice seeped into the back history room. “It’s four-forty-two and we know what’s gonna happen!”

Over the print up of history, Henry looked at Dean. “What is she talking about?”

“Beats me.” Dean said. “We’re lucky to get in here without an appointment. Now, go on. What is it?”

“Ready?” Henry asked. He took a deep breath and lifted a page. “Take a look.”

Before Dean could look down, his attention was drawn to the music, loud, upbeat and almost a happy older rock. “What is that?”

“Our band.” Henry said. “Courtesy of . . .” His finger pointed to the paper.

Dean looked. “Shit.” he took off from the room.

Sweeping up the print out, Henry followed.

Trish watched them dart out past her. “Thank God! As if I’m not busy enough.”

It was top speed out of History, Henry and Dean ran. Almost to

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the beat of the music. Following it to where it came from. Fast through the social hall door they blasted, both skidding to a stop beside Frank.

“Oh, my God.” Dean looked up to Robbie singing and playing on the stage. “It worked. We did it.”

Frank grinned. “We did it.” Arms folded Frank watched with pride to his brother play.

“Frank?” Henry stepped closer. “Is it me or does Robbie look different.”

“Yeah.” Dean agreed. “There’s something different about him.”

“You’re right.” Frank said. “Look at his eyes.”

Watching Robbie, so happy, play his guitar, Frank saw it and so did Dean and Henry. No matter how rugged the edges were on his young handsome face. No matter how many scars of war Robbie had. The gleam of his bright blue eyes showed the ageless innocence of Robbie. Innocence that wasn’t there when Robbie showed up in Beginnings a year before, nor in the history when Robbie was married to Ellen. It was back. Or rather, never lost. And Frank knew he didn’t just have Robbie back in his life, he had his little brother.

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CHAPTER TWO

“Frank.” Joe snapped to get his attention in the crowded and loud social hall. “Are you listening?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded, took a drink and gave a motion of his head to the playing band. “Pretty good.”

“Not to Robbie’s band. To me. And thank God they’re almost done.” Joe sipped his whiskey. “I couldn’t take anymore than two hours of this shit.”

“Dad.” Frank gasped out. “Such lack of support.”

“And you.” Joe pointed. “You’re acting like you never heard them.”

“I haven’t.” Frank saw Joe gaze up. “I mean. I have. But, what I’m trying to say is . . . have any of us really listened to the band. I mean really . . .”

“Frank. Enough.” Joe rubbed his temple. “Do you have a problem with it.”

“The band? No. I like them.”

“Not the band.” Joe slammed his hand on the bar. “Robbie going to Cleveland to check out the cryo lab at the same time Ellen will be in quarantine following the future trip.”

“Yeah, a little. I’d like to spend some time reminiscing with Robbie.”

“What the hell is the matter with you?” Joe asked. “I could care less what you and your brother have to talk about. I’m talking about running security and your family.”

“What about it?”

“Will you have a problem with it. Will it be too much?”

“Dad, please.” Frank scoffed. “I’m Frank.”

“Unfortunately.” Joe grumbled. He then sighed in relief when the silence of the finishing band hit. “Thank God. Frank, let me ask you something now that I don’t have to shout over the band.” He waited until he not only had Frank’s attention but comprehension that he was about to be

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asked a question. "You guys came through the machine today." Joe spoke in a low voice. "Why? You obviously had to change something back. I can steal the history disks, but tell me."

"You can't yell." Frank said. When he saw Joe lift his hand in a promise, Frank leaned down toward the bar. "When we came back from the past trip . . . everything was gone. Beginnings was gone."

"Gone?" Joe stated in such disbelief.

"Nuclear war." Frank made a mouth blast sound. "There was even this odd purple cloud. We figure it had to do with the call Dean made to himself concerning the plague. So we had to come back and stop Dean."

"And how exactly did you get back to stop Dean?" Joe asked.

"Jason sent us."

"Uh-huh." Joe nodded. "A nuclear war. A purple cloud. No more Beginnings yet Jason was here."

"Dad. It was the oddest thing." Frank looked up when Robbie approached. "I guess, you know, some things are meant to be."

Robbie reached between his father and Frank and grabbed Frank's half empty glass. He downed it. "Hey, Frank. Ready?"

"Yep." Frank stood straight. "Se ya Dad."

"Frank." Joe called to him. "Just tell me this. It was screwed up. Did you fix it?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "We made it better." With a smile he walked from the social hall with Robbie.

Robbie snickered. "Man, what has gotten into you? I swear you've been hanging around Dean too much. All calm."

"A lot has happened." Frank stopped walking.

"Frank?" Robbie looked at him. "Is something bothering you? Everything's all right. Right?"

"Yeah. But . . . aside from no longer being the town drunk. Some things changed. Feel like talking for a while?"

"Sounds serious."

"It is." Frank nodded. "I need you to have an open mind."

"You got it." Robbie gave a twitch to his head and started to walk. "Let's go."

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Frank was ready for the laughter, ready for the ridicule because he was ready to talk. There was a lot Frank needed to find out, to know, and he had to hear it, especially from his brother's mouth.

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

"It's a grab and go." Steward explained as he took a seat across from George in the office. "Whoever is sneaking in here hasn't a clue what they want. They hit one of our buildings, grab what they can and go." Steward shrugged. "Last night's little invasion and tonight's, don't match up. I mean, the information they got on both nights isn't even vaguely similar."

George nodded his comprehension. "I realize that. But just running in and grabbing can be detrimental to us as well."

"How?" Steward asked. "You are talking forty-two men. Forty-two."

"I know that doesn't seem like a lot. And in comparison to us, it isn't. But just as we build, they could too. And them knowing what we have, isn't favorable to us."

"I understand your concerns about that." Steward said and prepared to say more when a knock was at the door.

George looked up. "Must be Doyle. Come in." He called out.

Sgt. Doyle stepped in. "Sirs." He greeted George and Steward. "Scout report." He held up a small sheet of paper.

"And? George asked.

"All indications are there that these men are our defectors. Whether or not they are the ones that came in and stole information remains to be seen." Sgt. Doyle explained. "Scouts report forty-four men. All of prime age and in good shape. They apparently have a makeshift camp set up. No long term signs. They are definitely temporary there."

George leaned back in his chair. "They could have picked up two more men out there. And seeing that they're so close, let's not take a chance."

Sgt. Doyle nodded. "I agree. I'd like a dawn hit. Four, eight man

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squads led by Sgt. Hemsley. I'll notify the scouts to stay put and do nothing."

George nodded.

Steward stood up slowly. "I'll notify the surgical crew to prepare for immediate removal with this batch. They can be in limbo until implantation."

"No." George said, causing Steward to stop. "No."

Steward looked in surprise. "No? You worry about these men. Through your concerns, do we want to lose another scout master or records man at their hands when they try to escape again?"

"Absolutely not." George said. "And I made mention, take no chances. And we won't. No gas, Sgt. Doyle. No cyborg enhancement. At dawn, sneak attack, heavy fire. As Steward keeps reiterating, they're only forty-some men." George gave a nonchalant attitude. "So just wipe them out."

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## Lee-Curtis Mansion Arlington National Cemetery

The hand sharpened pencil tapped upon the tattered scrap paper he wrote on. At the oak kitchen table in the former historical tourist attraction, Elliott Ryder sat by a dimly lit lantern. The small flame flickered a dance in his Hispanic dark eyes that shifted to the battery powered radio. He stared for a moment at what he had written, then reached over and shut off the hissing transmission. Fingertips cold, Elliott huffed on his hands before he grabbed his paper and the lantern. A man of thirty, thin and fit, began his journey to delivery the news.

A few specks of illumination were in the house. Most came from the fireplaces with small burning fires to keep the men warm while they slept. Most of the men rested, a few engaged in conversation.

From the basement level he walked up, shivering from the cold

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and shuddering from the eerie feeling of being in the icon of the civil war. He didn't like it there. It was damp and ghostly. Of course being set in the middle of a cemetery aided in that. To Elliott, it was more spooky than the entire dead country. Not too mention there was just something weird about it. But he understood why they went there just that morning. Elliott himself preferred the 'wait and stay' in the White house. Gathering up information there was easy, plus Washington D.C., for some reason had power, so the White house was warm. But everyone was together again, all information that could be retrieved was, and the society soldiers moved frequently through the overgrown capitol preparing it for something. Moving about, for him and his men for supplies, had to be done through the sewer system or former subway. A tedious task, not to mention dangerous with the society growing everywhere. It was time to move to safer higher ground. And they did . . . literally. On top of a hill in the most famous cemetery.

There wasn't a part of his body that didn't grow colder as Elliott made his way through the extremely drafty halls of the home. He was grateful for the red bandana he wore. In fact most of the men wore bandanas. Not as a statement, but as a sense of warmth. Elliott didn't mind forfeiting his black locks when he was recruited into what he thought was the 'New United States Army'. He didn't mind until his one cohort, did what he always seemed to do, charmed his way into keeping his long dark blonde hair. Elliott supposed that was why his cohort was the undeniable leader of the crew. He could convince anyone to do anything. In fact *he* was the one that had convinced Elliott to join the army twelve years earlier. When all Elliott ever wanted to do was work in his father's shoe factory outside of Cleveland.

The Captain. For so many years before the plague, Elliott had called him the Captain--or Lieutenant pre-promotion--that Elliott swore he had forgotten his real name. Everyone called him 'The Captain' and that was who Elliott journeyed through the spooky house to see.

In the sitting room doorway, Elliott stopped. He took a moment to chuckle at the Captain who sat alone in a chair by a small fireplace. A chair probably graced by the rear of Robert E. Lee many times. The Captain sat reading, his tall, brawny body looking small in the piece of old furniture. Piles of papers spewed around him.

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“More productive night?” Elliott questioned as he stepped in.

Looking up, the man not much older than Elliott grinned. “Very productive. I got a lot more than I expected. But still not enough.”

“You’re not going back into Quantico again, are you?” Elliott asked.

“I have to.” The Captain shifted a piece of paper. “I need to get all I can before we move on. I knew something was up when I saw Hadly arrive. And this documentation, though not much, confirms it.”

“You do know they’ll kill you if they catch you.”

“Elliott.” The Captain chuckled. “They probably are looking for someone sneaking in. Hell, I walked right through the front gate in a society uniform. Besides, if something happens to me, you’ll lead the men.”

“Me?” Elliott laughed. “Me? No. I’m no leader.”

“Nonsense. Look how you organized the stylish movement of bandanas.”

“Oh, really funny.” Elliott shook his head. “We’re all bald.” He gave a sneer to the Captain’s long ponytail. “Well, all but one of us.”

The Captain smiled. “How’s the demeanor of the men?”

“Fine.” Elliott said. “Waiting patiently on your move.” He smiled. “Captain, I have to tell you. This house . . . this house . . .”

“Is great?”

“No, it sucks.”

“Now is that a general consensus or an Elliott opinion only?”

“O.K., well.” Elliott shrugged. “It’s mine. But . . .”

“Elliott.” The Captain stood. “Don’t you find the house filled with spirit? Don’t you feel the irony of the past and current situations when staying here?”

“No.” Elliott said. “I get the creeps. And speaking of irony. I do have a reason for disturbing you in your ‘wanna be Robert E. Lee’ moment.” Elliott handed him the paper. “Definitely morse code. That’s their means of communication now.”

The Captain read his notes. “Where’s this Bethel.”

“Not far. Fifteen miles. Small camp. Dawn hit. A wipe out. And . . . here’s the deal. They think they’re us. So knowing this . . .”

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The Captain's eyes raised. "We have a moral obligation."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Run a little pre-dawn interference?"

"Sure, why not." Elliott shrugged.

"Excellent. Let's go tell everyone." With a clench to the note, a swat to Elliott's back, an upbeat Captain walked from the sitting room with Elliott.

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### Beginnings, Montana

The envelope, crinkled a bit and yellowed, sat on Henry's coffee table. Just sitting there, it gathered the most in awe stares of Frank, Dean and Henry.

"This is so weird." Frank reached down and touched it. "Dean, you just mailed this not that long ago."

Henry sat with his personal journals opened. "At least we know that letter was the reason it worked. Was it, Robbie? Did that letter prompt you to go to Ashtonville?"

"Absolutely." Robbie's eyes went to the letter. "It was simple. Frank telling me Dad would call. Saying it was imperative I go to Ashtonville. When I read that. I thought how psychic Frank was."

"Wow." Frank was amazed. "So you waited until the year of the plague to open it?"

"No way." Robbie laughed. "I opened it right away."

"And you still believed it?" Frank asked.

"Why not." Robbie answered. "You're my big brother. Why would I doubt you. Of course, now, years later I'm a little wiser." He winked.

Henry took notes as he listened. "So you go there on the onset."

"Yep." Robbie nodded. "As soon as I got the call, I grabbed that letter. I called Hal, but there was no way he'd get there. He was stationed in Hawaii. And Jimmy. Jimmy said he'd try. But I went immediately. I went AWOL."

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Henry handed Robbie a sheet of paper. "Here's a list of people we remember being in Ashtonville. Anyone different, that wasn't or was there that could have made an effect we don't know about?"

Robbie reviewed the list. "Just me." He handed it back to Henry.

"Good." Henry breathed out. "We don't want to not remember someone we should. I have some other events that happened. Can you fill us in?"

"I'll try." Robbie tossed his hands up. "Fire away."

"Colorado." Henry said. "Obviously the scientists were defrosted. What went down with Colorado?"

"El and Miguel went. They tried to keep El, Frank went after her." Robbie stated.

"Wait." Frank interrupted. "Why would I trust Miguel over you. Why didn't I send you to Colorado?"

"I was supposed to go." Robbie answered. "But I broke my leg in a trap the night before. It's finally feeling really good.."

Henry flipped a page in his journal. "Now I have written, El and I went back to save Dean."

"Yep." Robbie nodded. "Well, that's what we're told. I never knew the Dean is dead history. What I recall is being locked in holding with Frank awaiting our ousting. My Dad shows up walking. George escaped."

Dean decided to interject. "So Joe was still hit with the Salicain. I saw by my notes we're still working on the virus. What about the time machine to find the society?"

Robbie nodded. "Find them or, as Frank believes, find what we have that's so important. Personally, I think it's me." Robbie grinned.

"Strategically where do we stand with the society?" Frank asked.

"Haven't had any hits by them lately. So we definitely think they're taking time to build. Right now our pain in the ass problem is our budding savages." Robbie saw that the three of them knew exactly what he talked about. "In and out of Beginnings. We think, but not sure, they keep messing with perimeter seven."

Frank understood. "What about our personal lives? El and I are married, I know that. And we're obviously having problems, she's bunking

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here with Henry. But tell me, tell me her and I have always been together.”

Robbie shook his head and pointed to Dean. “She was with Dean for a really long time, Frank. You kept interfering and Dean finally said enough is enough. But you and her are working through this. It kind of went full circle and Ellen ended up cheating on you with Dean.”

It was a relief to Dean. Even though their personal lives were still the same scrambled mess, they were a familiar ground they could stand on. “So you played no interference in the relationship aspects?”

“No.” Robbie shook his head. “Oh.”

“What?” Frank asked.

“Well, you may find out. You may not. You know what?” Robbie waved his hand. “I’m not saying anything.”

Dean’s eyes lifted to Robbie in slow revelation. “You slept with Ellen.”

Frank scoffed. “Oh he did not, Dean. See where your warped perverted mind is at? Robbie said nothing about him . . .” Frank saw Robbie’s eyes lift in an innocent manner to the ceiling. “No.”

“Well.” Robbie stood up slowly. He saw the glare in Frank’s eyes. “No, wait.” He defended. “It was a short time after the plague. She shut everyone out but me. And I believe that’s because I stayed by El’s side the whole entire time. The whole time. Just, just like your letter said.”

Frank’s nostrils flared as he tried to control the hard hit of the news. “I’m not happy about this.”

“Yeah, well. You weren’t back then either.” Robbie said.

Henry decided to divert the subject. “What about you and I Robbie. Do we get along?”

“No.” Robbie replied as he sat back down. “We clash, our tempers flare and occasionally we square off. Actually I’d go as far as to say we hate each other.”

Henry whistled a breath in relief. “Oh good. Because I just needed to feel justified for not liking you very much right now.”

“You know we wouldn’t have these problems right now.” Robbie said with a slightly raised top lip. “If you didn’t take advantage of my emotional vulnerability and convince me to have that affair with you.”

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“Oh my God!” Henry nearly flew back. “I’m gay in this Beginnings?”

“Flaming.” Robbie winked.

“See.” Frank pointed. “What did I always say, Henry. You bitch too much like a woman to not be gay. And you broke my brother’s heart. Shame on you.”

“Now, see.” Henry shook his head. “Now I know you’re lying. You probably put him up to this.” Henry cringed at Frank’s laughter. “Yeah, laugh. Assholes.” He saw Dean stand up. “See, you offended Dean.”

“No.” Dean snickered. “I’m just gonna go home. Josh will want to bring the kids back from Frank’s. Thanks, Robbie you told us a lot.”

“Yeah.” Frank stood up too. “We’ll talk tomorrow Robbie. I’ll go get the kids, Dean. Bring them right . . .”

“Wait.” Robbie stood up. “I answered questions for you guys, answer me this. Not that it matters now, but I’m curious. Frank said I didn’t arrive in Ashtonville, it took years for me to get here. What happened to me?”

Frank hesitated, but took a deep breath to start his explanation. “See Robbie, you searched for us. For five years you looked. You lived out there and when you got here you were . . .”

“Sick.” Dean interrupted in a fast speaking manner. “Very, very sick. A major infection had taken over your body and . . .” Dean slowed down his talking. “By the time you got here, it was too late. We couldn’t help you. You died not long after.”

“Well at least I found my family right?” Robbie smiled. “I succeeded. Thanks for telling me. I’ll walk out with you guys.” He moved to the door. “Hey, night Henry.” Robbie said snide.

Henry, looking at his journals and history, lifted his head in a snubbing manner pretending not to see Robbie flip him off.

Frank laughed as he was the last to walk out. But he slowed down in pulling the door closed to grab Dean’s attention. Behind Robbie’s back, silently, and mostly with his eyes, Frank delivered a ‘thank you’ to Dean for interfering in the painful ‘Robbie’ truth.

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HENRY'S JOURNAL

November 27

Oddly enough I am on the last page of this particular journal. And as I close it, I also close another book. The ripple we all caused. A lot of answers were given to me, but I guess I do not know the whole truth. That would be impossible. Too many years have passed. I suppose, there will be times when I am confused. When my mind will wonder how bringing Robbie back caused this or that. I must remind myself to not drudge over it. To move on and not worry. There's nothing that can be done. The changes have been made. Our lives before this now have been sculptured a little differently than we know. A new history is set in stone. And even if ill-informed, I have to accept it. Because this is the way it will be from here on in.

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CHASING TOMORROW

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## CHAPTER THREE

November 28

Bethel, Virginia

It looked more like a manual to better football plays, rather than the military manual it was. But Society troop leader, Sgt. Hemsley found the ‘Caceres Society strategical handbook’, quite the asset. Especially when picking out which maneuver he wanted to use in the dawn raid of that defector camp.

He liked under sneak attacks, maneuver CS-422. Especially because it stated that he himself had to stay back while his men went into the opposing camp. And that was what Sgt. Hemsley did. Stayed back by the trucks, a mile or so away, and waited.

Corporal Warren gave a simple single chirping sound. His signal to the society soldiers that it was time to move in on the sleeping camp. So quiet the camp was, but on his call, the soldiers barged in. Weapons raised, they opened fire across the tents, ripping them to shreds. They followed through with the tossing of grenades. The small fire arms rained upon the camp causing the finishing off explosions that sent dirt and debris into the air.

And then silence.

“Hold your fire.” Corporal Warren called out. “Hold your fire.”

A shot here and there trailed off.

Corporal Warren assessed the camp. There were no sounds. Only the dead quiet that they anticipated following the slaughter of fire that the society laid upon them. “Move in!” he ordered out.

Weapons lifted still ready to engage, the society patrol moved in slowly.

Corporal Warren reached the center camp along with his men.

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“Anyone you find alive. Shoot. And . . .” He stopped talking when he heard the whistle. Just a single one. And he turned his head thinking it was one of his men. Before he could find who signaled him, it rang around them in a frightening thunder. The shifting and pumping of weapon chambers. “What the hell?” Corporal Warren looked about. He saw nothing. No one.

“Fire at will!” The Captain’s voice rang out across the silent camp. And on his charge, the gunfire began.

Perched in trees and hidden in the brush, the forty-four men who would have died in that raid, along with the defectors, unleashed a bloody death upon the thirty-two unsuspecting society soldiers. The bodies were ripped apart by bullets that came from gunmen they never saw. The tables had been turned.

The first symphony of gunfire and explosions were expected, but the second sent Sgt. Hemsley into a tailspin. Something was wrong. He could hear the distance screams of pain echoing through the dead world distance. Immediately he jumped in his jeep, tossed it in gear and sped off down the overgrown road toward the raid.

The gunfire slowed down, instead of steady shots, occasional pops rang out. The closer he drove the more he knew something was not right. Knowing this, and knowing someone had to report the trouble, Sgt. Hemsley decided to turn around. Releasing his foot from the gas, and gripping the wheel, Sgt. Hemsley slowed down enough to turn. But as soon as he jerked the wheel to the right, out from the trees, darting crossing the road was Elliott Ryder.

Instinctively Sgt. Hemsley hit the breaks. The jeep screeched and slid to a stop at the same time Elliott’s hands slammed onto the hood when the vehicle nearly hit him.

Both men locked eyes. The stare wasn’t as long as it seemed. Breathing heavily, Elliott, stepped back, and reached for his weapon.

Sgt. Hemsley did the same and realized he had left his behind. Jeep still running, he hit the gas, jolted the wheel and just drove off. Even if it wasn’t on the road, he was making his escape.

Elliott fired at the jeep. But the thick trees that Sgt. Hemsley

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disappeared into were a shield of natures protection. Elliott lowered his weapon in defeat, then turned and headed back toward the Captain to alert him of what happened.

CHAPTER FOUR  
Beginnings, Montana

“Morning, Dean.” Ellen said semi chipper as she entered the clinic lab. She turned to her right and stopped cold. She looked at the empty coffee pot. “Dean, if you’re gonna drag my ass to work on a Saturday, you have to make coffee.”

“Sorry.” Dean looked up from the computer. “I got busy. And, El, thanks for coming by this morning to watch the kids until Hap got there. I really needed to start prepping things for this future trip.”

“Which by the way . . .” Ellen walked to the counter. “Was there a problem last night?”

Confused, Dean peered from his work. “No, why?”

“Frank didn’t bring all the kids home.”

“Sure he did.” Dean snickered.

“No, he didn’t. You’re missing one.”

“Oh.” Dean nodded. “Brian stays with Frank, El.”

“Not Brian.” Ellen said. “Dean, where’s your son?”

“Isn’t he home?”

“No. When I went up to check he wasn’t in bed.”

“Oh, my God.” Dean sprang up. “Billy’s missing?”

“Not Billy.”

Dean tilted his head with an even more confused look. “El, Frank brought the kids home last night. Who else could it . . .” His eyes widened trying hide his confusion on how that odd child still existed. “Frank.” He said the same in a complaining manner.

“What?” Frank answered as he walked into the lab. “I heard the call of greatness.”

“Asshole.” Dean walked from behind the counter. “Where’s my kid?”

“Which one?”

“You know exactly which one.” Dean said. “You were supposed

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to bring them all home last night. Where is he?”

“Who?” Frank asked.

“You know. Um ..” Dean closed his eyes. “What’s his name.”

Ellen tapped Dean on the shoulder then folded her arms in an angry stance. “Joey.”

Dean snapped his finger. “That’s it. Thanks, El. Joey. Where is he, Frank? What did you think? I wouldn’t notice you didn’t return my kid.”

Frank laughed. “You didn’t.”

“And you knew I wouldn’t, so you did it on purpose.” Dean turned his head to Ellen’s gasp. “What?”

“You wouldn’t notice your own son not coming home?” Ellen asked.

“No he wouldn’t.” Frank interjected. “Shameless father. Which brings me to the reason for my visit. I have a proposition for you, Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “This ought to be good. Go on.”

“Let me have Joey.”

“What!” Dean blasted.

“No, hear me out.” Frank held up his hand. “Let me have him. Him and I, we have a bond. He looks just like me. Let me have your kid, Dean.”

“No!” Dean yelled.

“Come on, Dean. I can dress him up in baby cammies, make him a miniature Frank. No one will know.”

“Frank.” Dean barked. “Everyone will know if I just give you my kid. And no.”

“Come on Dean, let me have him.” Frank followed Dean around the lab. “Dean. The kid can successfully hang jump from the second floor window without injury. Do you know what that means?”

“Yeah, there’s something wrong with him.”

“Exactly.” Frank failed to hear the numerous sounds of shock come from Ellen. “So I should raise him. Give him up. He’s not your type of kid.”

“No, Frank, this is absurd. I can’t believe you just want me to give you my kid.” Dean said. “And you raising my kid isn’t even an option. I

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would like him to know how to read.”

“Dean.” Frank spoke with seriousness. “Have you talked to Joey? I don’t think he has that in him. I’m gonna have to go another route of skills.”

Dean bobbed his head. “You may have a point.”

“Oh my God! Enough!” Ellen exclaimed. “I can’t believe I’m standing here listening to this. Dean. Do you have a problem with Joey?”

“No.” Dean said in a defensive manner.

“Then why are you implying he’s not smart?” Ellen asked.

“Well . . . El.” Dean tilted his head.

Another gasp came from Ellen. “I have blood work.” She turned with a jolt. In her storm from the clinic she nearly barreled over Joe. “Excuse me, Joe.”

After watching Ellen whiz by, Joe stepped into the lab. “Is there a problem?”

Both Frank and Dean turned around.

“I thought maybe there was.” Joe walked in further. “We had a meeting in my office a half hour ago. So knowing this, Frank, why’s your jeep parked outside?”

Frank slowly shifted his eyes from Dean to Joe. “Um, because I can’t park inside?”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “The question should be, why are you here?”

“No, Dad.” Frank held up a finger. “The question should be, why are *you* here questioning me on why *I’m* here when both you and I should be there.” He nodded. “See?”

Dean raised his hand slightly. “Joe, as odd as this is, in Frank’s defense, why didn’t you just radio him?”

“I did.” Joe snapped. “I kept saying, ‘Frank, where are you?’”

“And I answered you.” Frank said. “Every time you asked. I told you. Bakery. My office. Here.”

“Frank.” Joe stated his name with an eerie calm. “Get your ass up to my office for that meeting. We have the society and the Cleveland run to discuss. And Dean, since your supposed to stop by, you might as well hop

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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a ride.” Joe started to leave.

“Joe? What for?” Dean asked.

Frank breathed out in irritation. “The meeting Dean.”

“Not that.” After a quick glare to Frank, Dean looked back to Joe. “Why, uh, am I meeting with you guys. I’m not remembering. We did come through that machine yesterday. Time machine memory loss.” He tossed his hands up.

“That’s right.” Joe nodded. “When you returned from the nuclear holocaust.” Joe spoke as if he were talking to a three year old. “Dean. You’re supposed to give us a Marcus report.” After a pacifying smile, Joe gave one more nod and walked out.

“Oh, yeah.” Frank grinned. “We’re talking about killer babies. My favorite topic. And speaking of innocent children.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “You’re not getting Joey.” He moved to the door. “Wait for me Frank, I just have to run down to the cryo lab and get my Marcus notes. I won’t be long. Thanks.”

“O.K.” Frank nodded. And after Dean walked out, so did Frank. He left the clinic, watched Dean head to the entrance of the tunnels, then Frank got in the jeep and drove off.

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“In excess of fifty-five miles per hour.” Dean laid down his notes as he sat in Joe’s office for the meeting. “And this is just a baby. Weather?” Dean fluttered his lips. “Not effected at all. We saw some deterioration in Marcus’ skin sample at three hundred and seventy-five degrees, so in a sense you probably could burn them.”

Frank reached for the notes. “Or shoot them. But . . . we’d have to catch them first. Any guess on how fast they’ll move as adults?”

Dean shook his head. “I don’t want to think about it.”

Henry’s whispering words caught their attention. “An indestructible army.”

Joe, Frank, and Dean, all looked to him.

Henry continued. “Not just workers. A force indestructible.”

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March through anything, quickly too. The SUTS, that's their first line of defense. Having them around until these Marcus type people are ready. Remember they can only know one thing."

Frank rubbed his eyes. "So basically our next generation is looking at a hell of a war."

Dean chuckled emotionally. "Next generation? No Frank, this generation. These things grow fast. Right now Marcus has grown at six times a normal rate. At that rate, within three years they can have an army going. And how many embryos they created is not known either. And we have one other problem. We have one hell of a generation gap here in Beginnings, or hasn't anyone noticed. Leaving out babies, we have a small group of children between the ages of four and ten, and three teenagers. Our median age for men here is thirty-five. Thirty-five is young to you and I, but we aren't youthful men Frank. In five, six years, our young won't be old enough to fight and our men may be losing their edge."

Frank scoffed. "Speak for yourself, Dean."

Joe who had been silent, spoke up. "Though Dean has a point. There's nothing we can do about that. We just have to keep trying to find men for an army. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I do." Frank spoke up. "We have about a hundred of those killer baby embryos. Grow our own army. Just like them."

Joe winced. "They explode uterus, Frank. Whose gonna volunteer for that?"

Dean interjected. "I was actually thinking after the virus stuff was over with, creating an artificial womb. If I'm successful, go that route."

"Or use animals. How about a cow?" Frank added.

Dean gave a thinking look.

Joe cringed. "No. Even if we do that, who's gonna raise these wild children."

Frank gave a wave out of his hand. "Hell with raising them. Pen them up, make them animals, then train them using shock therapy."

"Frank." Joe barked. "They're humans for Christ sake."

"Killer babies." Frank corrected.

"Humans." Joe reiterated. "Whether they eat live flesh or not,



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humans. Creating a lab army has to be out.”

Frank’s finger snapped as he stared blankly out. “What about using one already made?” He saw they didn’t understand what he meant. “Come on, you don’t know? Our SUTs? Henry what do you think?”

“Frank, they’re programmed already for the society.” Henry replied.

“So.” Frank said. “We reprogram them. Set up a SUT camp where we work with them. Me and Robbie can train them. We have smart people here, isn’t there anyone that can figure out how to reprogram these things? This is perfect. They’re all different ages, they don’t know any better . . .”

Joe held up his hand. “Frank you’re getting ahead of yourself. I like the way you’re thinking. Make them our first line of defense. But I really don’t think that can be done either.”

Henry smiled. “Maybe it can, Joe. We have that microchip from the SUT Frank shot. Dean, could you give it to me. Let me work on it. See what I can do. I’m great with computers.”

Dean tossed his hands up. “Sure. But then what, Henry? Who are we going to implant it in to see if it works?”

Frank answered. “Another SUT. We’re bound to run into one, especially with that Cleveland trip next week. We pick one up, drug him. Can you keep him alive Dean without that thing in his brain? That way if we remove his, Henry has two chips incase he screws up.”

Dean’s finger lifted in a thinking manner. “This could work. And it’s pretty good coming from you..”

“I’m the man.” Frank said. “We’ll build our own army yet, even if we have to cheat to do . . .”

Robbie knocked once and stuck his head in the door. “Dean, your Barbie camper is parked.”

“My what?” Dean stood up puzzled then it hit him. “Oh my Mobile. Did you guys get it up there?”

“Yep.” Robbie nodded. “Let’s go, I brought the jeep, I know you’ve been waiting for it.”

“Thanks, Robbie.” Dean moved to the door. “I’ll uh . . . see you

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guys later.” Excited he followed Robbie out.

Henry soon stood also. “I have some things to take care of too. Frank, make sure Dean gets that to me?”

“What?” Frank asked.

“Never mind. I’ll talk to Dean.” Henry left.

“About . . .” The door shut. “What?” Frank stood up and then snapped his finger. “Oh.” He closed his eyes. “I remember now. O.K.”

“He’s gone Frank.” Joe spoke.

“I know, I was thinking out loud. I understand myself better that way. I’m heading out too. I want to finish the Cleveland Run notes.” Frank started to leave.

Joe just nodded slowly watching his son walk to the door. He was grateful the meeting was over.

“Oh Dad? One more thing.”

“What’s that, Frank?” Joe asked.

“Isn’t it good to have Robbie here? Especially the Robbie we remember.” With a smile, Frank walked out.

“What?” Joe threw his hands in the air, then saw his door open again and Frank poke his head in.

“Dad? Forget I said that. Thanks.” The door shut again.

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Dean was filled with excitement when he jumped from the jeep to see the huge CDC mobile parked nearby Jason’s lab. John Matoose was walking away from it when Dean approached. “Hey John, all secure?”

“Yep.” John took off his baseball cap, ran his hands through his balding, thin blonde hair and put the hat back on. “All situated. I’ll tell Henry he can start running the power lines through in the morning.”

Dean smoothed his hand on the outside of the silver tube-like building. “Any equipment in there?”

“We took it out. It’s up in storage with that other stuff you brought from Nebraska. You’ll have to hook it up when you’re powered up. Otherwise she’s clean. We even did like you said. We sent the one brain

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damaged field worker inside. He cleaned out all the specimens that could be dangerous.”

“Excellent.” Dean reached for the door.

“Dean? It’s kind of small in there.” John said leaning into him. “How are you three going to be quarantined in there for any length of time. There’s not even a real bathroom.”

Seeing Dean’s mouth open, Robbie filled the air with words. “Where you been. John?” He stepped closer to the mobile. “We’re bringing in one of the small security campers from the field. Hook it up to the side door. It should make it easy for Henry to power that up also. Gonna build a small protection tunnel.”

John nodded. “Good idea. Get with me later and we’ll work on moving it before you head out to Cleveland.”

“Will do.” Robbie watched John leave. “So Dean, you gonna check it out?”

“Um yeah.” He grabbed for the door. “You coming?”

“Nah, I’ll check out the outside of it.”

Dean, leaving Robbie be, opened up the door finally. The smell of old and dirt hit him immediately. Tubular inside and out. There were two small labs. A normal set up. A working lab and an infectious special lab were separated by a glass wall. The closet size decontamination room was adjacent to the lab behind the glass. Rubbing the coldness from his hands, Dean stepped further in. He stood in the bigger lab he supposed they’d do a lot of their paper work in. It was dark. The main window that took up the whole one end of the building, was so dirty it blocked out any sunlight. When John said it was clean, what he really meant was empty. The mobile would have to be scrubbed down completely. Dirt so thick gathered everywhere around the blue and white interior. Thinking how much nicer the military special units were, Dean ran his freezing hand down the blackened counter-top. Bringing his fingers to his view, he heard the loud metal thump above his head. The thump turned into several, spanning across the length of the mobile. Looking up to the ceiling, Dean’s ears rang with the steady heavy hits. “What the hell?” He stepped back out and looked up. “Robbie! What are you doing?”

Robbie slammed his foot against the roof of the mobile.

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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“Making sure this thing is air tight. If you’re going to be bringing back some killer virus from the future, it better be.”

“It won’t be if you keep banging your feet up there. Get down!”

Dean scolded.

“All right.” With a four step run, Robbie leaped from the top of the mobile landing on the grass by Dean.

“Gees, Robbie, you’re gonna break your leg again.”

“Nah. I’m too cool. Hey I’m heading back to do my tests, want me to drive you to town?”

Dean closed the door to the mobile lab. “I’ll take a lift.” As he walked to the jeep he looked back at the distance that Robbie had leaped from. A distance had anyone else done they would have shattered their ankles. Chalking it up to it being a Slagel thing, Dean got in the jeep. He watched Robbie through the corner of his eyes as they drove back. Robbie popped a cassette into the jeep’s player, turned up the volume, bobbed his head with a grin, and sang as he peeled out. An air of arrogance surrounded Robbie, but it was coupled with something else. A childlike enthusiasm lost to most men in the world gone bad. It was so hard to believe to Dean that *this* Robbie was the same one who beat him to a pulp and shot Frank. In actuality, he wasn’t. And even though Dean was still in a game of mind ping-pong over his trusting of Robbie, he knew before long he would stay steady at one side of the table. The side with Ellen and everyone else in Beginnings. There was something innocently genuine about *this* Robbie Slagel. And Dean liked him. He really liked him.

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

The large auditorium was crowded. Packed with every man that could attend what George was calling the ‘town meeting’. Every seat was taken and the men who stood, crammed in the back to listen to the president. All if them held onto a newsletter of sorts given to them.

George wore blue jeans and a simple tee shirt. His work boots were dirty, his hair not as neatly combed. He sat in a lean against a long table

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before the room. Relaxed and honest was what George wanted to portray. And he looked the part.

“That friend.” George pointed then brought his hands back to a fold. “I want to be that friend. I want . . . I want to be the father you can come to in the middle of the night. Any time. I am here.” He slowly stood up. “That was the way I ran my presidency. This is the way I want to be with you. Many of you have questions. Hell, so would I. I don’t cringe when Mr. Lange brings me the contents of the suggestion box. No.” George shook his head. “I welcome the feedback. Welcome it. And I read every single one. Now . . .” George stopped pacing again. “I may not be able to address every concern. But that is what the weekly meetings are for. To try. You men are here by choice and by God we are grateful. What we plan to do can not be done without you. A number one question is why we are not calling ourselves the United States. Think about it. Take the word apart. United. United. Are we united?” George shook his head. “No. The Caceres society was an organization who planned and stockpiled for such a situation as we faced. For years they planned. Set in motion where and when to be. What took so long to get you? It has taken years to get to the point where we are even able to offer you anything. I myself was taken prisoner for a while. But . . .” George sighed heavily. “That is not you concern. You’re here. Food. Well, we must ration. But that is only until we get things running. We are a country ravished by plague. We have groups of survivors who are selfish, want no part of the new order. We have survivors I call savages who run around in loin cloths defiling the memory of our great American Indian ancestors. These are obstacles. You ask, some of you, where the women are at. Need I answer that with the savages running around. Safe and secure, placed in what we like to call . . .” George smiled. “A spoiling community. Pampered and treasured like the valuable assets they are.” He reached behind him for a clipboard. “Some of you have asked why survivors are taken against their will. Well, under the laws of this nation the government may seize any land they see fit. If it is farmed and fertile, we must take it. We must feed those who are here to rebuild. You are our future.” George set the clipboard down. “We have to rebuild technology, strength, agriculture and most of all we must build an army great enough to defend this land. Why?” Stopping, George

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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took a relaxing seat on the table. “This country fed seventy-five percent of the world. This country is ours. If we do not build to defend it, if we do not unify in the name of the Caceres Society. Then where do we stand? How long will it be before other countries build and gather the technology to come over here and take what is ours? We can not let that happen. Our greatest defense will be readiness.” George caught the subtle clearing of the throat. The with the shifting of his eyes he saw Steward standing to his right in the exit door. Behind Steward, a very dirty Sgt. Hemsley. George stood up. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.” With a nod, he walked around the table and toward Steward at the exit.

The moment George left, The Captain in society uniform--camouflaged within the crowd of soldiers in the back--held tight to his information sheet and left the auditorium as well.

CHAPTER FIVE  
Beginnings, Montana

“In my personal opinion.” Robbie spoke in an upbeat explanation mode to Sgt. Luther Baily, or ‘Sarge’ as they headed toward perimeter nine. “This is the best and most viable way, not to mention high tech, to test the perimeter beams.”

“Will I be trying this?” Sarge asked.

“Not right now. You’re in training. Just watch. It takes skill.” Robbie nodded. “Trust me, it’s not as easy as it looks.” Setting down his clipboard, Robbie brought himself to a squatting position. He had a gleam in his eye, his bright white smile flashed as he looked into a metal cage. “Hey guys.” He tapped his finger on the cage. “Today is an important day.” The four squirrels inside the cage scurried about. “You now have achieved a purpose in life. This moment can be yours. Which one?” Robbie spoke to them like they were children. “Don’t be shy, which one? Tell you what. I’ll choose.”

Sarge chuckled as he watched. “Is speaking to them part of the testing ritual?”

“Oh, yeah. And now, the good part. Watch carefully.” Next to Robbie was a long metal stick. A wired loop wrapped around the end. Poking the loop through the small opening of the cage, Robbie moved it around until one of the squirrels had the unfortunate timing of running through it. Quickly, Robbie pulled the lever on the handle tightening the loop around the squirmy creature’s neck. “Thank you for volunteering.” Opening the cage, Robbie pulled out the squirrel which dangled from his stick-trap. He shut the cage and stood up. A wave of the metal rod in the air caused the squirrel to swing around in a circular motion. With a count of three, Robbie released the lever hurling the rodent twenty feet ahead of him. A high animal squeal emerged followed by a sizzling sound as the squirrel, spinning full speed, whammed into the perimeter beam. “Yes. Perimeter nine working properly.” He picked up his clipboard and checked it off.

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“And when will my training be complete so I can try that high tech means?” Sarge smiled.

“Now. Congrats. All trained. Your new job for now.” Robbie bent down and picked up the cage. He handed it to Sarge. “Go on check perimeters five through eight and I’ll meet you down at Frank’s.”

“Got it.” Sarge looked at the rodents in the cage. “I have to say I’m gonna miss my night shift watching perimeter seven.”

“You did good though. Whatever it was messing with that beam. You scared it away.”

“Thank you. But if I’m needed to pull more watches . . .”

“I’m sure my brother will put you on. See you in a bit.” With a swat to Sarge’s arm, Robbie tucked his clipboard under his arm, then headed to Frank’s office to hand over his findings.

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“Yeah?” Frank called out in his usual manner as he sat behind his desk rocking back and forth in his chair.

“It’s me.” Robbie walked in and tossed the clipboard at Frank.

Frank caught it with a grunt to his chest. He stared at the clipboard. “*You* do these tests?”

“Uh . . . no Frank. You do them. You left that clipboard hanging around, I thought you may want it.” Robbie tapped his temple. “Time machine memory loss?”

“Um, yeah.” Frank looked at the clipboard then set it down.

Laughing, Robbie headed to the door. “See ya, I have to get cleaned up before I start working at containment.”

“Speaking of which . . .” He waited for Robbie to turn around. “I want to ask you something about one of the survivors, someone that’s been here for a while. The guy called Mo . . . I mean, Reverend Thomas.”

“What about him?” Robbie stepped closer to the desk.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“He’s on one of his fanatical retreats, you know that. He goes on them once a month for a few days, he’ll be back probably tonight.”

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"Do you trust him?" Frank asked Robbie.

"Since when do I trust too many survivors? Trust him as in what? Is he dangerous? I don't think. Whacked out. Yes. He's the eccentric bible thumper. Why? Are you having a bad feeling about him?"

"You could say that. My gut says we should watch him."

"Then we'll watch him." Robbie agreed. "I'll check up on him more often."

"Where does he go for these retreats?" Frank asked.

"The mountains. Why all the questions about him?"

"Well in my memory. You know." Frank shrugged. "He was bad, Robbie. He was really bad. He band together a group of men that were nothing but trouble. I actually killed him myself."

Robbie whistled. "No wonder you're worried about him. Any chance that the change in time changed Rev. Thomas."

"Like I said I haven't seen him since things changed. But . . . I'm going to say no. Even if it seems like it, I have to keep in mind what he did in my time frame. Even as a precaution, I can't forget. I don't want a repeat of history."

"I understand. Sort of sticking with the theory that those who can't remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

"Whoa." Frank looked up impressed. "That is pretty good. Where did you hear that?"

"You're kidding right?" Robbie smiled. "You're not?"

Frank shook his head. "Who said it? Dad?"

"No, way. I wrote it myself." Robbie rubbed his temple. "Here's another to leave you with. Those who live by the sword, die by the sword."

"You should write those down."

"I might." Robbie grinned and walked to the door. "But, I'm off. And I'm on that Rev. Thomas issue."

"Thanks." Frank replied. When the door to his office closed and Robbie was gone, Frank lifted the clipboard to review the perimeter tests. But before he did, he wanted to write down Robbie's quotes. He was proud that his little brother was creatively philosophical and Frank wanted to eventually share that wisdom with others.

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*Pictures?* Dean couldn't believe it. Who would have ever thought that having Robbie Slagel around from the beginning would signify a history made up of not only paper and words, but of photographs as well. And lots of them. They were a dropped off surprise gift from Robbie. He was passing them on to him, Frank and Henry. Extras not put in the history books. Dean would have to make an appointment to see those. But Robbie left enough. Many different ones. The ground breaking days and early days of Beginnings. For the generations to come, for those who would never know them, a glimpse of what the founding fathers of their land looked like. Robbie's idea. Dean couldn't comprehend how not one of them thought to do that at all in his remembrance of the early days of Beginnings.

Dean took another moment to stare at it. The photograph of him and Ellen. He had no idea when the picture was actually taken. Early on, not only did he and Ellen look younger, Ellen was very pregnant. They embraced in a semi kiss, smiles from both of them seemingly stopped their lips from touching. How happy they looked. And Dean didn't even know what caused that moment. It was a memory Dean would only have through the eyes of a camera's lense.

Running his index finger over it once more, Dean set it up on his desk. He checked over his notes and blood work. Clinic work he had let slide over the past few days during the rippling of time. He thought he was finally catching up, but Dean knew once they went full swing into the virus he would fall behind again. "O.K., let's see." Dean spoke out loud looking at his notes. "Let's play psychic. Which one of you is going to give me the most trouble while I'm stuck in the mobile?"

"Talking to yourself again?" Andrea called out from the door of his lab.

"Andrea." Dean stood straight up. "What are you doing here? It's Saturday."

"I'm welcoming another addition to the land of Beginnings." Her eyes caught it as she moved to his desk. "What's this?" She walked over

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and lifted the picture. "Now here's something that hasn't been on this desk for quite some time." She smiled at it and set it back down. "The anniversary is coming up, is that the reason for the picture?"

Dean's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Andrea chuckled. "Let me let you in on a little secret Dean. If you want to pretend it didn't happen, pulling out a wedding picture is not . . ." Andrea felt the whoosh of air as Dean snatched up the picture and flew out of the lab. "My." She gasped out. "Don't want my opinion., Fine." She threw her hands up in the air in her march from the lab. "Fine."

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"O.K. boys . . ." Ellen handed a bucket and rag to Denny and Josh. They stood in the hallway of containment. "Baseboards need done today. Especially in the skills room, we have that session in there this afternoon and the people will be on the floor. Survivors or not, I don't want them thinking we live like pigs. Got it?"

Denny made a wincing face. "Why?"

"You blew me off two weeks ago. You both disappeared with Johnny to shoot pool. I didn't say anything to Joe. But next time you'll go back to school with . . . Jenny Matoose."

Josh whined loudly. "We look really dumb."

"Yeah." Denny added. "Can't we just play with Mike the dog."

"You can play with Mike after you clean my baseboards, now hurry. It's not that much." Hearing the buzzing of the containment door, Ellen looked up to see Dean. She smiled. "Hi."

"Hi, El." He hurried to her a little out of breath and kissed her on the cheek. "Do you have a minute?"

"Dean? You have this weird look on you face. Are you all right?"

"I think. I'm not sure. We'll find out. Come here." Grabbing her arm Dean pulled Ellen to the office.

On his hands and knees, fingers barely wanting to touch the soap, Josh shook his head. "And they say we're the weird ones, he can't even speak a whole sentence."

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“Yeah.” Denny agreed. “Some doctor he is. And we’re the ones scrubbing the floors.”

Inside her office, Ellen watched Dean close the door. “What is going on.”

Dean just handed her the picture.

Ellen shrieked. “Oh my God, look how huge I was.”

“El, when . . . when was that taken.” Dean asked as he ran his hand through his hair.

From the picture, to Dean with seriousness, Ellen looked, Then she handed the picture to Dean. “I’m busy.” She moved toward the door.

“Ellen, wait.” Dean grabbed her arm. “When.”

“I told you I’m busy.”

“Why won’t you answer me?” Dean asked.

“Because that has to be the most *dick* question you have ever asked me.” Ellen, with attitude tried to open the door.

After thinking, ‘dick question?’, Dean hurriedly reached out and shut the door. “I’m very serious.”

“And so am I.” Ellen’s eyes were wide as she talked to him. “You should know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Dick.” Ellen grabbed for the door.

“El. Please.” Dean dove in front of her. “Why are you making this into a game? Just tell me.”

“If you don’t know, I’m not telling you.” Ellen said sharp. “And there is no reason on the face of this earth that you shouldn’t know when that picture was taken.”

“Oh yeah? Try this. Frank screwed up time, El. He screwed it up big time.” Dean tossed his hands in the air. “So much is different that I feel like an idiot hanging around people. I thought, I thought my life was pretty much untouched. My personal life. Well, with the exception of that one kid. Um . . .”

“Joey.”

“Yes.” Dean snapped his finger. “Thanks. But I’m finding out it

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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may not be all the same.” He slowed down his words. “I need to know. Were we married?”

With a bit of irritation and disbelief, Ellen answered him. “Yes.”

“Oh my God.” Dean stepped back.

“Why are you acting like this is a shock?”

“Because it is.” Dean looked up, so lost. “In my memory, in my non-Frank fucked up time frame, you never loved me enough to marry me. And that was all I ever wanted. To have a life with you. And now . . . now I found out I had it and this . . .” Dean held up the picture. “Is all the memory I’ll ever have. Do you know how bad that sucks?”

Ellen slowly took a step to him. “You’re serious.” She watched him nod. “We knew it.” She said. “We knew it. How odd you were when you came back three days ago.”

“Well, that Dean that you remember three days ago, I don’t. See, we came back yesterday trying to fix the first screw up Frank did.” He saw how confused Ellen looked. “Never mind. Long story. How did it happen? Did Robbie convince you to marry me?”

“What?” Ellen asked with a laugh. “Why would Robbie have anything to do with it?” She waited and only received a silent look. “Another long story?”

“Yep.”

“O.K., tell you what. How about tonight. We exchange long stories. I may never be able to give you the actual memory, but I sure can fill in the blanks.”

“Thank you.” Dean placed his hands on her arms and kissed her. “Oh, wait. It’s Saturday. Don’t you do that twelve step thing with Frank?”

“Screw Frank. He blew me off last night. He wanted to have an emergency step six session and he never showed up. He was at the social hall watching Robbie sing. Not like he hasn’t done that before.”

“You’ll find out through the long stories . . . he hasn’t.” Dean, knowing he was leaving Ellen puzzled, walked do the door. “The lab?”

“You got it. Oh, and Dean?” Ellen waited until he turned around. “December 12<sup>th</sup>. That was when the picture was taken.”

Giving a peaceful smile and a thank you nod, Dean walked out.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

George ran his hand across the bridge of his nose so hard that he could have wiped away the top layer of skin. “All of them?” He gazed angry eyes at Sgt. Hemsley.

“All of them. I . . . I don’t know how I dodged their bullets. Grace of God I guess.” He tried to follow George who was leaving. “I stayed in the woods after the radio and watched to see . . .”

“I don’t care!” George blasted spinning with an angry point to the frightened sergeant. “I could care less how many bullets missed you. Thirty two of my men were wiped out by a camp of goddamn low life, living in tent survivors turned defectors?”

“The ones living in the camp, from what I observed, weren’t our defectors.”

“Great.” George threw out his hand as he barged again to this door. “Get this man from my office and out of . . .”

“The ones who aided them were.” Sgt. Hemsley cried out in a last ditch attempt.

“What?” George stopped cold. “How do you know?”

“I recognized the one.” Sgt. Hemsley caught his scared breath. “I recognized him.”

“How?” George asked. “How in God’s name can you remember a defector when not even the camp master does.”

“Because his ethnicity never matched his name. It always struck me as odd. He’s Latino and his name is Elliott Ryder. And he is leading this pack. I can tell you. They all are wearing bandanas as a statement. His was the only one that was red.”

“It’s probably not a goddamn statement, it’s probably because they’re bald.” George’s attention was however caught. Calmer he stepped back into his office. “Aside from being a visual racist, how do you remember him?”

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“I was part of the sweep that happened upon their town. It was a very friendly sweep. A small town on the border of Texas and Mexico. I recall because I thought they had picked up Elliott from Mexico. When in fact . . .”

“Oh my God.” Steward’s words seeped discovery. “They were all remarkably together pre-plague. Hold on.” He raced to the door. “Ambassador Lyons did that sweep, but none of us have gotten to question him because he’s been ill this past week.”

George tossed his hands in the air as he returned to behind his desk. He sat down with a sarcastic tone. “Oh, yes, now everyone remembers. A week ago no one knew anything. Now I have a name.” Tapping his fingers on the desk surface in an impatient manner, George looked up when Jeremy Lyons walked in. He looked pale from his bout with tuberculosis, but George didn’t care he wanted answers. “Sit.” George pointed to the chair and waited. “Did Steward tell you?”

“Not much. He just said you needed to speak to me about a sweep I did.”

“Two weeks ago, I’m guessing. You did a friendly sweep of a small town bordering Mexico and Texas. What can you tell me about these survivors you picked up.”

Proudly, Jeremy smiled. “Excellent grouping. Friendly, smart. Fantastic backgrounds. They’re shining quickly for us, aren’t they?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re shining.” George stated. “They defected last week and have been nothing but a pain in the ass. Death toll now, thirty five.”

“Oh.” The smile dropped from Jeremy’s face. “I expected great things from them.”

“Let’s just hope you’re wrong.” George said. “Tell me about this fantastic background.”

“They were all together pre-plague. All servicemen stationed in Hawaii together. They survived because some doctor tried an experimental vaccine on them. Not everyone who was given it lived. From what they told me, about ten percent of the ones given the vaccine in the early stages lived.”

“Hawaii.” George leaned back. “The almost cure.” He noticed

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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the questioning looks. "During the plague Dr. Hayes got a half ass recipe for a vaccine some doctor had success with. Dean always said that the vaccine could have worked if given early enough and the person was not only strong, but had some sort of genetic link to the immunity. Taylor."

"Taylor? Who's he?" Jeremy asked.

"Taylor was the most precious thing. How she came from that annoying little Beginnings woman I'll never know. Anyhow, five years old. The vaccine worked some, but ended up failing on her. She had the genetic link to her immune mother, but she was given it in a later stage and . . . she was just a child."

"These men were servicemen." Jeremy said. "They all left Hawaii together. They all separated in groups for an agreed length of time to search for families and get this . . . they all returned back to the meeting place. The town in Mexico."

"Loyalty." George said. "They stick together well."

"Many years. When we came upon them they had picked up, four women and two older men. Those six were moved to special sectors."

"But we did take all the servicemen."

"No." Jeremy shook his head. "Six stayed behind."

"What!" George barked. "You left six behind? Why!"

"They were not aggressors. And the six that stayed behind planned to stay for four weeks and then head out to us."

George grumbled. "Probably a back up if something went wrong. Which means." George smiled. "Our defectors will head home." He stood up. "We have to get a crew out to that town to wait." He saw Jeremy shake his head. "No? Why?"

"The six were finishing up the move. See, they were moving to a better resource location. One they had been working on. That is where the six are waiting."

George sat back down. "I guess asking you where this new location is, would be in vain."

"We haven't a clue where that is."

"Figures." George dropped his face into his hands. After a moment, he laid his hands on the desk. "So now our defectors that no one

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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worried about, diverted our attack, wiped out our men and stole our weapons.” George saw Steward’s mouth open. “Don’t. Don’t give me that stock line, ‘they’re only forty-two men’. Because our forty-two renegades are probably now . . . eighty-six.”

CHAPTER SIX  
Beginnings, Montana

It was a pretty large stack of folders that set before Ellen on the counter. She looked at the stack then to the clipboard. “Dean.” She spoke. “I know they’ll be some wait time on results in quarantine. But do we really need all this side work?” Ellen shook her head looking at the list of items she had to prepare to have at the mobile lab within a few days. “Dean?”

Dean sort of heard her, but he was too engrossed at the other counter. A counter filled with items Ellen brought of their life. His fingers kept flipping the cover of the hotel matchbook he held. Flipping it open to see his name written inside. “We had an affair.” Dean stated quietly then looked to his empty hand when the matches were snatched away.

“A hotel incident.” Ellen leaned on the counter next to him. “An afternoon.” She smiled.

“I’m sitting here racking my brains how Robbie got you to my lecture before the plague.”

“Robbie didn’t.” Ellen said. “I had planned to go anyhow. Why didn’t I go in the time frame you remember?”

“Pete.” Dean stated. “He found a letter that confirmed your affair with Frank. You said things were ugly and you never went.”

“There you have it.” Ellen smiled. “Pete never found a letter from Frank. He found . . .” she started giggling. “One of Robbie’s dirty emails he sent me. Why I printed that up I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Anyhow, Robbie’s correspondence to me grew heavier and heavier before the plague. He called it his countdown to me needing him. *Now* that makes sense. Frank told him that in the letter.”

“And you ended up at the lecture.”

“And in bed with you.” Ellen explained. “It was nice. Of course you always said you fell in love with me the second you laid eyes on me at the lecture. When in your memory did you fall in love with me Dean?”

Dean chuckled in embarrassment. “The second I first laid eyes on you.” He turned back around to his items. “All this stuff is great. Thank

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you.”

“You’re welcome. Even though you looked at all that while I did the work.”

“And I appreciate it. We . . . we have a good history.” Dean gazed at the items.

“Yes, we did. Didn’t we have a good history in your memory?”

“Yeah.” Dean smiled. “Only right before Frank screwed everything up, you may have been working it out with Frank, but we had another incident and you were confused about your feelings.”

“Well then see.” Ellen smiled and tapped Dean’s cheek. “Nothing’s changed. And I have to go.” She hurried and kissed him. “I want to stop and see how Henry’s doing with that microchip in the cryo-lab.”

“You’re just leaving me hanging.” Dean said.

“Yep.” Ellen backed up. “And I’ll get those things tomorrow.”

Dean nodded and returned to the items Ellen brought. No sooner did he look upon them than he heard Ellen’s distant voice saying, ‘hey, Rev. Thomas’.

Dean lifted his head. The sound of his name sent a sickening feeling straight to his gut, causing Dean to spin around, losing his balance some and slamming back first into the counter.

“The Lord has sent me to deliver a warning to you.” The deep voice resonated from the towering big man, his red hair long and vibrant, he carried a large red bible.

“Moses . . . I mean . . .” Dean swallowed, anger filled his chest. “Thomas.”

“Listen to his word Dr. Hayes!” Thomas held up the bible. “*For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, they are plans for good and not disaster. To give you a future and a hope.* These are the Lord’s words as spoke through Jeremiah.”

“I don’t have time for this or you.” Dean pointed. “And I would appreciate you not coming into my lab quoting the Lord’s word. Not you. Not ever.” He turned back around and began collecting the Ellen memorabilia items.

“You take this tone with me when you vow to change the future

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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that our Lord has laid out. Vow to change it by bringing the beast of the future to our Beginning now? Rev. Bob has informed me of these endeavors.”

Though religiously it wasn't the correct thing to do, Dean damned Reverend Bob for opening his mouth. “You really don't know what you're talking about.”

“The metal deliverance of evil you brought to our fields.”

“The lab?” Dean laughed. “See what you know. It's science.” He walked over and shut down his computer.

“It is death. And you, Dr. Hayes . . .” His heavy hand pointed down. “Are the anti-Christ who delivers it.”

With a fluttering of his lips, Dean broke down in laughter. “All right, I've heard it all. I've been called a little-man with an attitude. A wife stealer. Even gay. But never have I been called the anti-Christ. Thanks, that's a new one.” Chuckling Dean grabbed his belongings and moved across the lab..

“You plan to bring this virus before its time. Deliver it on the people of Beginnings.”

“Really? Thanks for the prophecy. Now, leave.” Dean shut off the light and shoved Moses as he walked. “Out. Out.” He led him to the hall and pulled the door closed. Then doing something Dean hadn't done in a long while, he locked the lab door. “Goodnight.” Hearing Moses still mumbling bible quotes, Dean not showing his agitation, walked down the hall. How Moses was permitted to live in Beginnings was beyond him. And the confrontation would warrant--no matter how painful it was--a mentioning of it to Frank.

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It was so quiet, only the sound of turning pages and an occasional click of the keyboard emanated into the tunnel from the cryo-lab. Silently Ellen stood in the door, watching Henry. He sat on a stool in front of the only computer that was on. Three or four text books spread out before him. With a thermos tucked under her arm and a cloth covered plate, Ellen

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walked softly into the lab. She cleared her throat so as not to startle him too much. Standing right behind him, she leaned over, resting her chin on his shoulder. "How's it going?"

Henry sighed. "It's sort of like the first date syndrome. In that getting to know it phase." He lifted the chip with tweezers. "My date." He smiled. "My companion in quarantine while you and Dean are playing with germs."

"You aren't going to sleep with it are you?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm bringing back cybersex."

Ellen snickered. "Good one. Anyhow, I was just gonna stop by and see how things were. But knowing you and how you put your mind to things, I went home first to stock you up." She laid the thermos and plate before him. "Sandwiches and tea. See how special you are Henry. That is made with the tea I brought back from Nebraska."

"Thanks, El." Henry looked up with a smile. "But I really don't plan on being here all night. Honest."

With a smirk, Ellen nodded. "Sure you don't." She ran her hand down his back then folded her arms. "I'll let you be. Don't work too hard. And eat something."

Spinning on the stool, Henry faced Ellen. "El, thanks a lot. It really means something to have someone just care where you're at and that you ate. I haven't had that at all in a long time. I'm really, really glad you're my roommate."

"And I'm insulted, Henry. I'm more than that. I'm your friend." Ellen waited until she received Henry's embarrassed look. "Besides." She sighed out and moved to the door. "Living with you is safe. It keeps me from prematurely choosing the wrong side of the fence."

"El." Henry's voice was soft. "You can get mad at me for saying this, but . . . Frank's your husband, there isn't a choice."

Ellen nodded. "I know. I just have no one who understands. I can't go to the women. They're all into this two men, understanding thing. And even if Frank and Dean would agree to that." She shook her head. "I wouldn't let it happen. No understanding. It's an easy way out for a problem I've had long before understandings happened. I just hope you never to

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choose between two people you love. It's bad."

Slowly Henry looked up. "It can't possibly be as bad as having no one to love."

Ellen's eyes closed and she folded her arms tighter. "Humbled. I'm sorry." She started to leave, but stopped. "Henry? I know it's not the same thing. But . . . I love you."

Though it had a hint of sadness, Henry smiled.

"Night." After one more flash of a smile, Ellen walked out. As she stepped into the tunnel she saw the odd sight of John Matoose walking down the tunnel. Following him at his same quick pace, Ellen wanted to call out but opted for a loud dramatic gasp instead. A gasp that caught his attention as he tried to climb the ladder.

John released the rung. "Ellen." He spoke her name with annoyance.

"John?" She folded her arms walking to him. "Are you . . . are you spying on Henry?"

"Why would you even ask such a stupid question?"

"Because you're a stupid man."

"And you're an annoying woman." He reached for the rung again. "And just so your Harriet the spy mind doesn't take off somewhere, I was finishing my rounds."

"Oh sure you are. I believe that. Since when does security make rounds in these tunnels. Frank never makes rounds in these tunnels."

"Then Frank doesn't do his job."

"Obviously if you're still walking the streets of Beginnings. You know what I think?" Ellen moved even closer trying, though not succeeding, at looking intimidating. "I think you're worried about what Henry is doing in the cryo-lab."

"I could care less about Henry in the cryo-lab."

"Then why were you spying on him?"

"I was walking my rounds! And I'm not arguing over it with you. You don't know anything." He began to climb.

"I know that you were in on it with George."

"Ellen . . ." John paused in his climbing. "Fuck off."

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Giggling and thinking how much fun her confrontations were with John, Ellen waited until he was up and far away and then she climbed to the top also.

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### Lee-Curtis Mansion Arlington National Cemetery

A grumble and a shiver accompanied Elliott's entrance into the mansion. He pulled the front door closed, stepped over the three sleeping men in the entrance hall and turned left to the sitting room. He cleared his throat.

The Captain turned from his stand by the fire. "Hey, Elliott."

Elliott stepped inside. "Night watchmen are all secure."

"Good. I'm going to be up all night, so if you want to go to sleep."

"Sleep sounds good. I'm sure I'll squeeze somewhere." Elliott walked closer. "Reading the Caceres Society newsletter?"

"Yes." The Captain grinned. "Talk about luck. I go to get more info and there's a town meeting." He laughed. "Of course, Hadly is an asshole and the men are stupid if they believed what he said. A lot is bullshit, some is truth. He made valid points. But you'll be glad to hear we don't need to go in for anymore information."

"Why?" Elliott asked. "You said the meeting wasn't that informative and what you have isn't that much."

"What I *had*. Look what I have now." The Captain reached down and pulled up what looked like a log book. "Steward Lange's person entry diary."

Elliott's eyes widened. "I can't believe you took that risk."

"Yeah, it kind of was. But it was worth it. I was thinking." The Captain paced some. "I'm not really wanting us to leave a trail of bodies anymore. Not for a while. I'm not wanting the society to get pissed and go after us full force before we're ready."

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“Ready? Ready for what?”

“I’m working on a plan.” The Captain held up a finger. “But for now, any infiltration or diversion we make, we should use gas.”

“Gas would work, but where are we . . .” Elliott saw the Captain’s point to a small green knapsack. “Let me take a wild guess. Gas courtesy of the society? As a child did you find yourself getting into a lot of trouble?”

The Captain smiled. “Never. You do know we have to go into Quantico at least one more time.”

“For?” Elliott asked.

“Hating to do it .. . food. Right now they’re our only resource until we make it back home. And we have a lot of mouths to feed.”

“And keep warm.” Elliott said. “Not that this charming haunted house won’t do, but it’s not safe. Too much movement in DC.”

“You’re right. And I have thought of that. In fact I’d like to make plans to move by dusk tomorrow.”

“You’ve thought of a place already?” Elliott said pleased.

“Absolutely.”

Worry hit Elliott at that moment when he saw the look on the Captain’s face. “I’m gonna hate it, aren’t I?”

The Captain grinned wide. “Absolutely.”

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

From the small bathroom adjacent to his bedroom, Steward Lange stumbled in his insomnia frustration. Hair tossed about from fanatic finger rampaging, he made his way to his small personal desk in the corner of the room.

He sat down in the chair that squeaked, and turned on his desk light. He needed something boring to do, or at least something that worked his mind. Placing on his glasses, Steward opened his left hand drawer and while grabbing a pen, he reached blindly into the drawer. He expected it to be

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there, it was big enough that his hand wouldn't miss it. And Steward would have thought he left it in the office had he not pulled out the small slip of paper that was in the empty drawer instead of his personal log diary. A note that simply read "Thanks for the log!".

He didn't have to think too hard to know who took it, Steward knew exactly the culprits. And knowing that, along with wanting to save face and any extreme verbal lashing from the president, Steward ripped up the note. As far as Steward was concerned, he never had a log diary, and he wasn't about to let George know he had one that was stolen. Especially one with such vital information in it.

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Beginnings, Montana

Ellen checked her hair to see if it was still damp from her shower. Laying in her bed waiting for it to be dry enough for her to go to sleep without risking total pandemonium bed head, Ellen sifted through the pile of old tabloids she had saved. During the past hour she had looked at the pictures in everyone of them. Thinking maybe she might break down and read an article, she blindly reached for one from the middle. Mid grab, she decided she wasn't wanting to be literary. A little uncomfortable, bored and not to mention chilly, she walked to her dresser for her sweat pants. Stepping into them and pulling them on, she heard the sound of the front door opening slowly. *Henry*. She thought with a smile. Though she didn't expect him home, Ellen was glad he arrived. She was going out of her mind being alone. Hearing a rummaging, and the sound of him bumping into the lamp table, Ellen snickered and stepped from her room. "Henry?" She called out. "Henry."

She didn't get an answer.

"Henry?" She moved closer to the stairs and she heard the footsteps. The floorboards of the stairs creaking slowly as they were ascended. "Henry answer me." Still no response, the footsteps continued. Thinking quick, Ellen stepped back speaking loudly. "Frank, I think someone

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is downstairs, can you get up and check?" Suddenly the footsteps stopped and the sound of running back down was heard, followed by the slamming of the front door. "Shit." Ellen grabbed her chest. "Oh shit." She breathed heavily and her heart raced. "Shit." Frantic, she searched for her shoes and placed them on. "I have to find Frank." Walking in a quick stride into the hall, Ellen took a deep breath. She counted to three, then with everything she had, she charged down the steps, ran out the door, closed it and took off, top speed all the way to Frank's house.

With the burst of the front door and a flick on of the light, Ellen called out in a whisper as she raced into Frank's house. "Frank! Frank!"

Robbie grumbled and sounded muffled as he laid on the sofa, half on his side wearing only his boxer shorts, his blanket across his feet. "Aw El." He covered his face with the pillow.

Ignoring him, Ellen called up the steps. "Frank."

"El, shut the light out I'm trying to sleep."

Ellen waved her hand at him. "Frank!" She called out in that whisper again. "Robbie, is he here?" She walked to the back of the couch. "I need to . . . and cover up or something. I can see right through the front opening of your boxer shorts."

Robbie dropped the pillow to the floor. "Who cares, Ellen? Why are you looking at my crotch anyhow?"

"It's right there."

"Can I help it impresses you."

"Ha." Ellen laughed and turned back to the steps. "Please. You're a Slagel remember? Big men plus large egos equals the Slagel curse."

"Thank you for that." Robbie said with sarcasm, rubbing his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"Not to see your crotch." Ellen saw Frank come down the steps. "Frank."

"El." Frank stepped to her. "What's wrong?"

"Frank." Ellen sounded frantic. "Henry is working all night. I heard this noise."

"A noise?" Frank asked. "What kind of noise, like an animal?"

"No a person." Ellen stated. "Whoever it was, was sneaking up

the steps.”

“Like a prowler?” Frank laughed. “El, we’re in Beginnings, there are no prowlers.”

Ellen shook her head at him. “Fine, laugh at me. But it scared me.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Frank asked.

“Yes, Frank very.” Ellen told him. “I heard the door open. I heard whoever it was walk into the table lamp and then they walked up the steps. They wouldn’t answer me when I called. And when I pretended you were with me, they heard that and ran out.”

Frank looked to Robbie who was pulling on his pants. “Robbie?”

“I know. I’m on it.” Robbie tossed on his shirt, then slipped his feet in his boots. He began to lace them. “I’ll check it out.” Stomping to adjust his foot, Robbie stood up.

“Get back to me.” Frank told him.

“You got it.” Robbie grabbed his coat from the chair. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

Ellen smiled in relief at Robbie. “Thank you.”

“Yep.” Opening the door, Robbie looked back before he walked out. “I want you to take note of how nice I’m being. And you insulted my penis, too.”

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Joe’s heavy thinking breath seeped from his hand that slid down his face. Still wearing his night clothes, he kept looking back to Robbie as he paced about Henry’s livingroom. “No mistake?”

“None.” Robbie shook his head. “Someone was in here. Dirt tracks on the stairs, lamp knocked over.”

“Do you . . .” Joe looked up to the loud thumps as Frank came down the stairs. “Anything Frank?”

Frank laughed.

“What?” Joe asked annoyed.

"I can't believe you still have those pajama's. Didn't you have them when we were . . ."

"Frank." Joe snapped. "Anything upstairs?"

Frank cleared his throat. "No. Of course Ellen said she heard the door close."

"Doesn't mean they didn't stay when she left." Joe said. "Was it Henry or was it Ellen."

Frank decided to answer. "Seeing that Henry was in the cryo-lab and that Ellen called out and they still came up the steps. We're thinking it's Ellen."

Joe looked to Robbie. "A survivor from containment?"

Robbie shook his head. "Greg's on watch. I talked to him. Everyone's locked down."

"Escape hatch?" Joe questioned.

"Secured and padlocked."

Joe snapped his finger. "Maybe Mike the Dog, we do let him out."

"Nope again. We now put paper down in the men's room."

"Oh my God." Frank gasped. "Get rid of that animal. If he's not house broken by now he shouldn't . . ."

"Frank." Joe held up his hand with a wince. "What about taking a look at the people Ellen may have had confrontations . . . Never mind, we'll be talking to the whole community. All right. This may have something to do with sex as well. Robbie, get together with Jenny Matoose. Ask her what men in the community haven't been with a woman in a while. She keeps records of which of her women service who. And let's watch Ellen. But keep this under wraps. Especially from her. She'll be running around accusing everyone. Got that." He got an agreement from his sons. "And keep an eye out for anything strange." Joe stopped before leaving. "And yes, Frank, I have had these pajamas since you were teenagers."

When the door closed, Frank looked at Robbie. "I knew it. He loved those pajamas."

"You know what, Frank? We should hide them like we used to."

"Oh. Excellent idea." Frank smiled and gave a swat to Robbie's

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arm. “And you know what the best part is. Hal’s not around to blame it on us, so we won’t get in trouble for doing it.” With a nod, Frank walked out, leaving his little brother laughing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

November 29

The diningroom was loud, extremely loud, however, Ellen did her best to block out the noise while running in her mind what she had to do that morning. “Here.” She gave Brian a bottle, lifted the spoon from his bowl of cereal on the table and shoved it in his mouth. “Good boy.” She patted him on the head. “Your turn, Josh.” She raced back in the kitchen and laid two bowls of cereal down to Billy and Joey.

Billy whined. “I hate corn flakes.”

“Tough.” Ellen poured the milk in his bowl, then Joey’s. “Alex, what are you doing?”

Alexandra sat with a rice cake breaking it into tiny pieces and sticking it in a bowl. “Making cereal, Uncle Robbie taught me this.”

“Remind me to thank your Uncle Robbie for the mess.” She brushed the crumbs off the table. “I saw that Billy. Joey eat your own food. And Josh, the food goes in Brian’s mouth.” Letting out a loud grunt of disgust, Ellen turned to the door when she heard the knock. “Who is that?” She raced to the door and opened it. Denny and his little sister Katie stood there. “Denny.”

“My mom said to feed us. She didn’t have time.” Denny, holding Katie’s hand walked in.

“Sure go on.” Ellen held her hand out. “I need my coffee.” Moving faster than the two young people in her livingroom, Ellen brushed by them.

“Hey, Josh.” Denny, leaning in his walk, walked into the diningroom. “Did you hear?” He sat down.

“Hear what?” Josh asked.

“What they’re making us do. We have to help Dean and them clean out that lab. Hanging out with old people again.” Denny complained.

“Aw. That thing is probably really dirty.” Josh complained. “Why do they make us do that?”

“My mom said Dean rec . . . rec . . .” Denny tried to remember

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the words. “Ellen?”

“Requisitioned you.” She walked into the diningroom with her coffee. “That means you really aren’t people yet, Joe can do with you what he wants.” She started to feed Brian.

Denny’s mouth dropped open. “That’s not fair. I don’t think.”

“Welcome to Beginnings.” Ellen told them. “In the old world we had laws pertaining to stuff like that. Rules. And when people like Joe broke the rules, people like you guys just wouldn’t do their work.”

Denny was surprised to hear that. “How did they get away with that?”

Ellen, between feeding a reluctant Brian and trying to get her morning dose of caffeine in, proceeded to explain to the two teenage boys in awe, about labor rules in the old world.

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Joe put out his cigarette and stretched some in his chair. Barely eight-thirty in the morning and he felt like he put in a days work. In actuality he did. He never went back to sleep after the ‘proowler’ episode. He wanted to, but hands were needed in the greenhouses to get ready for their harvest. Readyng himself to make a walk through in town, Joe grabbed his coffee and stood from his desk chair. He took a clipboard and opened his door. Enjoying the welcome warmer weather of the fall season, he stepped outside, whistling as he stared up to the blue sky. About ten or so feet in his stroll, Joe paused, stop whistling and turned around. His hand went harshly down his face when he saw Denny and Josh. Stern and so fatherly he walked up to them. His one word sent shivers of fright through them, but they didn’t show it. Or at least they didn’t think they did. “Boys.” With a pointing index finger, Joe walked back into his office. He wanted to get to the bottom of how the two most ill-informed people in the community learned how to sit in a protest holding a sign that said, ‘Unfair child labor practice’.

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Ellen just wanted to gripe. Take this. Do that. Bring this. Move that. But since she was running around the community so much, she had no one to complain to. And she ran around without a jacket too, which irritated her. Since the whole reason for the rush was Henry's secret tell tale signs that the weather was getting bad. And Joe, swearing by Henry's system, moved both the Cleveland run and future trip . . . up.

She got the files from down in the cryo-lab that would be needed for the mobile. With the files gathered in a box, Ellen moved through the tunnels. She hummed something as she walked, using her footsteps as a metronome. It made her laugh that she hummed a melody from some old sitcom. In her indulgence of laughter at her subconscious memory of useless tunes, Ellen wheezed in some of the dust from the box. Stopping to sneeze, the box tilted from the violent shaking of her body. "Damn it." She bent down to pick the three files that had fallen to the ground. Grateful that they hadn't sprayed out everywhere, Ellen picked them up and stood. As she did, she heard the footsteps behind her. They moved at the same pace she had previously done. Not knowing who it was, Ellen began to walk again. She stopped when she heard whistling of the same song she had just hummed. It was eerie, too eerie, but it had to be someone messing around with her. "Robbie?" She called out. "Frank?" The footsteps continued. "Joe?" The failure to receive a response told her it was time to run. And she did. Holding the box that jingled as her small body ran, she could hear the footsteps behind her meshing with the sound of her own. Before Ellen was aware, she had passed up the ladder to the top. Running faster, she knew where she had to head. Not much further was the escape hatch into containment. She arrived at that ladder, and box in arm, she climbed using one hand. Bracing herself and hearing the approaching person louder, she pushed up the hatch. Locked. "Shit."

Louder and louder the footsteps grew. Steady and taunting.

Ellen struggled with the hatch, pushing it, making it shake, grunting in her efforts. More violently she fought to get it open when she heard not only the footsteps stop, but the shifting of a gun's chamber as well. Neck muscles protruding, frightened emotional sounds seeping from her throat, Ellen banged fanatically on the wooden hatch. "Help me!"

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With the ‘crack’ of the hatch being lifted from its hinges and the ray of light from the skills room, Ellen tossed up the box. Her arms were grabbed, and her body was lifted with such a force, it seemed to eject upward out of the tunnel at the exact same time the sound of a bullet ricocheted against the ladder.

Out of breath, Ellen felt the gentle release of her body by Sarge. The other survivors gathered around.

“Watch her! And someone call Frank!” Sarge ordered out, tossed his weapon behind his back, and then leaped feet first into the escape hatch. His large feet landed with a thunderous crash against the echoing floor of the tunnel. He looked from left to right, zoomed in on the fading running footsteps and raced in that direction top speed. He knew his efforts were growing futile when he could hear the clanking of shoes against the metal ladder. By the time Sarge reached the other ladder, he saw no one. He climbed topside with haste only to see the normal hustle and bustle of Beginnings. Whoever he had chased, whoever shot at Ellen, clearly used their residency in Beginnings as the perfect camouflage to their recent emergence from the tunnel.

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As if Henry wasn’t busy enough. He couldn’t even put his mini notepad away, he had to keep checking off things that he did. And the way he ran around, he figured his legs should have been cut like a marathon runner. And Henry had to hurry if he didn’t want to miss it. Not that he had to be there, but as head of mechanics he wanted to be there. The metal tubing that would be made into a makeshift airtight walkway between the CDC mobile and trailer, was being attached and welded. Rush testing had to be done, and just to double check it was done properly, Henry wanted to oversee.

He supposed stopping to see Frank was actually on his route to the garage to pick up a jeep. Frank wanted to see him and Henry did need to tell him, though half ass, he attached hinges back on the escape hatch in containment. So he’d stop. Proudly Henry was midway through his list for the day and it wasn’t even noon. He hoped Frank didn’t hold him up too

much.

“You wanted to see me?” He approached Frank who stood by a keypad outside of warehouse three.

“Yeah.” Frank placed the screwdriver in his back pocket and pulled a piece of paper from his chest pocket. “Here.” He handed it to Henry. “List of new keypad codes I’m reprogramming. Memorize them, destroy that.”

“Got it.” Henry looked at the list. “I fixed the hatch. Anything from Robbie yet?”

“Still looking for the casing.” Frank said. “It seared off that ladder. So it’s down there. That should tell us if someone snuck in and is living down there or . . . it’s one of us.”

“Keep me posted.” Henry shoved the list in his back pocket. “I’m heading up to the mobile. Anything else?”

“Yes. I’m thinking . . . I’m thinking about moving Ellen back with me.”

Henry’s eyes slowly lifted to Frank. “Can I ask why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? For protection.”

“She’s safe with me.” Henry said.

“Someone broke into your home last night, Henry.”

“That is unfair, Frank. I wasn’t there.” Henry snapped. “And I won’t let her be alone again. I promise.”

“Why are you arguing with me on this. She’s my wife and besides keeping her safe, I would like to get on with my marriage.”

“And you two are doing really well working it out slow. Moving her back in and using protecting her as the excuse, is going to just toss aside all your work. It won’t fix things, it’ll force things. And trust me, Frank, please don’t force Ellen’s hand.”

Frank’s eyes cased about the look on Henry’s face. “You know something. What is it?”

“All I know is that if you feel strongly about moving Ellen back for the right reasons, then talk to Rev. Bob. See what he tells you. As far as keeping her safe, I can do that. And besides, in a few days we’ll be locked in quarantine anyhow. Safe and secure.”

“True. All right.” Frank reached for his screwdriver. “Oh, Henry, before you dart off.” He pulled Henry back when he was trying to make an escape. “Moses said some whacked out things to Dean last night. Could you, without letting on, see if he has said anything to Ellen?”

“Sure Frank.” Henry said. “But even if he didn’t. I would bet he’s the one. We should just throw him out.”

“As much as I’d like to, my gut is saying he didn’t chase her. He’s too big. He wouldn’t move that fast.”

Henry laughed. “Please. I don’t remember Moses being . . .” Henry’s words slowed down when he noticed him. “Shit. Speak of the devil.”

“Literally.”

It was the first time for both of them since they had rippled time, that they had seen Moses, or Rev. Thomas as the community knew him by. They watched as Reverend Thomas moved across the street their way. His long gorilla type arms swinging back and forth, his red hair bouncing with his every step.

Henry blinked long, then swallowed the lump in his throat. “O.K. you’re right. He’s big.”

“He’s looking at you.” Frank said. “Want me to handle him?”

“Nah. I can. I’m not afraid of him. Watch.”

“You!” Reverend Thomas pointed in a heavy hand to Henry. “You are a messenger of death. Down shall thee fall by God’s hands, you and the other two.”

With a tilt of his head, Henry smiled. “Blow me.” He turned. “See ya.”

Frank watched Henry be-bop away as Rev. Thomas grumbled in anger before he stormed off the other direction. Nodding with a slight look of impressed, Frank lifted his screwdriver. “That worked.” With a shrug, he returned to the keypad.

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Fresh was the aroma of the CDC mobile when Ellen and Greg, both carrying boxes, walked in. So clean, crisp and chilly, it gave her

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excitement shivers. "Put that down over there." Ellen instructed Greg then smiled at Denny and Josh who were on their hands and knees scrubbing. "Look at you boys go."

Denny looked up at her with a pouting face. "You got us in trouble. Big trouble."

"Yeah." Josh added. "Joe pulled our ears."

Denny grabbed his lobe. "Mine still hurts."

Ellen shrugged and placed down her box. "Oh well, that's a normal thing guys. People will pull your ears until you're twenty. Where's Dean?" She saw him come from the back room. "Never mind. Ask and you shall receive."

"Hey, El." Dean smiled then looked oddly to Greg. "Greg, this is a surprise."

"Oh, I'm here to try to help move things faster along." Greg said. "And watch out for Ellen."

"Yeah." Ellen nodded. "I was almost shot today."

Dean's expression dropped. "You're joking?"

A 'bang' against the counter, brought a moan from Henry as he stood and rubbed his head. "Nope. She almost was. First last night, then today. What's next."

"Death." Ellen whispered in a joke.

"El." Dean shook his head. "That's not even funny."

She waved him off. "I'm fine. This is Beginnings. And look, Greg's my body guard until he leaves tomorrow. Huh, Greg? I trust you."

"Thanks, Ellen." Greg smiled. "It's nice to be trusted and part of this."

"You should be part of everything." Ellen said. "Shouldn't he Henry?"

"Yep." Henry agreed as he untangled wires.

"And be a top dog in security." Ellen added. "And I am still so shocked you aren't attached. Such a handsome fellow. Isn't he handsome, Henry?"

"Very." Henry replied.

Dean laughed. "El, why are you obviously buttering him up."

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Greg answered. "She wants something from Cleveland. A souvenir. All the women are being nice to me. Jenny Matoose showed me her breasts." Greg's head spun to the ghastly 'UH!' that came from Josh. "What Josh?"

"She's not going to show us is she?" Josh asked.

"Oh my God." Denny sounded panicked. "What if she does. What do we do?"

Ellen answered in a giggle. "Run. Really run."

Denny curled his lip in disgust. "Greg, was it scarey?"

"I'm afraid so, yes." Greg spoke. "And I must get back to the trailer, you know. I have to get that vison out of my mind." He gave a wink to the boys as he opened the door and walked out.

Denny shook his head. "How do women live with those things. Especially Mrs. Matoose, hers are so big. Hey, Josh, at least your mom's don't hang. I don't think, do they hang or do you get them bound up Ellen?"

Ellen would have been insulted, especially with Dean and Henry laughing. But she considered the source. "No, Denny, I'm a free breasted woman. Mine don't hang. That's because God loves me."

Dean snickered with a shaking head. "What does God have to do with your breasts?"

"Simple." She saw she had the boys attention. "See, breasts are a curse given to women by God. Because the very first woman on this earth gave him attitude. So he gave her breasts to annoy her and a menstrual cycle, but that's another story. Anyhow, the more annoying you are, the bigger your breasts are. So there. That's why Mrs. Matoose's breasts are so huge."

Denny opened his mouth with a nod. "Oh, I see. Ellen? Is this menstrual cycle like the motorcycle Frank rides around on?"

"Um . . . yeah sort of." Ellen answered. "Only instead of looking cool when your on it, you look mean. Huh Dean?"

Dean raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah." He pulled Ellen away from ear shot, whispering. "Why are you misleading the only teenage boys in Beginnings?"

"Oh, it's fun." Ellen laughed and took a change of subject breath. "Dean? How long are we going to be in quarantine?"

“I don’t know. It all depends what the length of incubation is. Hopefully I’ll have had figured that out in the future and that part of our work will be done for us. With any luck, which I usually don’t have, we won’t be stuck together too long.”

“I don’t mind.” Ellen said. “Henry, do you mind being stuck with me?”

“No El. We’ll have fun.” Henry answered.

Dean turned and faced them. “Why is that? Why is that always the response? Why does everything always have to be fun?”

Henry shrugged. “I don’t know. Would you prefer a different mood?” He faced Ellen. “El, why don’t we be mean in quarantine?”

“Or Henry. Bitter. How’s that?”

“We could be sad, El.”

“Or premenstrual.” Ellen laughed.

“Oh, I hate when I get like that.” Henry winced.

“Guys . . .” Dean wanted to shout, not even in quarantine and they were starting. But Robbie walked in and became the saving grace.

Robbie raised the corner of his mouth in a half smile when he saw the expression on Dean’s face. “Getting on your nerves already, Dean? Henry, we’re about to attach that walkway.” He waited for Henry’s nod. “Hey El. Your new house is all set up out there. See, one day from my long trip to Cleveland and I’m working hard to make sure things are done right for you.”

“You’re sweet, Robbie.” She tapped him on the cheek. Crossing her arms, Ellen moved to the window peering out at the mobile home. She just wanted to get a good look. The smile quickly vanished when she saw John Matoose walk around the mobile home and into her view. “What’s John doing out there?”

Robbie answered. “Checking out the propane tank for leaks.”

“Excuse me.” Ellen, still holding her arms close to her chest, walked to the door and outside. She marched up to John. “Thinking of ways to blow us up?”

“What?” John turned and faced her. “What in the world are you talking about now?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know this is a way for us to beat George. Curing the . . .” Ellen stopped when her quick wit kicked in and she remembered only a privileged few knew about the virus. “Cure the itch, yeah, that we have to be quarantined together to create a deadly biological weapon.” Ellen nodded with a ‘so there’. She was proud of her explanation, especially since a weapon was what everyone thought they were going into quarantine to work on.

John shook his head and squatted down to the tank. “You talk shit Ellen.”

“I talk the truth. And I’m on to you. I know you’re trying to kill me.”

John laughed at her. “Yeah right. Why would I do that?”

“Why not? I threaten you.”

“You irk me.” John tried to work on the tank.

“I know that was you in Henry’s house the other night. I know that was you following me in the tunnel. Taking a close shot at me. Bet the reason they can’t find the casing is because you have it. Huh, John. You were helping Robbie search for it. You found it and . . .”

“Ellen! Go the fuck away.”

“Own up, John. The truth will set you free. George.” She whispered. “George.”

“Ellen!” John stood up storming and breathing heavy at her. “Keep it up with your big fuckin mouth and someone is going to shut . . .”

“John!” Robbie’s deep voice was so close, so unexpected. “Get out of her face . . . Now.”

John only shifted his eyes to Robbie. “Back off, Robbie. It’s between me and this bitch.”

“You were warned.” Eerily calm, Robbie reached out, the fingers on his left hand gripped tightly in a squeeze to John’s neck. Quickly he jerked John to him, then with a hard fast jab, Robbie landed his fist, center John’s face. He shoved John back. “Come on EL.” Robbie grabbed Ellen’s hand and led her away from a bleeding and complaining John, who screamed, ‘ow you broke my fuckin nose’.

Ellen hesitantly followed with a light snicker to her. “You didn’t

need to do that.”

“Why was he talking to you like that?” Robbie asked.

“John? John always talks to me like that. I’m used to it.”

“He what?!” Robbie began to charge back to John, but Ellen halted him.

“No, don’t. It’s all right. He’ll trip up one of these days. I’m waiting for it. You know. About him working with George.”

“Ellen.” Robbie covered his eyes. “I have told you, he wasn’t in on it with George. Didn’t Frank and I lock him in a room with us for three hours? Don’t you think we would have broken him?”

“Nope. Cause he cried. I bet he cried.” She saw Robbie look away. “He did, see. His way out. And won’t you and Frank look like the big fools when the truth is finally known. I won’t hold it against you though. Why do you think he’s so mean to me?” Ellen rambled. “He’s threatened.”

“I’m going to my Dad about this, if John is . . .”

“No. Don’t. I don’t want John to think anyone else but me knows. And it will only make me look stupid. Please?” She tipped toed up and kissed him on the cheek. “I have to get back in there. Thank you for breaking John’s nose. That was great.”

“Ellen . . .” Before Robbie could say anymore she had quickly made her escape. What he saw of John’s reaction, and heard of John’s comments, sent the warning signals blaring. Though Ellen didn’t want him to, Robbie knew he had to look into it. Speak to Joe. For his own peace of mind, before he left for Cleveland, he wanted to make sure that if this was the way John always was to her, then it was the last time it happened.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ellen paced about in excited little circles in front of Joe's office door. "What do you suppose it is, Henry?"

Henry tossed his hands up. "Haven't a clue. But it's big."

"Yeah." Ellen looked at the door. The same one Frank had stuck his head out to give the minute warning. "Oh. I know. Maybe it's a surprise."

"Could be. You're birthday is coming up."

"And Robbie's gonna be in Cleveland. Bet me they're having a private party for me." Growing more impatient waiting on the surprise, Ellen smiled when she saw Dean approach.

"What's going on?" Dean asked. "Joe said he wanted me here for you."

Ellen pointed to Henry. "He told Henry the same thing. They're having a surprise party for my birthday. Only they don't know I figured it out. Oh, Henry. How's this look of surprise." Ellen mustered up a shocked expression.

"You have me fooled." Henry nodded.

"Oh, what's taking so long." Ellen returned to staring at the door.

After tapping the folder on the edge of the desk, Joe walked around and extended a handkerchief to a seated John Matoose. "Here."

"Thank you." John dabbed the blood then whined loudly. "The pain is awful, Joe."

Joe rolled his eyes. After looking at Robbie who stood in the office as well, Joe leaned against his desk, and gave a motion of his head to Frank.

Frank opened the door. "You can come in." He stepped back opening the door wider.

Ellen, all smiles, walked inside. The smile dropped.

With a heavy breath, Dean ran his hand down his face,

mumbling into his palm. "Surprise all right."

Ellen's eyes angrily shifted from John Matoose to Robbie. "You son of a bitch! You went to Joe!"

"El." Robbie tried to defend. "Listen, I was worried and I . . ."

"You had no right!" Ellen blasted. "Especially going to him."

With a slightly tilted head and an irritated look, Joe stood up from his lean on his desk. "Him? Why is that, Ellen? Why shouldn't my son have come to me?"

"Well." Ellen let out a breath. "You're a busy man Joe. Very busy. And these petty personal differences shouldn't cloud up your day."

"Petty personal differences?" Joe asked. "Ellen. You're beyond petty. Frank and I were very disturbed when we found out how he spoke to you."

"As well as you should be." Ellen nodded.

"And then . . ." Joe reached to his desk. "We find out after talking to John, that what you've been doing to him would have been considered a crime in the old world."

Ellen scoffed a laugh. "And you believed him."

"No!" Joe shouted. "I believe this!" He whipped the folder causing papers and pictures to fly about.

Henry from the back, raised his hand up. "Uh, Joe. Is there a reason why I'm here. Because this sounds like a family matter and . . ."

"Sit, Henry. You're on council." Joe ordered. "You and Dean have your work cut out watching her from now on. Keeping her in line." His voice was directed to Ellen. "Not only, Ellen do you verbally accuse this man of working for George, but you wrote notes accusing him too. That, Ellen was stupid. You nailed your own coffin on that . . ." Joe lifted a handful of papers. "And if that's not bad enough on the literary side. How many letters did you write forging George's name?"

Ellen folded her arms. "A couple."

"Try again. Fifteen." Joe snapped. "All requesting John to be at the meeting place."

"I was trying to trip him up." Ellen tried to defend herself.

"Oh, yeah? Well how was it tripping him up by cutting George's

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head out of a picture and pasting it over Jenny's face!" Joe held up a photo that should have been John and Jenny embracing, instead it was John and George. Glaring, Joe's eyes stabbed at Dean who laughed. "You think this is funny?"

"Well, yeah." Dean said. "I can't believe you guys are just finding out about this. I thought everyone . . ."

"You knew? You knew!" Joe yelled.

"Joe, come on." Dean held in his snicker. "Don't you think you're overreacting. I mean, John's a grown man. If he can't handle this. Then that's his problem."

Ellen smiled. "Oh, my God. Thank you, Dean."

"You're welcome." Dean smiled back.

Henry nudged his hand into Frank's back. "See Frank. Unresolved. Brownie points for Dean."

Joe rubbed his eyes fiercely. "Ellen, I want you to stop this nonsense and apologize to this man."

"I will not!" Ellen stomped. "He broke into Henry's house to get me and he chased me in the tunnel. He shot at me Joe!"

"He did not!" Joe blasted.

"Did too." Ellen said snide. "Why can't we find the casing, huh? And . . . where was he? Where? I asked. He wasn't in Mechanics, nor moving that trailer. Where, John?" Ellen peered at him. "Where? Calling George to tell him you failed?"

"Ellen." Joe had reached the boiling point. "John was with Rev. Bob all morning. Rev. Bob confirmed this."

Ellen's jaw moved from side to side. "Well, maybe Rev. Bob is lying."

"Jesus Christ!" Joe brought his hand up to his own face.

John stood up catching the blood from his nose. "I want an apology from her Joe. And your son!"

Frank reached out, laid a hand on John's shoulder and shoved him back in the chair. "You won't get an apology from my brother. From what he heard you deserved the punch. You're lucky it wasn't me."

Arrogant, Robbie interjected with a laugh. "As opposed to what,

Frank? Me?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded.

“Fuck you. Are you saying I can’t throw a punch?”

“I’m saying you’re not me.” Frank argued.

“I broke his nose!”

Frank tossed his head back with a laugh. “Pansy hit.”

Dean nodded and held out his hand. “There, Joe. This is proof of misdirected mentality. It’s all right to get angry at Ellen for a few tricks, but these two can stand in a testosterone argument over who would have hurt John more?” He reached out and took Ellen’s arm. “Come on, El”

“Dean.” Joe warned. “Don’t you take her from this office. We’re not done.”

“Yeah, you are.” Dean, still holding Ellen’s arm, open the door, wiggled his fingers in a wave and they both walked out.

Not only was Frank filled with a burning outrage that Dean just took Ellen from the office, but he was angry that his mind had to interject ‘hero’ theme music to the act. He grew even more irritated when he realized that Henry was humming the tune in his ear. With a spin, Frank turned around and vocally blasted. “Knock it off!”

Henry backed up.

John Matoose stood. “I’m leaving, Joe. Obviously nothing will be done about this and I need to lay down.” He grabbed the bridge of his nose. “I am in so much pain.”

Hiding his grumble, Joe nodded to John. “I’ll get back to you on this.” When the door closed, Joe looked to Henry. “Henry, can you get Dean and bring him back here. I need to have a word or two with him.”

“Um, Joe.” Henry scooted out from his shadow of Frank. “Look. I’m not defending what Ellen did. I’m not. But, I’m gonna defend what Dean did.”

“What he do, Henry?” Frank barked. “He took advantage of the situation to smell like a rose to my wife.”

“No, Frank.” Henry corrected. “He acted like not only her friend, but her family. And he really is. I’ll tell you three, family sticks together. Instead of coming down on Ellen, try sifting through her logic. She

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has valid points. And Dean at this moment deserves to smell like a rose. Because he did what you three should have done all along. Stood by Ellen.” Almost apologetic for speaking his mind, Henry gave a closed mouth look and walked from the office.

Joe’s long slow breath through his nostrils filled the silent office. He stepped backwards to his desk, his hand being a guide across it as he moved to his chair. Sitting down his elbows rested on the desktop and his fingers did a slide down his face. “I think we all just ate a big old slice of humble pie.”

Frank scratched his head. “Come to think of it Dad, I don’t think I’ve eaten anything today.”

Robbie hearing and seeing his father’s head fall to the desk, barged to the door, flinging it open. “Is he fuckin adopted or what?”

“No!” Frank screamed at the empty door. “You should know better!” Shaking his head, Frank followed Robbie out. “And people call me dumb.”

When the door banged, so did Joe’s head--again--to his desk.

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“Sit down.” Steward said with a bit of enthusiasm, and pointed out his hand to George’s chair. “Please.”

The lines on George’s face wiggled annoyance as he did as requested, getting more irritated by Steward’s smile. Behind his desk, in his chair., George laid his hands on the desk surface. “I’m sitting. Now what?”

From the corner of the desk, Steward lifted the phone and laid it before George.

“O.K.” George looked at it.

“Wait.” Steward said. “Any second.”

George tapped his fingers on the desk. “I’m waiting.”

“Just any second.”

“You said that a second ago. How many more . . .”

The long ring of the phone caused both men to jump.

“Holy shit.” George looked at it.

“I knew you’d be pleased.”

“You couldn’t have told me the phone lines were up.” George said as the phone kept ringing. “You had to be all dramatic about it.” he picked up the receiver. “Yes.” He fell back into his chair and looked up to Steward. “It’s Beginnings.”

“Yes.” Steward nodded. “We have to be careful of you calling there. They have no phones. But our person can call here. Until, well, you know.”

George returned his attention to the phone. “How are you?” He asked the Beginnings person, then nodded. “Good. I understand. Not everything will go as planned. Just keep trying. Yes.” He listened. “Oh, while I have you on the . . .” George paused to smile. “Phone. I don’t know if it’s your morse code or our deciphering. But what the hell is this cedic thing they moved into the community. Cedic.” George repeated. “You said ‘cedic is in place’. Work will start on bio . . .” George nodded again. “CDC, those morons. So that’s where they’re working on it. Anything else?” Immediately George snapped forward and his elbows slammed on the desk. “Repeat that . . . They’re going where? Why?” He let out heavy breath. “Well let me know if you find out.” George without saying goodbye, hung up the phone.

“Problem?” Steward asked.

“It makes no sense.” George nearly mumbled. “None of this. I understand them using the time machine to go to the past for information about us. I understand this trip to Cleveland. What I don’t understand is why . . .” He stared at his hands. “Why they’re going to the future. What is there that is so important.”

After a breath and a thinking shrug, Steward apprehensively gave his guess. “Us?”

George immediately looked up.

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It was a small town encircled with trees that trickled from Manassas Battlefield National park. While some men opted to take over a home, tents were erected for those who wanted to stay outdoors. All the small burning campfires were hidden within the overgrown thickness of nature. The Captain preferred the outdoors, until it was time to get some sleep. He had a lot of men to talk to and wanted to speak to each individually.

Elliott spotted the Captain standing from his recent talk with a group of three men. Rubbing his hands together to keep them warm, he approached the Captain. "I'm heading in for the night."

"I have a few more to speak to, then I'll do the same." The Captain walked with Steward's log book under his arm.

"Are you explaining things?"

"What there is to explain." The Captain stopped. "This isn't just a restructuring of the United States that the Society is doing. It's a totalitarian society where if you don't fit the bill . . ." He lifted the log. "They make you fit the bill. More are taken against their will than agree to join. There's still so much to learn."

"But in the meantime?" Elliott asked. "Do we stay put or head home?"

"Oh, we definitely head home." The Captain said. "God willing, our men have kept things up. We have fresh water, food, shelter. That's the place to be. In fact. I've picked out two teams of four to send back. First team leaves at first light, the second that evening."

"Want me to map safe passage around the Indian wanna be regions?" Elliott asked.

"Could you?"

"Not a problem." Elliott assured. "What about the rest of us? When will we leave?"

"When we have things ready. We need vehicles. There are some remaining in this town. You and I can get them up and running."

"Power up a small generator? Hook it to a pump and drain what we can from the old gas station reserves?" Elliott suggested.

"Like we did before." The Captain smiled. "How long do you

think?”

“No more than a week.”

“We’ll try to lay low while we get ready.” The Captain nodded. “Our supplies will hold up and that also gives me some time to find this . . . ‘spoiling camp’ where they have our women. Get them, our other two men, and head west.”

“Captain, can I ask you something?” Elliott waited for a nod of approval. “Are we sure heading west is the best choice?”

“I’m positive.” The Captain said with certainty. “See I’m learning from the society’s past in order to know their future. And the way I see it. What they hit, plan to hit, it all tells me they want to secure the Eastern portion of the United States first. Staying west is where we have to be.”

“And then what?” Elliott asked.

“Then as a whole community we decide, do we just ignore what the Society is doing, Or . . .” The Captain took a deep breath and started to move on. “Or do we try to stop them?”

Elliott watched the Captain walk away knowing full well what the Captain’s personal choice was. And though there was no question in Elliott’s mind that he himself felt the same way, he did however have to question . . . how they would go about doing it.

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How many times did Frank look out that window? There was nothing to see, but a part of Frank felt it helped. Looking out into the peaceful night of Beginnings that was such a contrast to what he felt inside. The wee hours of the morning were approaching the time he himself usually got up. But since Robbie was leaving for Cleveland, and Frank wouldn’t have the extra help while he was gone, Robbie decided to do the morning checks for Frank. But the extra sleep was not to be had.

From the window, back to pacing, and to his little list. Dean and Ellen were the cause of that list and surely Frank would add them to it. He had thought about speaking to Rev. Bob after talking to Henry. And when Dean stood up for Ellen, the urge to see the good Reverend hit him again.

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But the second Ellen dropped off the kids so her and Dean could work, said thank you and nothing more, was the second Frank knew the proverbial talk was warranted. Perhaps Rev. Bob didn't appreciate Frank's late night interruption, but it took Frank that long to get the nerve and words together. Rev. Bob listened to Frank, and told him he would consider speaking to Ellen about possibly moving back in, if Frank could compile a list. Simple, short, no more than ten things. Ten reasons why the twelve step plan would be more detrimental than good. Frank thought it was easy, until he had to start the list. A part of him prayed for interruption. That one of the kids would get up. He had five in the house, surely one was having a nightmare or something. But nothing. Silence.

Until . . . The boom of his front door being burst open, made Frank immediately drop his list, dive for the night stand and retrieve his revolver. After he checked it. He flew from the bedroom into the hall.

"Dad?" Josh stepped from his bedroom.

"Josh, get with the kids. Stay put." Back against the wall of the staircase, Frank rushed down in a gun readying position. He lowered his weapon when he reached the bottom. "Sarge." Frank closed his eyes, shaking his head. He looked at the tied up, gagged, and squirming man on his livingroom floor. "Why is John Matoose tied up." Frank walked over to John.

So loud Sarge spoke. "Sir! I was . . ."

"Shh!" Frank cringed holding his hands up. "My kids are sleeping. Now quietly explain to me why John is tied up." Frank bent down to John and began to untie him.

"Sir, this man was at perimeter seven. He was touching the beam sir at zero two hundred-forty-five hours."

Frank removed the gag from John's mouth. "What happened, John?"

John gasped loudly for breath. "The man is a lunatic, Frank. I was suffocating. I have a broken nose. He almost murdered me. I was just checking the beam."

"Sir." Sarge interrupted. "I memorized the roster sir. He was not on detail for rounds tonight."

"What were you doing up at seven, John?" Frank asked.

John shook off his wrists as he stood up. "Checking Frank. I knew you didn't have a guard at seven anymore. Jenny and I got into a spat and I went to the social hall until it closed and I figured I would check it. And I shouldn't have to justify my whereabouts."

Frank tried to remain rational. "Now . . . Sarge. John was just checking the beam."

"But sir, he was . . ."

"Good job though. John you have to admit, it was a good job on his part." Frank said. "But tell me why you went up there Sarge, you weren't working either."

"To check." Sarge answered. "You said there were problems and I thought since it was known around the community that I wasn't on watch, that the perpetrator would return. He did."

"Oh, this is such bullshit!" John in a huff stormed to the door. "I am a trusted original. First my nose gets broke then I get tied up and gagged. Do something about him, Frank. And don't think I won't go to Joe about this." John stormed out.

From the slammed door to Frank, Sarge looked. "Sir, you aren't removing me from security are you? I feel strong about this, Sir. What if that beam would have gotten moved. With the Cleveland run on his mind, your brother could have easily not thought about that beam and walked right into it."

Slowly Frank looked up. "Robbie." He whispered out then looked to the door. The John and Robbie confrontation immediately ran through his mind.

"The perpetrator, may know I'm no longer up there." Sarge still carried out his defense. "And whoever it is may . . ."

"I think . . . " Frank held up a hand. "I think you have a point. Ignore what you see on the schedule and keep quiet about where I put you."

"Perimeter seven?" Sarge asked.

"Yep. And you and I will be the only ones who know you're there."

"Are you beginning to believe that the problem lies with in the community sir?"

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“As a matter of fact . . .” Frank ran his hand down his face as he looked once more to the door. “I am.”

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It stayed with him like a bad scent. George couldn't shake what was bothering him until he figured it out. And he tried to put it aside, thinking perhaps the answer would come to him while he wasn't thinking about it. Like when trying to remember someone's name, in the middle of the night, he would jump up and say, 'oh, I got it.'. But it was far passed the middle of the night. And just like in the old world when something wasn't right with his checkbook, George nitpicked the problem apart until he solved it.

None of it made sense. First the time machine trips. Joe was using his head. Actually with the advantage of the time machine, Joe was playing rather fair. Gathering information about the society. The information from the first past trip bred the address of the Cleveland lab. Even that didn't bother George. He knew nothing really vital could have been left behind. Or at least nothing Beginnings didn't know about. The future trip was what George couldn't figure out. And vampire hours or not, it was time to call in part of his brain.

Steward did think, even though he looked far too groggy to comprehend anything.

“But you made a valid point.” George said. “When I asked what is in the future, you said, ‘us’. Remember?”

“Yes. But what would Beginnings have to gain by eliminating us in the future. Nothing.”

“Could be they go to help themselves out.” George guessed with a shrug. “After all they are creating a biological weapon in that lab.”

“Maybe that's the reason for the quarantine they scheduled.” Steward said. “But didn't our person say the weapon is not created yet?”

“True. So they couldn't bring it to the future.”

“Maybe . . .” Steward shook his head. “Nah.”

“What!” George barked.

“Don’t laugh. I was just going to say, maybe they plan to bring the weapon *back* from the future. But if that’s the case, why did they take the vials from our freezer to Nebraska?”

Like the time it took him two days to remember the purple girl’s name in Willy Wonka, George snapped to brightly. “That’s it!”

“What?” Steward had a slight chuckle. “They’re bringing back the weapon from the future?” He snickered. “Again, why take our vials to Nebraska to work on them.”

“Because it’s not their goddamn weapon . . . it’s ours.” George nodded. “Bet me we nailed them with it. They thought we had it in the case. Obviously we didn’t. Hence the future trip to try to get it and get a jump on things.”

“Sir?” Steward stepped closer to him. “We have no plans to hit them with a biological weapon.”

Snide, and arrogant was the deep chuckle that came from George when he looked at Steward. “We do now.”

CHAPTER NINE

December 3

Beginnings, Montana

It was the day before. Perhaps that was what drove Dean to nearly skip a night's sleep. But he was filled with the excitement and fear of the future trip. There were a few things that still needed to be brought to the lab. Plus things needed set up. And Dean swore before the sun set, he would have them done. So before the sun rose, Dean grabbed a jeep and headed up to the mobile lab.

Dean was actually in a good mood. Lack of sleep or not. Even Frank pulling him over for speeding didn't bother Dean. He did get a little perturbed when Frank asked for the licence and registration then proceeded to laugh at his own bad humor. But Dean ignored Frank's immaturity along with the twelve work hour fine Frank imposed just to be funny.

It would have been too dark up at the mobile had it not been for the spotlight on the side of Jason's lab building. It lit things up enough for Dean to shut the headlights off and making it to the CDC lab without tripping. He paused before going in to take a look at what would be his home for at least a week. The lab and the trailer, connected together in some sort of "T". The end of the trailer home seemingly glued to the side of the CDC mobile.

Box in one arm, coffee in his other hand, the keys to the lab dangled from his mouth as he made it to the lab door. He set down the box and reached for the door. Barely did Dean touch it and the door opened. It creaked as it opened and Dean reached in and turned on the light. He was a bit apprehensive, first wondering if maybe Rev. Thomas was waiting to lunge at him. But when Dean looked in, nothing. Everything appeared fine, smelled clean and was undisturbed. Chalking up the unlocked door to his own mistake of being absentminded when he left a few hours earlier, Dean picked up the box and went into the lab.

A sip of his coffee, a pause in his walk, then Joe grumbled and shook his head at Henry. "Feel that?" He looked up to the sky that was becoming light. "Warmth. Total warmth. It's December."

"Not for long, Joe." Henry walked briskly with him.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Oh, positive. Last radio contact from Robbie. Where was he?"

"Chicago." Joe answered.

"And?"

"He couldn't go anywhere. Too much snow."

"Exactly." Henry said as they hit town. "We're getting it Joe. And we're getting it big time." He shivered. "Burr. I get cold thinking about it and why is the light to the social hall on?"

"Huh?" Joe's head spun from Henry's sudden switch of subject. He looked over to the social hall. The interior light peeked through the small window on the door. "Let's go see." He led the way over to the social hall and pushed open the unlocked door. Joe was surprised to see Frank sitting at the bar. "Frank?"

"Oh, hey, Dad. Henry." Frank lifted a glass to his mouth, a bottle of whiskey before him.

"Frank?" Joe asked. "Why are you drinking at six thirty in the morning?"

"Night cap." Frank showed the glass. "Winding down for bed."

"So everything is all right?" Joe asked. "Nothing's wrong?"

"Aside from Ellen still being too nice to me." Frank shook his head with some sadness.

"Well, Frank." Joe shrugged. "I told you she was pissed about our John interrogation. You should have apologized right away with me and Robbie. It loses its effect two days later."

"I know." Frank ran his hand down his goatee. "It's just that she's going on this future thing. How do I know she'll be fine? What if something happens to her?"

Henry stepped forward. "I'll talk to her, Frank. I'll tell her now is

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not the time to be mad. Maybe I can get her to go over your house tonight.”

Frank looked up to Henry with a tired smile. “I would really appreciate that.”

“Sure.” Henry nodded.

Joe shook his head. “Fix your own goddamn problems, Frank. That’s the only way.”

“I know.” Frank finished off his drink and poured another. “I even tried. I went to Rev. Bob. He blew me off. He said I’m just overbearing and annoying.”

“The religious have a keen sense about them.” Joe gave a pat to Frank’s back. “And we’d better get going. Let’s go Henry.” Joe gave a motioning point of his head to the door. When he turned to leave, Sarge walked in. “Morning.” Joe told him as he left with Henry.

Sarge barely waved or got to respond, Joe and Henry were gone. “Hey, Frank.” Sarge greeted as he pulled up a stool next to Frank.

“Sarge.” Frank lifted up some, leaned over the bar and grabbed a glass. “How was last night.”

“Calm. Boring.” Sarge shrugged. “Perimeter seven secure. For now.” Sarge folded his hands. “But I have a hunch, something is gonna happen soon up there.”

“Oh, yeah?” Frank lifted the bottle, poured a drink in the glass and slid it to Sarge. “You and me both.”

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Reverend Bob was hungry. The short, rotund man with fluffy white hair ignored his growling stomach and made his way to the clinic. But community service or not, he was going to eat a hearty portion of eggs as soon as his blood tests were over with. He was glad that Dean was good about doing the test bright and early.

Not more than a few steps into the clinic was Rev. Bob and he heard the oddity of it. Laughter. Two voices, meshed together in a conversation that consisted of laughing as much as words. Wearing the smile it brought on, Rev. Bob stopped as he raised his hand to knock on the open

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lab door. He watched for a second as Dean stood with Ellen, in Rev. Bob's opinion just a little too close, nudging her, smiling a they worked in more of a flirtatious manner than a work ethical one.

"Rev. Bob?" Ellen called out.

Out of his thoughts, Rev. Bob snapped. "Morning. Both of you are uh, working early I see."

Dean nodded as he walked away from the counter. "Actually we worked really late last night."

"You mean into this morning?" Ellen corrected.

"Do that a lot?" Rev. Bob asked.

"Lately." Ellen answered, "And I suppose with quarantine we need the practice."

Rev. Bob caught it. He guessed he wasn't suppose to but he saw the wink Dean had given Ellen. "I'm here for my test."

Dean held up a folder. "Just gathering your things. You can head to room three."

Rev. Bob nodded, lifted his hand in a wave and headed to the examining rooms. Dean and Ellen stayed on his mind during the walk. Perhaps he was putting more into what he saw, but all Rev. Bob kept thinking about was how he kept dismissing Frank. He vowed as soon as he was done eating his eggs, he would dig up the list Frank had made him a few days earlier. The one Rev Bob laughed at, ridiculed and made him call Frank an incurable paranoid possessor. But if his memory served him correctly, that list wasn't compiled of jealous rantings, instead it was compiled of valid points Rev. Bob never heard Frank trying to make.

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Cleveland, Ohio

The bitter cold brought in from the lake did not bother Robbie as much as the ice that formed on just about everything in Cleveland. The interstate was bad enough to travel without the ice that laid inches above the overgrown road. On foot was how they had to get to the lab that laid on the

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outskirts of the major metropolis. Making their way through the frigid city whose layer of thin white made it look more dead than any place Robbie and his crew had ever gone.

It was worse than any jungle Robbie had navigated himself through. The map of Cleveland was a mere joke. Instinct and gut feeling led Robbie to the research center. The giant 'B' of the Bowen name was tilted and its blue coloring cracked and faded. They found the cryo-lab. It laid in the third sub basement level. Open doors were a path to it. Doors that were probably left open by Chester not that long before.

"Check out ever single piece of paper. Read it, save it." Robbie ordered out, stepping over the still decomposing bodies that had defrosted months earlier. Blood and vomit, dried and part of the floor showed evidence of the plague they suffered--late--but by their own hands. A circle of justice, Robbie thought as he looked at those who suffered and died faster than they should have. "Let's do this quickly, gentlemen. Scavenge this place, we have Chester's house to find. And I have sight seeing I want to get in."

Throwing his rifle behind him as it hung over his shoulder, Robbie found a seat at a desk that sat just outside the cryo-glass wall. A notebook, dusty and covered with bloodied finger prints set on top of it. Finding his home there, Robbie began to read and search out the desk.

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

They weren't one hundred percent readable but the information conveyed was clear enough. Behind his desk, George slowly sifted through the pile of papers. The words on some were sideways and George had to tilt his head as he read over every piece.

Steward's hand pointed down to a letter as he stood behind George. "This is the best that can be done. Dean and Ellen were in the mobile all night."

George adjusted his glasses. "Where did the fax machine come from?"

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“A . . . Cole brought back a case of them from a run.”

George nodded. “I remember that. I was just afraid the fax in history was being used.”

“Sir? They have no phones. Why would History have a fax.”

“Oh, that annoying anal woman.” George grumbled. “These are just notes.” George shuffled through the next one. “Aside from the fact, I can’t make heads or tail out of . . . whoa.” he lifted a page high.

“That was the particular one that caught my attention.”

“Steward?” George shifted his eyes to look at his right hand man. “You’re not gonna tell me you were reading my faxes before me, are you?”

“No.” Steward stood up straight. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Just caught the letter’s first line, that’s it. No more.”

“Right.” George read some more. “Oh my God.” He moved to the next page. “Oh my God. How was this found?”

“Seems our Dr. Hayes, in all his hecticness of getting ready for the future trip, failed to lock anything up in the mobile lab. Including his personal file box. That was in with his . . .” Steward snickered. “Birth certificate, marriage license and such. I thought it was brilliant of our person to think of looking in there.”

“Any idiot would know, if Dr. Hayes brought his personal file box to the mobile lab, there’s something in it. The original copy of these letters was returned?”

“Yes. And I’m sure unmissed.” Steward responded.

George read some of the letter out loud. “*Bring back Dr. Dean Hayes. He could very well be, your, the future of Beginnings, only hope.*” He peered up. “Dean had died. They used the machine to bring him back to try to stop this virus. The antidote is in the case, which definitely confirms we started it.”

“Is the virus in the case?”

“Can’t be. Not if they’re going into the future to get it. And look . . .” George showed Steward the letter. “They blackened out the Quantum Regressionator sequence. Godrichson’s an asshole.” He gathered up the faxes. “Get Davidson down from D.C. today he’s our theorist. I want to talk to him.”

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“I’ll take care of that.” Steward nodded and walked to the door. He stopped with a snap of his finger and turned around. “Just wanted to tell you. I sent a truck up to Vermont for our bio man, Dr. Radovich. Weather permitting, he should be here late tomorrow.”

“Good.” George said. “I need him to work on this virus. Whatever we get Beginnings with obviously does the trick.” He leaned back in the chair. “The thing is, they know it’s coming. We have to figure a way to hit them in a manner they won’t see it arrive and since we have a date . . .” George tapped his hand on the pile of faxes. “We have to hit them long before they expect.”

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## CHAPTER TEN

### Beginnings, Montana

“No, no, no.” Dean waved his hand in the air as he stood in explanation mode before Ellen and Henry in the mobile lab. “Henry won’t have to be the logisticalizer, we’re going to the future. He can actually assist in getting what we need.”

Ellen finally understood. “So he’ll do the air samples by the lab and the samples nearer to town?”

“Exactly.” Dean said. “That way you and I can collect what notes and blood and tissue samples we need. And enough of it. Since we’re setting our destination for night and one day after Jason’s letter, things should be quiet in town and allot us the time to get what we need.”

“Hopefully the samples we get, aren’t of a mutated strain that the antidote doesn’t touch.” Ellen pointed out.

“We’ll keep our fingers crossed.” Dean reviewed his list. “Next, is I want to run a test of the radio and headsets through the bio suits. Check to see if we can communicate with each other. Because that is so vital.”

Seriously, but still like she was in school, Ellen raised her hand, “When we return is our first plan of action to see if the antidote is present in the vials?”

“Most definitely. It’ll make it easier for us to work with the virus if there isn’t a threat of catching it.” Dean replied. “Henry. You’re being quiet. Do you have any questions?”

Henry looked up. “Um . . . no.” he shook his head. “Yes. But I feel really dumb since it has nothin to do with all this medical stuff. O.K., yeah it does, but . . .”

“Henry.” Dean snickered. “What’s your question.”

“O.K. I feel stupid. But . . . You. Me. Ellen. Right? Did we just already change the history? Because in Jason’s letter, Johnny is immune or rather got a hold of the antidote as well.”

Closing his eyes, Dean gave a slow nod of his head. “Yes. But

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we aren't exempting Johnny from his destiny." He saw another look of confusion on Henry's face. "Those vials are not small. They are by my guess, more than three inoculations of the serum. So, we will give one to Johnny if it's in there."

Ellen had to question that. "Why Johnny. We already changed the future by bringing you back. So why stick to the guns of it? I'm not meaning to sound cold. But we have other options." She gave a flick of her eyebrows.

Henry interjected. "The future is not etched in stone, Dean. This is very vital. Hey, wait if it's so vital, why waste it on me. Why not get Johnny to go and give him the serum along with someone else."

Ellen whined. "No, Henry. I want you to go."

"What value am I?" Henry asked. "I don't know anything medical and . . ."

"Hold it." Dean interrupted. "First, Henry, you're going because you heard Jason. He wants you on every time trip regardless. You will always be the constant. The one who knows the truth. And secondly . . . why Johnny? Who else? Jason? Andrea? Do those two know anymore than Johnny about the physics of viruses? No. I taught Johnny myself, though a novice, he knows. Besides, personally . . ." Dean smiled. "Andrea and her praying? Do you really want to be quarantined with Andrea?"

Henry pointed to Dean. "He's got a point, El." After getting a 'thank you' look from Dean. Henry had another question. "Dean? What's it gonna be like when we go. Will there be a virus?"

"Hopefully not." Dean exhaled. "We're going to the future from this point in time. Jason's letter was written from a future without me. So knowing the way I am, If we go and there still is a virus, I would have done a hell of a lot of work. Notes, samples and such. We'll bring supplies to copy and possibly steal what I did. My work in the future will be our ground work of today. So knowing that . . ." Dean paused when he saw Henry writing. "What are you doing?"

"Jotting that quote down." Henry gave a thumbs up. "Good job."

Dean grumbled. "I think . . . I think we've gone through this

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enough.” He started to gather up his notes. “Why don’t we go over to the trailer and get our things situated there.”

Henry stood up with a stretch. “Good idea.”

Ellen stood as well. Turning she stopped and drew up a quirky look as she glanced at the huge picture-type window and walked to it. “Dean.” She peered out seeing just a hint of the center of town in the distance. “I feel like we’re going to be the people in the plastic bubble, with this window.”

“Yeah, we will feel that way. We’ll be the entertainment for anyone who wants to come up and watch.” Dean shut off the computer.

Henry hesitated in his leaving the lab. “They won’t come up and watch if the weather gets as bad as I expect it.”

“Henry?” Dean had question to his voice. “I’m curious. How do you know so much about the weather?”

“My secret tell tale signs.” Henry answered.

“Which are?” Dean asked.

Ellen shook her head with a chuckle. “Dean they wouldn’t be a secret if he told.”

“Do you know them?” Dean asked Ellen.

“Oh, sure.”

“Then it’s not a secret.” Dean looked back at Henry who still stood by the door that led to the trailer. “Tell me.”

“All right.” Henry said. “You’re a doctor so you may appreciate this. It’s a combination of theory, common sense and body signs.”

Dean laughed. “What?”

“Yes. See, when my monthly cycle symptoms intensify, it signals a change in weather. More sever means a worsening of weather conditions, possibly drastic. Decreasing or none for a month means reversed weather patters. But . . .” Henry held up a explaining finger. “If my symptoms arrive early and are severe . . .” He whistled. “Watch out. There’s trouble.” He opened the mobile’s side door. “You guys coming.”

Ellen smiled and hurried to catch up. “Right behind you. Dean?”

“Wait.” Dean held up his hand then hurried to catch up to the pair.

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“Dean, that’s all there is to explain. Gees. And you call yourself a scientist.” Henry stepped through first into the newly attached three foot corridor and across to the other trailer.

They entered the small trailer home through its back door. A narrow hallway greeted them.

“Henry?” Dean trailed behind as they took the hallway passed the two bedrooms and bathroom to the livingroom. “Your monthly cycle?”

“Yes, Dean. That’s what I said.” Henry spoke as if Dean should have known better. He moved to where a grouping of boxes set center livingroom.

“What cycle Henry?” Dean asked. “You don’t get a period, you aren’t a woman.”

“I know that. But I do get a cycle.” Henry handed him a box. “All men do. They have times of the month.”

Dean laughed. “No they do not.”

“They do too.” Henry argued.

“Henry.” Dean paused so as not to laugh at him. “They do not. I’m a doctor, I know.”

“Dean.” Henry spoke with insistence. “I go through mood swings just like Ellen.”

“That’s because her mood swings are so severe they affect you. She did the same thing to me when I lived with her. I never said I had a period though.”

“I’m not saying I get a period.” Henry argued. “Just PMS.” He listened to Dean laugh. “Tell him, El.”

“It’s true Dean he does.” Ellen nodded. “Last month, he went through that wanting sweets, got irritable very easily and, Henry even got bloated. Huh Henry?”

“My pants were tight.” Henry shook his head.

“Oh my God.” Dean nearly toppled his box. “Henry you . . .”

“Dean.” Stepping to Dean, Henry tilted his head and smiled. “Why are you arguing with me. I know my own body. And I’m taking this box to the bedroom.”

Turning and watching Henry walk by him, Dean shook his head.

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“A monthly cycle. And I’m being quarantined with him.”

“Let’s hope not too long.” Ellen tapped Dean’s cheek. “He can get vicious.”

Just as Dean closed his eyes, he opened them when there was a knock at the door.

“Oh.” Ellen said excitedly. “Company. I’ll get it.”

“You do that.” Dean reached down and grabbed another box. “I’ll take these to the back.”

Almost in a skip, Ellen headed to the trailer door. She turned the unlocked handle and pulled. Nothing. “Damn it.” She swore. “Robbie, you were supposed to fix . . .” With the emphasis of her word she kicked the door. “This.” The door clicked then popped open. “Oh.” Ellen blushed. “Rev. Bob. Wow. What are you doing here?”

“How are you Ellen, may I come in.”

“Sure.” She opened the door wider. “And I’m fine. We’re just putting away some of our personal belongings we brought up.” She closed the door. “Is this official business?”

“Yes.” Rev. Bob nodded.

“That is really sweet. You’re gonna bless our trailer. Hold on. I’ll get Dean and Henry.” She took a step but Rev. Bob held out his arm.

“My business deals with you.” He spoke softly. “Frank came to me a few days back. He said he wants to stop the twelve step plan.”

Ellen snickered. “Frank is tired of that? I thought he was into it. O.K. Sure. No problem.”

“No.” Again, Rev. Bob shook his head. “He came to me to ask for my help in getting you to try another route. A route that deals with you moving back into the house. Here.” He reached into his pocket and handed her Frank’s list. “I told him if he could convince me with ten reasons, I would speak to you.”

Ellen scoffed in a slight laugh as she reviewed the list. She gave it back. “This is fifty percent a Dean lashing list. I didn’t think you’d buy into it.”

“I didn’t. But you have to read between the lines and look at the situation with your eyes open. He made valid points.” When Rev. Bob heard

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Ellen's sneering laugh, he filled with a little bitterness. "Listen. You're married to Frank. You made vows to him. But for over a month you have been in annulment limbo. A decision has to be made now."

"I thought you believed in your twelve step plan."

"I most certainly do." Rev. Bob said proudly. "But when outside influences are minimal. Ellen, you are drowning in a vat of outside influence . . . Dean. Frank made valid points."

"Frank made jealous points." Ellen argued.

"Again, I say no. The cold hard truth is that conventional relationships in this community are nonexistent. Men have reached agreement with each other, even set forth new domestic laws regarding the sharing of a woman. Men in this community are able to do that without jealousy, rage, or greed. Frank and Dean are not classified with those men. They can not. You can not. And a decision must be made."

"It's not that easy."

"Make it that easy. Do the right thing. You have a husband who loves you and wants to make this marriage work. If you choose to end the marriage, I will sign the annulment. No questions asked. But if you choose to make it work." After a deep breath, Rev. Bob moved to the door. "Then you, Ellen have to throw yourself into it, fully. Move back in with Frank. Even for half the week at first. I know Dean is the father of your children. But, for the sake of your marriage, you must limit not just your professional, but your personal contact as well. Deal with him only when it comes to the children. It was done in the old world, it can be done in this one. As with all other aspects if your life, friendship, companionship, whatever . . . you must cut Dean out completely. It's the only way, at least for a little while." Giving Ellen a gentle smile and advice to mull over, Rev. Bob opened the door with ease. "Think about it."

Ellen's eyes closed when the door did. She brushed the chill from her arms that was brought on by the chilly air along with the blast of cold reality. Turning around, she stopped when she saw Dean. He was staring from his standstill just at the livingroom's entrance. "Dean . . ."

"Who was here?" Dean said walking into the livingroom and grabbing a box.

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“Um . . .” Ellen’s nervous breaths seeped into her words. “Cole. He stopped by to see if we needed anything.”

“Oh. Good. And you better grab your things and claim the small bedroom. Henry’s insisting you should have the couch.” Flashing a smile, Dean turned carrying his box. He gripped it in his arms tightly and walked back out of the livingroom.

Breathing slowly and quietly outward, Ellen fell back into a lean on the door of the trailer. She was so grateful Dean didn’t hear what Rev. Bob had said. But the truth was, though he hid it well, Dean did. He heard every word.

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### The Plains, VA

For hours things were just about to the point of being packed up. The men who stayed behind waiting for the transportation to be secured, worked to aid in the stockpiling of the home out west they soon would head to. Items that would be of use, and if not needed could be placed in storage. It was something to do while they waited.

Carrying what had become his bible, The Captain read from the open log book of Steward Lange’s when he approached the school bus that Elliott had worked on. “My God, do you amaze me.” The Captain spoke with sarcasm as he walked up to behind Elliott. “A man of many talents. A school bus none the less. I was thinking before we get it going, perhaps we should paint it a patchwork of psychedelic colors. What do you say?”

Slowly Elliott lifted from under the hood. “I say . . .” He wiped off his hands. “As long as you promise to play guitar and sing, ‘Come on get happy’, I’m game.”

The Captain laughed. “How’s it going?”

“Going. You?”

“I’ve read every page.” The Captain held up the log book. “No mention of where this spoiling camp for women is. I am a little scared that our two men may have been, well, disposed of for non-viability.”

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“You’re kidding?”

The Captain shook his head. “Both of those men were over the age of sixty. According to this log book, without specifics, I’m gathering they are pretty much stuck in jars for . . . parts.”

Elliott looked horrified. “Is there anything more inhumane?”

The Captain shrugged. “Performing a lobotomy and getting implanted with a microchip pretty much is up there with that. They have a camp where they keep the men scheduled for lobotomies.”

Elliott’s shoulders dropped. “You’re thinking of helping them aren’t you?”

“I didn’t say that.” The Captain held up a finger, “I mean, we have to find our women, right? If we so happen to figure out the location of this lobotomy camp then . . .”

“No.” Elliott shook his head. “I’ll argue you on that. You said yourself no more raids. No more trails to us. Captain, if you want to build in anyway to have a defense against the society, we can’t go blasting in another camp. It’s going to throw the society up our ass.”

“Up our ass?” The Captain chuckled. “Elliott, I’m not thinking of going I there blasting like idiots. First we need to conserve our fire power, secondly. My god, we wouldn’t want the society to be . . . up our ass.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “Ha, ha. Funny. What do you have in mind?”

“Quietly. A very, very small group of us will just . . . unlock the gate for those men.”

“All right.” Elliott nodded. “That’ll work.”

“You’re too easy.” The Captain said. “But, thanks for agreeing. Anyhow. We’ll unlock the gate after we get our women. And of course, after the Partridge Family bus is rolling. Which will be when?”

“Well, I’m just about done cleaning everything up and repairing what I can. But we still have one problem. We can gas her up but can’t make her go. The battery. I can’t find one not dead.”

The Captain grinned. “Elliott, you worry too much, That’s not a problem. I’ll take care of it.” He gave a swat to Elliott’s back and stepped away. “Keep up the good work.”

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“But, Captain. How are you going to get a battery that . . .” Elliott watched the Captain move further away. “No.” Elliott shook his head, talking to himself. “I won’t ask again. Because I know I’m going to look like the fool when he pulls through.” Shaking his head again, Elliott returned under the hood.

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Cleveland, Ohio

“Listen to this.” Robbie nudged his leg against Greg, who tried to get some sleep despite the extreme cold. “Greg, are you listening?”

“Um, yeah.” Greg lifted his head from the wall he leaned against. He rubbed his eyes and tightened his arms.

“These two entries in Chester’s journal were three days apart. They were written a good many years before the plague. Entry one reads, *July 17th, Sometimes I wish that I was only a worker in this game. I look around my lab at my assistant and envy these people with mere bachelor degrees. Their lack of knowledge, their lack of scientific endeavor will breed a certain air of ignorance that at this moment, I wished I had. The memo is gone now. It has to be. A simple memo that had few words, yet spoke so many. Words that I, as one of the fifty ground breakers needed to know. Was my one vote not counted, or was I the only one. This shall remain a mystery until all of us meet again.*” Robbie turned the page. “Now what the hell was that suppose to mean? He just rambled on and on. Right? I’m sitting here reading this saying to myself, this Chester guy has lost it. I’m thinking this Greg, until . . .” Robbie turned another page. “I read this. *July 20th, It has been done. The main team can now proceed.*” Robbie smiled.

“And?” Greg sat up. “There’s more right?”

“No that’s it.”

“But you just acted like that told you a lot.”

“It did. Something happened. The depressed, not whacked out tone to the entry. The memo having to be gone. His vote not counted. The society decided on something. Bet me, the main team is the Beginnings team. Something was holding them up. It was an obstacle that Chester didn’t want

to see eliminated.”

Greg snatched the journal from Robbie’s grip. “Where did you read this?”

“Between the lines.” Robbie took it back. “I’ve read Chester’s tone through all of these entries. It changes on the 17th, drastically. Something happened between the seventeenth and the twentieth, Something that held up the Garfield end of the project. If we can find out what that was. We may be closer to finding out when they arrived in Garfield.”

“You read all that between the lines?” Greg leaned his head back. “You’re searching Robbie. You want to find answers so bad, your Slagel mind is searching. I didn’t get that. For all we know they could have just decided on which virus to use. Or which cryo suits to wear.”

“Greg.”

“Searching.” Greg closed his eyes again.

Seeing that Greg wasn’t really on the same lines as him, Robbie just continued reading in Chester’s journal.

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Beginnings, Montana

In a heated huff through the cold evening streets of Beginnings, Dean made his way to Frank’s. No more. Dean wasn’t going to take it. With a hard pound to Frank’s door, Dean shouted out his dismay. “Frank! You asshole! Give me back my kid!” The door opened just as Dean was about to knock again. Ellen stood there. “El?” He withdrew his hand.

“Come on in.” Ellen opened the door wider.

“Frank took Joey again and I . . .” Dean stopped cold. If the four boxes weren’t enough, the photographs of Taylor and Josh set up again on a table said it all. “El? What’s going on?”

Frank’s voice emerged. “That’s what I’d like to do. Why are you screaming your little man mouth outside?”

Dean turned to Frank. “Give me, Joey, Frank. Now.”

“I don’t have him. Did you . . . loose him again?” Frank raised

one eyebrow.

“Frank, you ass. This is the third time this week. Give him back. Now. I’m going into quarantine, you’ll have him. Get him.”

“Fine.” Frank pouted and went back to the stairs. “But I still say you should just give him to me.”

“No.” Dean said. “And he better not be dressed like baby Rambo again.” Shaking his head as Frank disappeared up the steps, Dean returned to Ellen. “What is going on?”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked.

“You know what I mean. The boxes. The pictures. Those pictures were at Henry’s.”

“Well if they were at Henry’s and now they’re here, then you really know.” Ellen cleared her throat and the nervousness. “I had a long talk with Reverend Bob. Actually two long talks. He came to the trailer and I went to see him. I’m . . . I’m moving back with Frank.”

“El, no.”

“Dean. Yes. Officially after the quarantine. Another process. Three days at first and every week I’ll increase it a day. Until eventually, him and I are back together . . . fully.”

“Why are you doing this?” Dean asked. “You said you were confused.”

“About my feelings, yes.” Ellen kept her voice low. “But not about who I am married to. Rev. Bob made a lot of sense.”

“Rev. Bob talked shit and played on something you rarely have . . . guilt.” Dean snapped.

“You heard him?”

“I heard everything he said. And it’s bullshit, El. Are you following his advice?” Dean saw Ellen look away. “You are.” He said with shock. “So what does this mean for me? Are you only going to work with me eight hours a day and keep it business. No more coffee talks. Just hellos when we switch kids. What? What does this mean for me?”

Frank, coming down the steps, answered. “It means . . . It’s means you’re out.” He set down Joey. “Dean, we’re gonna work out our problems. You can’t be a part of that process.”

Dean nearly gasped. “Why are you being so cold to me again, Frank. Last week, things happened. We went through a lot. I thought we were getting past this dick attitude we gave each other.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “I did too. But you’re moving in on my wife, every chance you get. I can’t have that.”

“We’re friends.” Dean defended.

“I can’t have that either.” Frank stayed firm.

“El?” Dean looked to her. “You can’t tell me you’re just letting him do this, are you?”

Ellen took a deep breath. “Dean, maybe you should just take Joey home.”

Dean nodded. “I see.” He took Joey’s hand and moved to the door. He stopped before leaving. “You’re wrong, Frank. Wrong. When El, and I were together I never stopped you two from being friends. And you’re wrong too, El. If a professional and medical relationship is what you want, then you got it.” With Joey, Dean stormed out.

Ellen jolted at the slamming door, and crossed her arms tight to her.

“El.” Frank whispered. “Believe it or not, it bothers me to do this. But we have to work on this free and clear.”

After a single nod, Ellen turned and walked out of the room.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Gerard Davidson was a thin man, a thinker and a theorist. He always took a moment to write down every thought before he spoke them. Looking a fool or sounding it was never what he wanted to do.

George tapped his fingers impatiently on this desk. “Well?”

Davidson looked up from his paper. “Yes.”

“All that goddamn time to tell me, my guess for the future trip was theoretically plausible?” George grumbled.

“I had to think about it.” Davidson said. “It does make sense.”

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Theoretically I'd say you're correct."

Steward interjected. "What about if we hit them with another virus? One they aren't getting prepared for."

Davidson shook his head, jotted down something, then looked up. "Seeing how they hadn't gone to the future yet, any thoughts you have of doing anything to change that future, will change it. Sort of like with the marshmallow man in the movie Ghostbusters. If you think it, you'll create it."

With a side swipe of his hand, George hit Steward. "Idiot. Keep your thoughts to yourself."

After another shake of his head and another writing down of information, Davidson spoke. "Doesn't matter. The fact that you're thinking of ways to change it, whether you determine what it is, will change it. In theory. Of course time travel is not my forte. I could be wrong."

George rubbed his eyes. "This is too confusing."

Davidson smiled. "Try this one." He lifted his notepad. "I was reviewing the notes and such your person sent. I have a theory. Beginnings created the plague."

"What?" George laughed. "You're nuts."

"No. By the notes. Not only Dr. Hayes, but you, Mr. President, died. They changed that time, hence bringing you both back. The future that sent the note was a future with out Dr. Hayes, and a society, I'm guessing, run by Mr. Lange. You, are a strong leader Mr. President, you would have taken Beginnings another way. Mr. Lange, a power hungry wanna be . . ."

Steward rolled his eyes in a 'gee thanks' manner.

Davidson continued. "Mr. Lange, seeing a struggle with Beginnings that he feared he'd lose, sent the virus. Had Dr. Godrichson just said 'Bring back Dr. Hayes, it's vital' and made no mention of the virus, it wouldn't have happened. The people of Beginnings may have gone into a future with no virus. But since Godrichson mentioned all the virus details and you got a hold of it, he in fact gave you the idea."

George leaned back in his chair. "So in essence. This time machine. Beginnings' ace in the hole. This wonder machine that warned of the virus . . . actually started it all."

Davidson smiled. "Exactly. By trying to save themselves, they

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began their own doom.”

HENRY'S JOURNAL

December 3

I just got home from Frank's house. Bringing some more of Ellen's things over. It's pretty tense there. Forced conversation and smiles. I suppose that's to be expected. Especially with tomorrow. In a few hours only, we will be leaving for a time trip that I don't think any of us are ready for. A trip to an uncertain future. All of us are almost more frightened of what we will see, than the virus itself. It's a place we can't change by going to, but a place we have to change when we get back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

December 4

Beginnings, Montana

The long covered computer lines ran from the back of the CDC mobile across the small distance, into Jason's lab. On the step of the mobile, Jason visually checked the contacts he had attached to make that back door the Quantum Regressionator archway.

"Good?" Joe asked as he approached.

"Yep." Jason stepped back. "When they re-enter our realm from the future, this is the least infectious way. It will take them pretty much into that decontamination room."

"But basically we're gonna have to wait until they emerge into the other lab to see if they're all right?"

"We'll know they made it back when we see the door illuminate." Jason nodded in approval after glancing once more at the moved time machine. "O.K., you wait here. I'll go power everything up, and when the three of them are suited and ready, you give me the signal." Jason took a step back to his lab, but stopped. He saw Dean at the jeep. Frank standing with Ellen by the mobile lab door, and Henry near the couple as if waiting impatiently. "And speaking of giving signals. Do you want to . . ."

"No problem." Joe said, and when Jason started walking again, he gave one of his high ear piercing whistles that caught the attention of the crew. "Move it. Let's do this!"

Ellen could feel the tremble slipping out of Frank's fingertips as they laid on her cheek. "Frank."

"I know. Just be careful. Please. Promise me." Frank whispered softly.

"I promise you. We have to do this." Ellen told him. "And I'm

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ready. Trust me I'm . . ." Her eyes shifted to Henry. "We're all ready."

As Frank nodded, and prepared to give Ellen one more embrace before she slipped into the mobile and far from his reach for an unknown amount of time, he felt the brush of Dean as he walked briskly by them.

"Excuse me." Dean said and walked to the mobile door. "Henry. Ellen. It's time." Box under his arm, he opened the lab door.

Frank looked down to Ellen. "Has he said anything to you at all?"

"Just that." Ellen answered. "Maybe it's for the best." She took a breath. "Give me a hug goodbye."

Frank stepped into Ellen, wrapping his huge arms all the way around her and holding her tight, bringing her feet nearly from the ground.

Henry hated to break up the embrace, but it really was time. "El, we have to do this. Frank, you are going to have to let her go."

Frank stepped back, placing his hands firmly on Ellen's cheeks. "Be good in quarantine."

"Henry is with me."

"That's what I mean, be good in quarantine." He kissed her. "I love you and I'll come and see you everyday."

"Talk to me through the glass with the radio, like I'm in jail." She took a step back with Henry. "Oh, Frank. Just like that movie . . ." Ellen winked. "I'll show you my breast."

Frank smiled, he needed to do that. "Be careful."

"I . . ." Ellen raised the corner of her mouth. "Always." Feeling Henry take hold of her arm, Ellen after one more wave to Frank, moved into the CDC mobile.

The lab door closed. The latch of the lock seemed to ring out and Frank's head dropped. He raised only his eyes catching glimpse of the huge window that would be his only communication with Ellen. Then only after a hesitation, he walked over to stand before that window and wait. To him, after they stepped through the time machine, they wouldn't be gone all that long.

The loud ‘rip’ of the duct tape nearly drown out Henry’s calm. Frustrated, Dean tried to tear the tape.

“Dean.” Henry said again as they stood in the decontamination room. The three of them wearing their bio suits with the exception of the hoods. “Want me to . . .”

“No.” Dean snapped. “Shit.” He ripped the tape off and placed the one end on Ellen’s waist then brought the long piece all the way around.

“Why are you doing this?” Ellen asked.

“Because.” Dean tugged on the tape causing Ellen to grunt. “The suits too big and you don’t want it caught up on anything.” He grabbed the end of the duct tape and almost too loud, ripped off another piece of tape.. “God.” With irritation he wrapped *that* piece around Ellen nearer to her chest. “If you weren’t so small. I wouldn’t have to be wasting my time doing this.”

“Me?” Ellen asked annoyed. “Oh, yeah, like you’re the fuckin jolly green Giant.”

“At least my suit fits.” Dean looked at her.

“Only because you’re wearing extra clothes.” Ellen said. “And does the tape need to be so tight. You did it on purpose like this.”

“Guys.” Henry stepped in between them. His eyes held warning when he saw Dean’s mouth ready to open in further argument. “No. Now is not the time. It’s not . . . the time. I won’t be the referee this whole trip. Put it behind. And . . .” He handed the almost helmet to Ellen. “Put it on. They’re waiting on us.”

Holding her headgear Ellen watched Dean bend down for his. Dean merely glanced at her before placing his on. Then Ellen did the same.

Suited up, they looked like space aliens. Dean reached to his waist, turning on his radio. “El, respond. Can you hear me.”

“Unfortunately.” She answered with a quiver in her voice.

“Check your lights.” Dean instructed. “Henry, you too.”

They both did, their faces brightening from the interior suit light, and the small light attached to the head was their guiding light.

“Shut off the interior suit lights, leave on the outer one. It’s

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gonna be dark when we step outside.” Dean said. “Let’s do this.” First lifting two cases, Dean adjusted them in his arms then did one more quick visual of Ellen and Henry’s suits and the equipment they carried. “Ready?” He received their nods then stepped before the two of them to the back door. As soon as Dean opened it, he saw Joe. He gave the thumbs up to them both. Their signal that they were ready. He watched Joe do a wind up of his arm, looking back at the lab. And with that all too familiar powering noise, Joe was no longer visible through the illuminated archway. “Let’s go.”

They were prepared for the one step out of the door from the CDC. What they weren’t prepared for was no step at all.

With surprise, a thump and loss of balance, Dean dropped first from the two foot fall, followed by Ellen and Henry who landed right next to him. Dean turned his head when he heard Ellen’s slight groan. “Ellen?”

“My fingers twisted in the case.” She grunted more. “I think two of them are broke.”

Henry saw them starting to get up. “Stop. No one move, stay put.” Standing, he turned around. “Where the hell is the mobile?” He saw Jason’s lab to the right, and an empty space before them. “We have to mark the archway or we’ll never get back through. We’ll never find it here in the dark. Stay put. I’ll find something.” Using his foot to draw a line, Henry stepped away. Thinking maybe Jason’s lab had something, he noticed the jeep and raced over. “Guys.” He spoke through the radio. “We can steal the jeep to get back into town.” From the back end, Henry found a tire iron. With it in hand, he ran back over to Dean and Ellen who still laid on the cold ground. “Found something.” Kneeling down to his line, he raised the tire iron above his head and with all of his strength, jammed it into the ground. “Target. You can get up.” He extended his hand to Ellen.

Rolling to her side, Ellen reached up with her uninjured hand and used Henry as leverage.

Clearly Dean could see, Ellen was babying her hand. He knew she had been hurt worse then she was letting on. “El, can you do this? Or do you want to hang back and wait. We have the jeep, an hour tops.”

Ellen shook her hand that started to thump and throb. “I’ll do it.”

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We're gonna have to get something to splint my fingers, Dean. We have nothing at the mobile."

"We will." Dean said. "Henry do an air sample and soil sample out here." Dean saw the light in the lab. "Maybe not. Hold up." He held his hand up walking closer. "Maybe there isn't a plague after all. Everyone turn off the headgear lights." Slowly and barely seen, Dean walked to the lab window to peer in. One look and Dean spun around, his back hitting against the outside quantum lab wall. "Take the samples, Henry."

Henry hid his terrified expression within the darkness. His heavy swallow was heard before his words through the radio. "I'll start them. See if the keys are in the jeep."

Dean ran to it and checked. "No, they must be inside. Ellen stay put. Jason's in there."

"I'm coming with you." She followed him. "I can handle this."

Not wanting to waste anymore time, Dean opened up the quantum lab door. Immediately the sight of Jason slumped over his work counter, was seen. His arms extended above his head, as if he decided at that moment to lay down and nap. "Keys." Dean turned back at Ellen who stood stunned in the doorway. "Ellen are you . . ."

"I'm fine." Not wanting to look at Jason, Ellen moved about searching for the keys in the quiet dead lab.

A foot from Jason's head, Dean spotted them. Hurriedly he snatched them up. "Found them." They jingled as he moved with haste to Ellen, grabbed hold of her arm and led her from the lab.

Henry stood by the jeep waiting. He had loaded their supplies in. "Was it our virus?" He asked as he helped Ellen in the back.

Dean answered as he jumped in the passenger's seat. "I'm sure of it. Let's just get this over with."

In silence, they drove the jeep to just outside the utility building, opting to quietly walk the last quarter mile into town. Not a single light was on, not even the spotlights. The abandoned appearance of the area left them to wonder if anyone at all was left in Beginnings.

Leaving Henry there to do his samples, Ellen and Dean, with their gear walked without light into center Beginnings.

From a distance it looked so normal, a few spot lights on in the streets, quiet and no movement. Dean and Ellen stayed close to the buildings just in case the guard who walked the street at night, was still doing that. They didn't want to be seen.

Dean spotted it first as they closed in to the clinic. The answer to the first question Henry posed. The CDC Mobile set in the street, directly outside the clinic. "We must have worked on the virus in there, El."

"But if everyone had it, Dean, why wouldn't we just work on it in the clinic?"

"I don't know. We'll check the lab out first, maybe we won't have to go into the clinic at all." Dean stopped suddenly, grabbing Ellen and pulling her back when he saw a man he didn't recognize walk from the clinic and past the mobile. Figuring it was some survivor or fearing it was a society soldier, Dean waited for the brawny man with a long blonde ponytail to move from sight, then he took another step. Another foot forward, another jump back. "Shit. Look." He pointed.

Ellen peeked out. She watched as Joe walked from the clinic. He moved slow, he slanted in his walk, his shirt was dirty. "Dean. Joe lived through it. Maybe it's not that bad."

But his hopeful observation lasted only a moment as they watched Joe do something they didn't expect him to do. Something that frightened them, something so simple. He stopped in his stride, turned back and went into the clinic. A few seconds later, the clinic, for the first time ever in the history of Beginnings . . . went dark.

Dean waited until he saw Joe disappear and he moved again. "Let's try it again."

Slowly and quietly they made it to the mobile, they saw no other people on the streets at all. In fact, the streets were darker since the brightness of the clinic wasn't seen.

Dean approached the side door to the mobile. "Wait until I check it out." he reached for the door. When he opened it, what was inside could not be hidden from Ellen who stood directly behind him. The mobile was no longer a lab, but a shell of a vehicle, filled now with bodies, covered

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with blankets, piled in one mass grave together. With his eyes closed tightly, a knot in his stomach, Dean shut the door. “El . . .” He faced her and turned on his interior suit light. “This is going to be bad.” He reached down to her waist and turned on *her* face light. When he did, he saw her horrified look. “Can you do this?” He waited for her nod. “The fingers? How are they.”

“Hurting but let’s go in there, get what we need and get the hell out.”

Dean’s turn from her and leading walk to the clinic was his non-verbal agreement.

The lights on the outside of their headgear was their guide when they walked in. It was over, and Dean knew it when they walked slowly down the dark corridor. Beds lined up the hallway and filled the waiting room. All of them empty. All of them exhibiting the signs and remnants of the struggle those who had laid upon them went through. “El, they’ve cleaned it out.”

“I hope they left the information in the lab.” She led the way, her head moving to shine the light on the dirty beds and cots. “What happened here, Dean?”

“We’ll find out.” He walked first into the clinic lab, immediately pulling the blinds closed and turning on only his desk light. He booted up the computer for Ellen. “Start as soon as it’s ready. Copy my notes and don’t read. Just copy my work.”

“What will you have it listed under?” Ellen pulled out the blank disks.

“Just go into the hard drive and look at the dates. See what the last thing it was I worked on.” Dean set his bio-box on the counter and opened up the refrigerator. The top shelf was filled with tubes of blood. Dates on the racks that held the tubes told Dean they were virus strained samples. Quickly, without looking at any names he loaded them in his box, taking enough samples to work on. When he spotted a smaller bio box on the bottom shelf, he knew. “Let this be it.” Dean whispered as pulled out the box and opened it. His eyes closed after he read the label on the vial. “Yes.”

“You isolated it?” Ellen asked. “Please tell me you isolated it.”

Dean lifted the vial. “I isolated it.” He saw Ellen’s head lower with relief. “Which means, we can beat this.” Dean spoke with a little

confidence. "We're now ahead of the game." He stuck one of each strain into his bio-box. "I have enough. How's the copying going?"

"It's going. I'm only copying the files that were worked on during these dates."

"Let's double check when it started." He searched for his journal. "Just to be certain we don't miss anything." The journal laid on his desk as it always did, Dean flipped open to the end. "Shit, I stopped writing two days ago in this time." He read back. "Oh God."

"What? What is it?" Ellen asked.

"I . . . I gave up." Dean head dropped. "Go back only . . .only one week." Dean swallowed. "That's when it started."

Emotions carried in Ellen's voice. "No. Not that fast. Not again."

With a shake of his head, Dean began flipping through his journal. He knew everything written in there, would be on the disks that Ellen was copying. But he wanted to read while he waited. So much he had noted. Symptoms. A suspected, but not proved incubation period. Air tests. Another turn of the page brought a heavy breath that was heard.

"Dean?" Ellen looked from the computer. "What is it? What did you find?"

"Listen to this." Dean began to read. "*The air exposure tests with the rabbits have proven that the virus is not airborne. One question answered leaves another at bay. How did so many come down with it so fast?*" Dean stopped reading.

"We know the answer to that." Ellen placed in the final disk. "They hit us and hit us big. Anything about the antidote?"

"Um . . . yeah, here. Shit." Dean slammed his hand.

"What's wrong now?"

"God I annoy myself. Four days ago, I wrote I found it and put it on the disk. Why did I do that? Why didn't I just write it in here?"

"That's you. In the Dean is dead history, we went crazy trying to figure out your meds. And this is done." Ellen lifted the last disk from the computer.

"Good, then let's get . . ." Dean saw Henry walk in. "Henry, good. Stay here with Ellen and gather the things. I'm heading down to an

examining room to get supplies so I can splint her fingers when we get back.” He watched Henry only nod with a petrified look. Dean walked up to him, grabbing Henry’s arm. “Are you all right?”

“No Dean, I’m not. I saw the mobile. I thought you were in there. I opened it up. Everyone, everyone is dead.” Henry grabbed on to the counter for support.

“Help, Ellen.” Dean started to leave but stopped. “And Henry? This scene you see here. You won’t see it again. I’ll bet my life on it. I won’t let this happen, I won’t.” Backing up, Dean raced down the empty hallway to the first examining room. He just wanted to get the supplies and head out. They had the information and samples they needed to begin their work.

When Dean walked into the examining room, what he saw was not what he expected. Eight tables were lined up in the room. Two to his left, six to his right. It was obvious they were bodies. Covered so neatly with blankets. Probably the last of them needing to be removed, Dean figured. Not wanting to see and keeping his focus forward, Dean walked to the supply cabinet. He bent down opening the door, but it wouldn’t open all the way. He had to move the gurney that was blocking it. Reaching up and using his foot, with a grunt, Dean moved the heavy table away six inches. He grabbed cloth bandages and splints then shut the cabinet door. When he stood up, the bandages fell from his hand. The blanket had edged its way from the table exposing the person that laid under it. “Oh God.” Dean felt his stomach churn and his balance leave. It was too real, it *was* real. He found himself staring at someone he least expected to see. They grey pale face, the death so evident, the sores that never healed. The hero who lost his final battle . . . Frank. Sickened, Dean reached to re-cover him but froze. Through the speaker of his bio suit ricocheted Ellen’s scream. His views jolted as her and Henry walked in. “Get her out!” Dean blasted emotionally.

“Frank?” Ellen began to hyperventilate as she neared the table, reaching. “Frank? No Dean, this isn’t Frank.”

Dean pushed her hands away. “Henry, get her out of here.” He finished covering Frank, feeling his heart race as he did. “Now.” He bent down for the bandages.

“El, come on.” Henry pulled at her.

“No.” She swung out trying to get back to see Frank, but in her spin of a turn she bumped into a table to her right. Losing some of her balance, she fell hands first, face first into the worst, most horrific scene of it all. Her baby . . . Brian. “No!”

Seeing what she saw, Henry reached forward pulling her away, dragging an hysterical Ellen. “Dean, come on!” He knew they both had to get out of there.

Dean couldn’t move, his eyes fixed with pain on the baby that laid on the table. Brian laid on his stomach the way he always had. Never had Dean felt what he was feeling. He had seen the world end, but nothing he saw was as painful as that moment. Right then and there he understood everything Ellen had gone through, Frank had gone through. There was nothing worse, no pain greater than to stare at his own flesh and blood, laying there so helpless and without the life he helped give him. Dean felt that. His heart ached as if it were crushing. His eyes grew heavy and his blood boiled with determination. More determination to conquer something that obviously had beaten him in that future.

“Dean.” Henry, like he had to do with Ellen, pulled Dean from that room into the hall. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

What they witnessed was a magnet, drawing them to take it in, forcing them to believe that this was their fate if they didn’t do anything about it.

Dean walked slowly. He had a hard time moving. He didn’t know what to say to Ellen when he looked at her sitting on the hallway floor, her back against the wall.

Henry strapped the gear onto a stunned Dean. “You carry this. Dean . . . Dean.” Giving a slight awakening shake to Dean, Henry grabbed his attention. “I know this is bad. I know it is, but we have to get out. And what did you tell me? This is the last time I’ll see this? You bet your life on that Dean and I’m taking that bet.” Almost pushing him to move, Henry squatted down to Ellen. “El, please.” He held out his hand. “El? Let me get you out of here.”

Ellen raised her head and reached out her hand, she gripped Henry’s and stood to her feet. “I’m sorry Henry. I’m sorry I lost control. I

thought I was prepared.”

“None of us were prepared for this.” Henry turned his head to see Dean, zombie-like move down the dark hall. “None of us.”

“This isn’t real, tell me this isn’t real.” She walked with him.

“It is right now.” Henry spoke the painful truth. “But it won’t be in a year. We won’t let it.”

^^^

Frank’s eyes dropped in relief and so did his heart when he heard the doorway power up. The longest five seconds of his life were standing there waiting. All he saw of them were their backs as they closed the door quickly behind them.

Racing to the other end of the mobile, along with Joe and Jason, Frank stood at the large window with bated breath. He could see into the lab and the doorway from which they would come out. “What’s taking so long?”

In the small decontamination room, the three of them not only moved in silence, but in emotional haste. Hurrying from the suits they wore. Taking them from their bodies as if slipping them off would slip the vision of what they saw from their minds. They were back. But the truth came back with them.

Frank felt it when he saw Ellen come from the decontamination room first. His heart pounded when he saw the desperate and lost look on her reddened face as she emerged from the room, as if the secondary lab was a salvation she strived for. “El?” With widened eyes and confusion, Frank watched her nearly trip as she raced to the window, her body shook as she cried. “El?”

“Frank.” She picked up the radio. “Oh God.” She lowered her head and started to cry, her hand reaching to the glass just to try to touch him, to feel him.

“El, El, what happened. Ellen . . .” Then Frank caught a glimpse

of Dean coming out. He, too, looked just as bad.

With such helplessness, Dean walked up to Ellen. He searched for something to say, anything. But he couldn't. Reaching out his hand, he pulled her away from the window.

Frank watched as Ellen stood up, looked at Dean and then so emotionally, she fell into Dean's arms. Frank had seen enough. He charged away from the window and to the door. "I'm going in there."

"No." Joe followed him, pulling him back. "Stay put. You can't go in there."

"What am I supposed to do?" Frank asked his words cracking. "Just watch her through the window? Just watch and know there is nothing I can do?"

"That's all you can do right now."

With a close of his eyes, Frank swung his hand in the air as he turned his body and headed back to the window. As soon as his eyes looked in again, his feelings of helplessness increased when he saw the three of them.

Henry sat on the floor, knees bent up, his head down, buried in his folded arms. Dean, holding Ellen with his whole body. His face looking so hurt, finally raised enough to make eye contact with Frank. Then Dean conveyed it all with a somber, slow shake of his head.

Standing between Frank and Jason, Joe took in the vision. "Dear God." He spoke in a gasp. "What did they see?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It hadn't been all that long since he heard from his person in Beginnings, but to George it seemed like an eternity. Davidson, after several sentences of writing, assured George it could take a day or two to find out what they recovered from the future trip Beginnings made. Theorizing that it probably was kept under wraps from general population, and George would have to wait to hear the remnants of gossip to get any lead at all.

George accepted that explanation, though he didn't like it. Things were going pretty smooth. At first he thought he was just so wrapped up in the future trip that he didn't notice, but Sgt. Doyle confirmed it for him. Nothing had been seen or heard from their defectors. None of the sweeps were interrupted. But George knew they hadn't encountered the last of the bold rebellious men. His gut sang to him. And it sounded so plausible, what Sgt. Doyle had to say about it, that George actually felt secure in counting on it. Basically what Sgt. Doyle explained was, anymore interference would be few and far between until they were no longer heard from. History shows man's traits. What starts as a chivalrous blast will end in a fizzle when the momentum is replaced with the reality that they have other things to do. Like survive.

Sgt. Doyle had a point.

George walked. Trucks from the sweeps weren't expected in. Survivors had been moved out, and the afternoon was clear. Even though George had walked through that small town of Quantico, he hadn't really looked at it. Remains of the old world were still present. The shops that sold relics and military souvenirs still held merchandise. He wanted to take in and enjoy his recent achievement. Watch for a while the hustle and bustle of his hardworking men as they refurbished the small town.

He found a seat on a bench . The peripheral view was good. Especially the word 'Java' that still remained hand painted on the front window of one of the shops. George smiled because the little coffee shop

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made him think of someone he hadn't thought of in a long time. His wife.

How Margaret loved her thick espresso. George used to call her a junkie over it the way her moods would swing if she didn't get it. Sneaking out at all hours trying to find an open coffee shop, like a crack addict trying to find a dealer. It got to the point that the secret service men grew tired of the aggravation that entailed in taking the first lady out. George decided to put a miniature espresso store, complete with a java artists, in the white house.

Margaret. What would have become of himself had Margaret survived the plague. Margaret was good. She would have put a stop to any and all of George's society connections. Surely George would have still been living in Beginnings. Still second in control, drinking the bad coffee and probably sharing Margaret with Joe in some sort of warped 'understanding' Beginnings ritual. He surely wouldn't be sitting in Quantico. He wouldn't be building giant forces that would secure the Untied States the way he wanted. He wouldn't be a man of power. Exhaling in those long thoughts while watching one of his men work on a truck across from him, George realized how much he loved his wife. How much he missed her. And even though he was deeply saddened by her death, there *were* some positive points to Margaret's passing.

It was almost time to move on, perhaps head to that area George wanted to designate a golf course. Standing up, he took one more glance to the soldier across the way. The brawny man who worked with so much diligence, he never stopped to notice anyone watching him. The soldier lifted a battery from the truck and placed it in a green sack. He then tossed the green sack over his shoulder, grabbed another from the ground and he shut the hood.

George knew it was men like that soldier--the ones who insured that the smaller things ran--who never received any of the society's appreciation. So because he was in that rare type of mood, and just to show the soldier he could be a cordial leader, George lifted his hand in a wave to the man.

And just so not to be pegged, or suspected, the Captain returned the wave, and added a smile before toting his two batteries and walking off.

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Beginnings, Montana

The pain medication not only seemed to soothe the pain of Ellen's injury, but her nerves as well. The warm water of the shower helped her too. Ellen knew she took longer than needed. But Dean was working on the reviewing the disks and virus, and there was really nothing else to do but wait. Struggling through the splinted finger to fasten her pants, Ellen turned to the knock on her bedroom door. "Come in."

It creaked slowly, and Dean popped his head in. "Got a minute?"

"Yes." Ellen answered.

Taking a breath, hands in pockets, Dean stepped inside. "Look. What we saw today . . . it shook us. And I . . . I kind of, without thinking, really turned to you."

Ellen nodded in understanding. "I did the same thing. Habit, huh?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to let you know. I'm sorry."

"Dean . . ."

"No." He held up his hand. "I crossed a line. I promise it won't happen again." Dean stepped back to the door. "I'm ready to review the data with you. So, whenever you are." He walked out.

Ellen stood stunned. She didn't know what to say. In fact, she was so engrossed in thought, she never saw Henry walk in.

"El?" He snapped his finger in front of her bringing her from the daze. "Are you all right?"

"Um . . ." Ellen blinked a few times. "Yes. Fine."

"How's the fingers?"

"Finger." Ellen corrected. "Dean said only one is broke. Look which one, Henry." She held up her left hand exposing her splinted middle finger. "Now Dean can't say anything to me if I flip him off accidentally." She smiled slightly.

Henry reached out his index finger and touched her top lip. "Keep the grin. I have a surprise to make you feel better."

"Really? What?"

"Come with me."

Ellen followed Henry back into the CDC mobile. As soon as she stepped in she saw what he brought her to see. It made Ellen smile, in fact it made her laugh. At first she heard it. Frank's voice, made to sound so high pitch, saying 'hi mommy, hi mommy' and then she saw him. Brian, and Brian only at the window, dancing about like a puppet--Frank probably underneath him being the strings. She laughed hard as she stepped closer to the seven month old baby suspending himself magically in the air. "Oh, my God." She hurried to the window, and picked up the radio. "Frank, you are such a goof."

From his work, Dean turned around on the computer to see. He too, smiled. The sight of Brian was needed more than Frank realized.

From his hidden stature, Frank emerged standing up with a grin. He held Brian speaking in that parent tone. "Look Bri, who is that? Is that Mommy? Do you see Mommy?" Brian smiled and Frank held him closer to the window. "El." Frank spoke into his headset. "Talk to him." He put his earpiece near Brian.

"Hey Brian." Ellen spoke wanting to just cry at the vision of Frank and her son. "What are you doing?" She watched Brian smile so wide then throw himself to the glass pressing his mouth against it as if he was trying to eat it. "Look Henry, he's excited to see me. What's he . . ." Ellen looked behind her, Dean was there. "O.K. so he's happy to see Dean."

Dean tapped his index finger to Brian on the window and he waved.

Henry pulled up a chair by the window for Ellen. "Take a moment." He laid his hand on her shoulder, standing with her.

Ellen grabbed the radio. "Frank. Thank you so much for doing this."

"Henry said you needed to see us both. Look how happy he is to see you, El." Frank adjusted Brian. "So how are you?"

"I've been better. But look . . ." Ellen held up her injured,

splinted finger. "I broke it."

Frank dramatically gasped and dropped open his mouth with a wide smile and looked at Brian. "Look Bri." He spoke to the baby. "Mommy's flipping Dean off for us, how nice of her."

Dean rolled his eyes slightly. Even though he wouldn't admit it, Frank's corny sense of humor was so needed. He took in just another moment of it then stood up. "I'll get everything ready." He told Ellen then returned to the computer.

Ellen scooted as close to the window as she could. "Frank, you know the baby can't be out here too long. It's too cold."

"I know." Frank adjusted Brian. "But he's tough, huh, Bri. You're tough. You won't get sick."

Immediately Ellen's mind flashed to what she saw. She didn't realize how much her face conveyed it.

"El?" Frank called her. "It was bad, wasn't it."

"Yeah." She answered softly. "But, I don't want to talk about it. I really don't."

"Then we won't. But I should get him back. I'll stop by later?" Frank asked. He smiled at Ellen's nod. "Good. See ya then." He lifted Brian's hand for a wave, then before he stepped away. He laid his fingers on the glass. "Be good. I love you."

Ellen's fingers laid upon her side of glass. In a silent move of her lips, she mouthed the words, "I love you." and then sadly smiled. She stayed at that window until she saw them leave completely. Watching Frank and Brian get into the jeep and drive further away until they were mere specks. Regaining her composure she turned around. "We would have the perfect marriage wouldn't we, if there was a constant glass wall between us." She sighed out then stood. "O.K., I'm ready. Give it to us Dean."

Dean faced them and waited for Ellen and Henry to sit down. Reaching semi behind him, he swept a small pile of papers up and read from them. "In case you're wondering, no." Dean shook his head. "None of my notes indicate that the three of us took a future trip. I spoke to Jason, because I thought theoretically there would be indications."

"And what did Jason say?" Henry asked.

“My theories suck.” Dean nodded. “Let me see if I can say it word for word. He said, in order for us to go to a future where we have gone to the future, we have to go to the future first.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “What the hell was that? Frank pretended he was Jason, didn’t he?”

Dean chuckled. “No. What it means is, we made the future trip, right? Well, if we go to the future tomorrow *then* everything we find will indicate the future trip of today.” Dean scratched his head. “Confusing. All right . . . my first order of business was to find mention of the antidote in the notes. I did. Anything else I can tell you is just from my quick review, and from that . . . groundwork.” He lifted the papers. “We got a lot of groundwork done. Because that was all we had time to do. From first symptom to finish . . . one week.”

Henry’s eyes briefly closed and his heart sunk. “Oh my God. History repeats.”

“Hopefully not.” Dean said. “I believe the time we so desperately needed in the future, we are giving ourselves now. We have a base to start from. Like I said, I still have to really read. We brought back four vials. Blindly, I injected some rabbits. I want to see if what we get coincides from what the notes say about the incubation periods.”

Ellen quickly looked up. “Periods?”

“Yep.” Dean replied. “From what I gathered, we couldn’t pinpoint it. From one day until at least five, because when I stopped writing we had rabbits still asymptomatic. Which means . . .”

“Multiple mutated strains.” Ellen interjected. “Did the ‘future you’ find the host?”

“Don’t know.” Dean shrugged. “I have a lot of data to read. As far as the antidote goes I read what I wrote on that. Here’s an interesting tidbit. Guess how we found the antidote.”

“We blew up the cryo-lab.” Ellen said.

After a quick confused shift of his eyes, Dean looked at Ellen. “How . . . how did you know?”

“Wild guess.” Ellen answered. “I can see us running blind. Everyone sick, so fast. It isn’t airborne. It came from somewhere.”

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Somewhere meaning, the enemy. The society. The case.”

“You’re right.” Dean spoke in awe. “That’s what we thought. So we opened the password protected files. Printed the vial information and let the cryo-lab blow up. Only check this out. Four and one half doses are in that vial. I have noted that we had used so much of the antiserum testing it, that it only left us with two doses.”

Ellen looked oddly. “Two? Who didn’t get the antiserum?”

Dean swallowed then looked at her then Henry. “You two.”

“Oh my God.” Henry fell back. “We died. You let us die?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “You didn’t need it. You two, were naturally immune to it.”

Ellen was filled with surprise. “How can that be, Dean? O.K., were we immune really, or were we exposed to the virus at some point and built up immunities?”

“Immune.” Dean read. “One percent will be immune. You two were the one percent. And that was a scary thought. But I’m going to double check anyhow. So I need some blood. If you are immune, then I’ll give myself the antidote and we’ll go from there.” Dean collected his things and stood. “I’m going to suit up. Ellen, could you draw some blood from Henry?”

“Sure. Then . . .” Ellen waited. “Dean? Then what?”

“Just draw his blood.” Dean said with a snap to his tone.

“Well how about while you test it I review some of this data we brought . . .”

“Ellen.” It was so sharp, Dean’s call of her name could have cut her. “They are my notes. You said yourself, you can’t decipher my notes. So my notes. My project, you are my assistant. I’ll tell you when and what I need you to do. O.K.?”

An offended loud, nostril breath exuded from Ellen. She waited until Dean was just about to slip from sight. “Dean?”

Dean turned around.

“My finger feels better.” Holding up her splinted finger, Ellen smiled.

Before he could hear the childish snickers he knew would come

from Ellen and Henry, Dean went into the back.

^^^

The Plains, VA

The band of pain around Elliott's head tightened as if someone where pulling on his bandana. He worked outside, and the frigid air hit his bones. It was bad enough his migraine was aggravated by the dim light while he worked on the map, but the nasty stench that carried in the form of hot steam from the nearby horse's mouth, made him gag.

From the map Elliott raised his eyes slightly when he felt the nudge to his temple.

"Hello." The deep voice spoke. "I'm Mr. Ed. How are you, Elliott?"

Slowly Elliott lifted his head all the way. He turned to his right to see the Captain grinning as he held the reigns of the horse, petting the animal's head. "Captain."

"Had you fooled, huh?" The Captain winked.

"No, you didn't have me . . ." It was a chain reaction. The flutter sound from the horse, the blast of steam outward, and the undeniable, throaty gag that came from Elliott. He turned his head and tried to stop himself from up-heaving.

The Captain laughed,. "Not feeling well."

Elliott turned his back to the animal. "Can we please finish this?"

"Sure." The Captain looked over Elliott's shoulder. "Go on."

"If you're right about this zombie soldier camp." Elliott lifted a map.

"I am." The Captain nodded.

"Good. Then you should have no problem doing a surveillance. From the maps, this region was originally a wooded area, so imagine it now. I marked what I thought would be good spots." He handed the Captain the map.

“You’re swell, Elliott.” The Captain rolled up the map. “You and John will be back by dawn?”

“Hopefully before.” Elliott responded. “We just want to check out this building that you say is the spoiling camp. See what they have as guards go.” Elliott turned back around fearing another blast of bad horse breath. “Be careful out there Captain.”

“You, too.” The Captain reached out and extended his hand to Elliott.

“And remember what Lange’s log book said. They are watching for us ‘defectors’. Low profile.”

“Don’t I always.” Grinning, the Captain stepped back. “Lewis!” he called out. “Let’s go!” He mounted his horse.

The sound of galloping brought, Danny Lewis on horse. A thinner man, who wore a black bandana, bounced slightly in his trot forward on the animal. “Ready.” He struggled just a little to keep his horse steady.

“See you in the morning, Elliott.”

Elliott folded his arms with a smile as he watched the Captain give a half wave before yanking on the reigns of the horse and causing the animal to lift its front legs. And it finally dawned on Elliott that the horses were tame, unlike the others they had encountered. And just as he was about to question where the Captain found the mammal means of transportation, Elliott got his answer and he laughed. Watching the Captain and Lewis ride away, even in the darkening sky, Elliott could see, the branded ‘CS’ on the backside of the animal.

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Cleveland, Ohio

Robbie always hated cats. It was one species rendered extinct by the plague, that never truly bothered him. He was reminded of his detest for the feline creatures as he stepped into Chester’s home. The small modest, single floor home a distance from the research facility. Skeletal remains of the once furry pets scattered about the home, an abundance of

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them. Probably they had made their way through the pet entrance of the back door. Robbie smiled as he and the men walked through the house that had the roots from the tree out front growing into the livingroom. He assigned rooms to each of his men, deciding on the bedroom as his own choice for the search.

It was the right choice, in Robbie's mind, even if he didn't find any information. He did find a great stack of pornographic magazines. That in itself was a treasure worth keeping. But his attempts were futile and his search yielded nothing. Having checked every drawer, inch of the closet and even under the bed and mattress, Robbie found nothing that could even remotely connect Chester to the Caceres Society. Chester had kept his work just there--at work.

Blowing the thick dust from the top magazine, Robbie took a brief break, lifting the heavy reading material into his hands. He flipped a couple pages into it. "Chester, Chester, Chester. You dog." Robbie commented as he looked at the picture of two woman, together, enjoying the pleasure of each other's company. It made Robbie chuckle as he looked at it. Lesbians, once considered in the old world--to the average male--to be erotic and arousing, would be considered to the men of Beginnings, a waste of good female flesh and companionship. Closing the magazine, Robbie laid it down. He picked up another figuring he'd might as well decide which ones he was going to steal. Flipping it open to allow the centerfold to be in his view, a slip of paper flew out at him and floated to the floor. Gazing down at it, he could make out that it was a cut out from another magazine. Part of a advertisement was showing on the back of it. "Chester, cutting out favorite poses now?" Robbie bent down to pick it up. As he turned it over to look at it, the magazine dropped from his hand and he clenched the small cut out article. "No way." He smiled. "Greg!" He called out. "Greg!"

"Yeah." Greg came barreling in. "Did you find something?"

With arrogance Robbie held up the article. "Remember last night I was telling you the society had an obstacle to eliminate?"

"Yes." Greg really didn't want to hear Robbie ramble about that one again.

"Guess what. This . . ." He held up the article. "Is that obstacle."

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His eyes ran over it. "And my Dad was right."

"About what?" Greg asked.

"He said, 'somewhere, somehow, someone knows something'.
Greg . . ." Robbie gave him the article. "We just found that someone."

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Beginnings, Montana

The sound of Dean's choking cough that carried loudly from the bathroom, made Ellen close her eyes. It went right through her and her hands gripped the bed sheet tighter. She paused for a moment listening, waiting for the sound that seemed to repeat since they stopped working for the evening. The cough, the choke, the flush of the toilet. Upon hearing the water running, Ellen proceeded to turn down the covers on the single bed.

Dean in a stagger, lifted off his shirt during his walk into the bedroom. As it raised off his head, he noticed Ellen. "El, what are you doing?"

"I know you're sick." She walked to him. "I left water on the night stand and some crackers for your stomach." She watched Dean sit on the bed and she crouched before him as he frantically rubbed his eyes. "Your head too?"

Dean nodded. "I'll be all right. Don't worry about me." He kicked off his shoes.

"Yeah, well, despite, the Dean professional dick attitude, I do." She grabbed his arm, "Dean? You're really warm."

"I'll be fine."

"Maybe I should . . ."

"I'll be fine El." Dean snapped then closed his eyes and calmed himself. "I'll be fine."

"Do you . . . do you have the virus, Dean?" Ellen asked, even though she feared the response.

"No." Dean shook his head. "After effects of the serum. I had it noted that they were sever. I'll be fine tomorrow. I just need to sleep."

"Then I'll let you be." Ellen moved to the door. "Dean, is there anything I can do in the lab?"

"No." He answered sharp.

"Dean . . ."

"What Ellen?" He huffed and looked up to her.

Ellen swallowed. "It's gonna be an even longer quarantine if we keep being like this."

"Call it practice for when we get out."

"Why?" She stepped back into the room. "Why does it have to be like this right now?"

Dean stood up. "Because you're cutting me out of your goddamn life, that's why." He took a long breath, "And I'm sick. I just want to be alone. It's been a long day."

"And a really . . . really bad one." Ellen's voice was sad. "I saw things I never wanted to see again. I still see them." She closed her eyes. "I need to get through that, and I wanted to get through that . . . with you. I thought you wanted, needed the same thing." Ellen turned.

With a rush forward, Dean reached and closed the door before Ellen could walk out. His chest pressed to her back and his hand hovered over her shoulder. "I do." he whispered.

Inhaling, Ellen spun around. So close she was to Dean. Reaching up she laid her hand upon his cheek.

Dean took hold of her hand, removed it then held it. "There's something I need to tell you." He swallowed. "I've been thinking about it all day. I owe you an apology."

"Dean." Near whimper she spoke. "Please don't do this. Can we just not think about what happens after quarantine and think about now?"

"This isn't about now, or today, or even tomorrow. It's about yesterday." Dean saw the confusion on Ellen's face. "Yesterday meaning a while ago. It's . . . It's an apology long overdue."

"For what?"

With some hesitation, eyes still locked, Dean spoke soft. "For any time I never understood what you were going through six years ago. For not understanding why you got like you got." He squeezed her hand. "For all

that you went through, and for what you are today, I admire you, Ellen.”

Ellen was taken aback. “Whoa. You’ve never said anything like that to me.”

“I’m sorry for that, because I’ve always felt that way.” Slowly Dean released her hand, stepped as far as he could into Ellen, and embraced her. “I want you to know, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure nothing pulls you down again. Tell me . . .” Dean closed his eyes and whispered with intensity. “Tell me El, that you think I can do this. Please.”

Right then and there Ellen knew it wasn’t just the side effects of the antidote. All of what was going on was troubling Dean. Everything they viewed, everything that scared them hinged on Dean. He was the key to letting that future happen, or stopping that, and Dean knew it. And for anyone, even Dean, that was an awfully big load to carry alone. Ellen wouldn’t let him do that. “No Dean, I don’t think you can do this. I *know* you can do this. I believe in you.” She felt him hold her tighter. “I really believe in you.”

HENRY'S JOURNAL

December 4

If anyone were to asked me again if I wanted to look into the future, from this moment on, that answer would be 'no'. What we saw, where we were, was not a place I ever want to be again. It was a vision, a trip I want to forget--a nightmare. With the grace of God, it will remain always that. A nightmare that I can awaken from. Hopefully Dean, Ellen and myself can ensure that what we witnessed will never be a reality to us in our lifetime or our children's.

LEAST EXPECTED TURNS

CHAPTER TWELVE

December 6

Beginnings, Montana

The escape hatch on the skills room floor slammed loud causing the nine survivors in the room to jump. Joe, toting a clipboard, pointed fatherly around the group. "While Ellen's in quarantine, I am in charge. And when I am in charge. No more pissing in the hatch." Grumbling he moved across the room. "I'll lock it back up, I mean it." Almost out, Joe spotted Mike. He sat on the floor on his hands in knees. "Mike, you're in charge. Watch them."

Mike barked.

"Good boy." Joe patted the bald head of the man and walked out. He stopped in the hallway when he hear the buzzing of the main door.

"Joseph Slagel." Andrea marched to him with her arms folded. "Joseph! I know you hear me you are not that far away."

"What Andrea, I'm a busy man." Joe walked to Ellen's office He saw Andrea follow him. "What is it? And don't slam that . . ." He cringed. "Door."

"You know exactly why I am here." Her finger pointed and her head bobbed. "What in the Lord's name are you doing to Denny and Josh. And what is it that you have them doing now?"

"Working. They have to work. What else are they going to do?"

"Get an education."

Joe scoffed. "They get an education a couple hours a day. The rest of the time they work."

"They should be in school full time."

"For what Andrea? I can see if they were headed to be the town doctor, but let's face it, neither of them two boys are a budding Einstein."

Andrea gasped.

"Andrea, what do I have them doing now that is so bad? They aren't doing anything but unloading and separating the Christmas stuff."

“Exactly.” Andrea raised her head. “Denny is seeing the gifts.”

“So what? It’s not like he’s nine and he still believes in Santa Clause.”

Andrea brought in her bottom lip and raised her eyes while tapping her fingers on her arm.

“Andrea! He’s fourteen years old for crying out loud. I understand you want to shelter the boy, but come on, you’re going over board don’t you think.”

Don’t you take that tone!” Andrea yelled back.

“Jesus Christ, you still have the kid believing in Santa?”

“Joe Slagel, I will raise that boy the way I see fit. This is a new world and . . .” She took a breath of disgust when she watched him nod his head and wave his hand to hurry her. “Sweet Jesus, what is with the attitude!”

“I’ll ask you the same thing. I haven’t been paying enough attention to you. Is that it? It’s starvation.”

“Oh, you arrogant son of a bitch. I am insulted. Starved for you?”

“Please, Andrea. You need me.”

Andrea gasped. “Need you!? If I’m gonna be needing anyone it certainly would be someone who was still viable. You, Joe Slagel are too old.”

“Old.” Joe laughed with a loud ‘Ha!’. “I’ll show you old.” Tossing his papers back to the desk, Joe grabbed firmly with both hands to Andrea’s face, pulling her to him and kissing her.

Andrea struggled but only for a moment, her tense arms relaxed and she threw them tightly around Joe’s neck, running her hands fanatically through his always perfect hair.

Grabbing to cling to each other, they became swept away in their kiss, clumsily bumping into Ellen’s desk, and knocking things off. Without thought, Joe turned Andrea around, clutching to her leg, and lowering her down to the surface behind them.

The moment they touched down, was the moment they stopped, when a loud, shrieking, Frank bellowed into the room. “Uh!” Frank shielded his eyes with his forearm. “There’s something just not right, seeing your father like that.”

Joe lifted himself up, shaking his head. "Frank."

"Dad, you assured me you weren't seeing this woman."

Andrea straightened her clothes. "Frank, grow up."

"Grow up?" Frank scoffed. "I'm merely doing my Job. My Dad calls for me. I get here, I hear screaming. I hear silence. I think you're killing my Dad. Instead you're molesting him."

"Frank!" Joe yelled.

"On my wife's desk." Frank instigated.

"Frank!" Again, Joe yelled.

"What!" Frank blasted in return. "Don't yell. You called for me. What's wrong. Why are you guys yelling?"

"Andrea!" Joe pointed with a heavy hand then sat down. "Get ready for this, Frank. She has Denny still believing in Santa."

"O.K." Frank nodded. "Dad? Robbie believed in Santa until he was fifteen."

A shriek flew from Andrea. She gurgled her voice in disgust. "And you ridicule me."

"Andrea." Joe barked. "There's a big difference. I told Robbie the truth. I even took him to the goddamn mall at thirteen and pulled off Santa's beard. But he still wouldn't believe me."

Frank snickered, "That was so funny. Man were those little kids fuckin traumatized." With a shake of his head and a laugh, Frank walked to the door. "All right. Glad I could help."

"Frank." Joe slammed his hand on the desk as he called his son. "I didn't ask you here to solve our Santa dilemma. Robbie's on his way back. Can you be my office when he arrives. He wants to have a meeting."

"What for?" Frank asked.

"He says he brings good fortune." Joe said.

"You mean, like a horseshoe?"

Joe's top lip curled. "Frank, you dumb son of a bitch. He didn't bring a horseshoe."

"How do you know. He said good fortune and that . . ."

"Frank! Can you be there!"

"Yes!" Frank screamed in returned. "God yell at me. Make my

ass come all the way down here when you could have radioed.” He stormed out. “I know you do that shit on purpose.” His voice faded in his complaint.

After Frank left, Andrea looked at Joe. “He is not right, Joe. Not right. And here I would of thought Frank was the one who believed in Santa for a long time.”

“Frank. Frank used to set traps for Santa. Damn near cut off my toe the one year.” Joe shook his head with a laugh at that memory. He, drew up an ornery look. “Hey, Andrea. Why don’t you shut and lock that door.” He winked.

“You are bad.” Andrea said serious then giggled and did as asked.

^^^

The Plains, VA

Elliott flashed a bright smile after listening carefully to the Captain. Over the map spread upon the table he leaned. He tapped his finger fast on the paper then released a sarcastic laugh. “What are you? Nuts?”

“Elliott, Elliott, Elliott.” The Captain shook his head. “It’s four women. Four measly little women.”

“I understand that.” Elliott said. “But, *I* surveillanced that spoiling camp. You did not. I understand your plan with this . . . pre brain surgery concentration camp. It works. We can go in there with fifty men. Hide out and not be seen. That area is dense. But this spoiling camp.” Elliott had argument to him. “It’s not a camp. No. It’s a big red building in the middle of everywhere. We don’t know how many guards are in there, because we only saw the change over. We can’t move in with a large group of men.”

The Captain smiled. “You really need to calm down. I didn’t say go in with a large group. I’m thinking small. Very small. Go in, get our women, get out.”

“I suppose you just want to walk right in.”

“Yes.” The Captain said with excitement.

“No.” Elliott argued adamantly. “It’s a huge place. The only way

we're gonna walk right through those doors, is if one of us are a woman."

^^^

Washington, D.C.

"I hate you." Elliott grumbled from beneath the long, dirty, purple shall that covered his head and shoulders. "I can't believe this." He said to the Captain who sported a Society uniform.

"Elliott, Shh." The Captain brought him to the reception window inside the empty entrance hall. "And hunch down. You're too tall."

Elliott did. "I don't know why you aren't the woman. You have the long hair."

"You're prettier." The Captain winked, grinned then knocked on the glass of the window. "Now don't say anything and keep your head . . ." The Captain grinned, when a balding man in a lab coat approached the window. "Afternoon. I'm dropping off."

Irritation laced the doctor's heavy exhale. "Paperwork."

"You don't have it?" The Captain asked.

"No. You're supposed to."

"No, you are. That big guy, um . . ." The Captain snapped his fingers several times. "What's his name . . ."

"Burke?" The Doctor asked.

"Burke, that's it." The Captain said. "Burke was to drop of the papers earlier. This one was a bit frisky. She keeps . . ." The Captain dropped his voice to a whisper. "Grabbing me."

"Burke didn't leave them. Then again, he's an asshole. O.K., go on take her up to processing."

"That would be floor . . ."

"Three." The doctor told him. "And by the way. Have you seen my guard?"

"Yeah. He's out front."

"He's supposed to be right here. All right. Take her up, thanks." The doctor grumbled and walked from the window.

Taking hold of Elliott's arm, with a jerk, the Captain tugged him. "Careful. No footprints."

After another grumble, Elliott looked down to the dead guard that lay right beneath the window, then carefully stepped over the body and the blood that flowed freely from his neck.

The elevator wasn't that far, a mere ten feet. The Captain pressed the button and the doors immediately opened. He hurried inside and pressed three.

Once inside and once the doors had closed, Elliott dropped the shall. "You owe me." He swung around his rifle that was on his back. Then reached behind him to the gas masks that too, were also hidden under that shall. He handed one to the Captain.

"Thanks." The Captain took the mask. "Stay back." He instructed when the door opened. Placing his foot out first, the Captain stayed behind the doors and peered. "Clear." with a motion of his head, he and Elliott stepped from the elevator. "Look, Elliott. Look how proficient." The Captain pointed to a sign that greeted them immediately. The word 'processing' had an arrow indicating left. 'Preparation and spoiling' were to the right.

"They've been here too long to be in processing." Elliott said.

"You're right." The Captain moved to the right. A single door with a small window was before them. Peering through the window but keeping out of sight, The Captain spotted guards in the long corridor. "Masks." He placed his on.

"You or me." Elliott adjusted his mask.

"You take this one. Ready?"

Elliott lifted the small gas canister. "Ready."

The Captain grabbed the door handle. Slowly he nodded his head. On the third nod, he flung open the door and Elliott tossed in the can. The canister rolled down the hallway and stopped at the tip of the boot of a soldier. The soldier peered down and reached for it, just as it exploded.

Back against the closed door, the Captain stood. He peered through the window watching the soldiers drop. "Now." Another grab of the door, rifle high, the Captain and Elliott barreled through. "Christ." The

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Captain turned to walk backwards. Through the steam, only three doors were seen. "Elliott, I'll take the far end. You take this one."

"Got it." Elliott said, watched the Captain race to the end of the corridor, then he himself prepared to go in the room. He tried the knob first. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. He looked through the small window only able to see a doctor walk by with a clipboard. Not seeing a guard, but not taking a chance, Elliott lifted a gas canister from his belt, placed his back against the wall, turned the knob, pushed the door open with his foot and tossed in the gas. He counted. He waited and then he rushed in. The moment he did, Elliott not only lost his weapon, he nearly lost his heart when the steam of the gas moved enough to expose the longest glass wall he had ever seen. But it wasn't the glass wall that took Elliott aback. It was what was behind it.

"Elliott." The Captain barreled in. "That was only . . ." His speed and words slowed down. "An office. Dear God." He gasped.

Elliott could barely speak. His hand lifted in a point to the wall, then closing his eyes, he turned around. "Correct me if I'm wrong but I think, I think numbers 72 through 75 are ours."

Those numbers were near the end. Though struck with the painful vision, unlike Elliott, the Captain had to take a closer look. He stepped nearer to the glass wall. Reaching up, his fingers pressed against the pane of glass as the Captain looked inside. A large room, a lab. It was dark with the exception of the glow brought on by the digital displays and power lights that graced the bottom of each vat. Vats, thin, tubular and tall, that filled the room. Too numerous to count, too many to see them all. The only identification was a posted number near the bottom. Some of the vats stood upright. Some vertical and some on a slant. But every single one of them was not only filled with a clear effervescence fluid, but the bodies of women suspended by wires. Their bodies nude, heads shaven. The life signal display at the bottom of the vat indicated their vital signs, while the rapid blinking eyes and twitching body parts reiterated they were still alive.

"Are they?" Elliott asked with a crack to his voice flinging off his mask.

"I . . . I believe the one is Rosemary, yes." The Captain turned around, taking off his.

“What are they doing to them?”

“I don’t . . .” Before the Captain completed his answer he saw the clipboard still clenched in the hand of the scientist who laid upon the floor. He walked to it and lifted it. The first sheet told him nothing, but the second sheet made the Captain’s eyes grow wide.

“Captain? What are they doing with them?”

“Breeding.” The Captain swallowed and dropped the clipboard. “They’re all pregnant.”

“We can’t leave them. Is there anyway we can save them?” Elliott asked.

Slowly the Captain looked back into the lab. Clearly he could see the small scar that graced above the left temple of every woman. “I don’t think there . . . yes. Yes there is. Stay here.”

“We don’t have much time, the gas will wear off. What are you doing?” Elliott asked watching the Captain move to the door that led into the lab chamber.

“You’re right. I don’t have time to help them all. But I can at least save *our* women from this. I’ll be back.”

Elliott didn’t have to look to know what the Captain was doing. He listened to the Captain’s boots moved slowly across the linoleum of the echoing lab.

The Captain approached the vats of numbers 72 through 75. He confirmed visually that they were indeed the women that had joined Elliott and him. And when he knew they were, the Captain took a deep breath, blinked long, blessed himself then raised his rifle.

Elliott’s eyes closed at the four sequence of sounds. A single shot, a shattering of glass and the ‘splash’ of rushing water. His head lowered and he prayed.

“Let’s go.” The Captain said with solace as he emerged from the lab.

Elliott followed. A few moans were heard in the hall along with something else. Female screams and a pounding on a door. Immediately Elliott looked up. “The other door.”

The Captain rushed forward, his damp boots squeaking with

every fast stride. His ears followed the pounding to the last door. After discovering the door was locked, Shoulder first the Captain backed up, and raced full speed into that door crashing it open.

A deep raspy scream shot out. "He's one of them. Get him!" The woman blasted.

Before the Captain knew it, like a nightmare, a bald headed extremely husky woman in her forties, wearing only a hospital gown, barreled forth at him pummeling her body the Captain's way. Her fist swung in a maddening way as she proceeded to beat upon the Captain.

"Run, ladies!" She ordered out.

Elliott flew in, only to find himself accosted by the six, baldheaded women trying to make an escape.

Blocking the blows, The Captain managed to pump the chamber on his rifle, hopefully as a warning. But it didn't do the trick as much as his loud yell. "Knock it off!" He screamed out. "We aren't the bad guys here!" He grunted when one more fist careened into his back. He stood up enraged. "Leave my man alone!" He barked to the women who fought Elliott. "Christ Almighty!" He snapped. "Use some goddamn common sense. Would I break open the door if I was one of them!" He took a moment to gain his composure, and sweep back the long blonde strand of hair that fell in his face. He stood up. "Elliott, are you all right?"

"Um, yeah." Elliott adjusted his bandana.

"Let's go." The Captain gave a wink that wasn't seen by the women.

"O.K." Elliott started to follow the Captain out.

"Wait!" The heavy woman screamed. "You can not tell me you are leaving us here!"

"I am!" The Captain shouted back.

"Don't you dare!" She growled at him stepping closer in an authoritative manner. "Our men would have not even thought about leaving us!"

There was something frightening about the woman. It wasn't her size or the fact that she was shaved bald, it was the look of 'mean' written across her. The Captain, stern faced, engaged in a stare down with the scary

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bald woman whose name of 'Grace' far from fit her demeanor.

"Captain." Elliott whispered. "We don't have time. We have to go. Our men are waiting."

"We stand firm." Grace crossed her arms like a warden. "You will take us out of here. And take us right now!"

After taking a look at Grace and all of the women who tried to take on an intimidating stance in their hospital gowns, the Captain grinned. "O.K., you win."

Out of the elevator onto the first floor, The Captain emerged first. "Clear."

"Mister." Mean, Grace tapped on The Captain's shoulder. "It will be cold. Could you have at least found us clothes?"

"Quiet." The Captain whispered then hid his snicker at her flapping hospital gown. "You look fine. Stay put." hurrying before the group, The Captain walked up to the reception window again. He tapped on the glass and the same doctor approached the window. The Captain made a signal of his hand for the doctor to slide the window open. When the doctor did, The Captain tossed in a gas canister, shut the window and held it. "Take them out, Elliott. Hurry."

Elliott led the pack of women who seemed to pull a squeamish tip-toe escape dance as they made it down the hall. Waiting for Elliott and the seven women to pass him, The Captain secure in knowing the doctor was passed out, left the reception window and brought up the rear of the group.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen held the brown and white rabbit up to her eye level. “Nothing Dean. He still isn’t sick.” She handed him to Henry. “Play with him Henry, that’s our job now.”

Dean moved to his microscope. “It’s called research, Ellen. You have to have contact with all the rabbits or how else are we going to see if we’re carriers.”

Henry looked curiously at the rabbit. “But why do we have to touch them?”

“To see if we can spread the virus.” Dean explained.

“It’s very silly. Dean?” He lifted up the bunny less than gently, then making motor sounds Henry flew it around like an airplane. “They are so useless if they aren’t being used for research.”

“No, Henry. That . . .” Dean reached his hand out stopping him. “Is silly.”

Arms folded Ellen walked up to behind Dean. “Why am I in quarantine?”

“Ellen.” Dean took on disbelieving tone. “You know why.”

“In case we’re contagious. I know.” Ellen said. “But why am I here? I mean for all you use me for, playing with rabbits. Typing your notes. Anyone could have done that. I want to do more, Dean. But serious stuff.” Ellen explained. “Not just blood removal.”

“You’re right.” Dean took off his glasses. “I’ll tell you what. Here’s what you can start on for . . .”

“Robbie!” Ellen shrieked out with a smile when she noticed the faint knocking at the window. “Look, Robbie’s back!” She said excitedly and hurried out of the lab into the other room to see him. “Robbie.” She picked up the radio and stood close to the glass. “How was Cleveland?”

“Productive. How is quarantine?” He asked.

“Productive. We aren’t sick.” Ellen smiled at him.

"I don't have much time, I have a meeting with my Dad. I can stop and see you later. But I just wanted to tell you, I brought you something." He raised his eyebrow. "Actually, you are going to love it so much, you'll drop my loser brother and be with me over it."

"That good? You're awfully sure of yourself."

"I'm sure of you. So will you drop him?"

"If it's that good, sure." Ellen shrugged. "What is it?"

Robbie grinned. "Say goodbye to Frankie boy." With a smack of his hand, he pressed to the window an open soap opera magazine. "Look what I got you, El."

Ellen snickered. "Not enough to leave Frank for. But a nice gift. Thanks, Robbie. You now what?" She peered closer. "I think I have that issue. But I can use another."

"No, El. Not the magazine. Him." Robbie showed her the picture of the tall typically looking soap actor. Dark hair, dimples, bright smile. "I got you him. I found him outside of Chicago."

"You brought me Blake?" She snickered. "Nice tease, Robbie. In the savaged world you find a soap opera star?"

"Yep." Robbie looked so pleased. "Bet me. Bet me, aside from you leaving Frank, bet me I got him for you."

"I'll bet you. If you didn't get me Blake, you have to walk Mike the dog for a week."

"You're on, and if I *did* bring you Blake. As soon as you get out of quarantine, you have to sleep with me. And I don't mean slumber party. I *mean* sleep with me. Sex, all night long."

"You're on."

With a wide eyed, open mouth grin, Robbie held up one finger and stepped to the side. "I can *feel* the erection growing. Are you ready?" Looking--if it was possible--even more arrogant, Robbie pulled him into the window's view. Blake. "Say hello Ellen." Robbie handed the radio to Blake.

Hearing his soft 'hello' Ellen let out a loud scream, held up a hand to Robbie, and ran from the window's view. She darted into the trailer next door, and into the bathroom to check her reflection. "Shit." She raced back out into the mobile and straight to the special lab where Henry and

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Dean stood stunned at her running around. “How do I look?”

Thinking she was losing it, Dean answered. “Fine, Why?”

“Look at my present Robbie brought me. Look Henry.” She pointed out.

Henry peered out the lab to the window. “Oh my God, is that . . .”

“Yes.” Ellen said excitedly. “Robbie brought him for me.”

Dean snickered at Robbie who stood with the new survivor. “Your brother in law brought you a person as a gift.”

“Not just a person, Dean.” Ellen laid her hands on his arms. “A soap opera god. Blake is in Beginnings. And he’s mine!” She raced back into the other lab and grabbed the radio. “Robbie this is the best present you ever brought me back. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But I have to go. He’ll be in containment waiting for you, El.”

“You’re the best. And don’t let Jenny Matoose near him, you know how she is.”

Giving a thumbs up to Ellen, and a shot of his center finger to Henry who watched from the special lab, Robbie laughed, and with Blake, left Ellen a happy woman--quarantined--but happy.

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“Frank!” Joe tossed a pencil harshly across his desk, hitting Frank in the head. “Will you stop biting your nails.”

“Sorry. I get edgy. I have things to do and I’m just sitting here.” Frank slumped shifting his eyes over to Jason who looked as if he was hiding a smile. “What? What’s so funny.”

Jason crossed his legs and tapped his fingers together. “You are such an uptight individual, Frank. You really are.”

“Dad. Why is this man here?”

“Your brother requested him.” Joe answered that question. “Not that I have to answer to you, mind you.”

Frank arrogantly scoffed his face. “But you *are* gonna have to answer to my wife on why you were fooling around on her desk. And where is Robbie, I have things to do.”

A breeze of soon-to-be-winter air came in through the opening door. “Right here.” Robbie said. “Hey bright boy.” He smacked Frank on the back of the head. “Sorry I’m late Dad, I brought Ellen her surprise to see.”

Frank curled his lip, looking up at Robbie. “Did she like him?” He asked in a sulk.

“Loved him. She was hysterical. She didn’t believe me at first, I had the guy hidden.” Robbie snapped his finger. “Say, uh, Frank. While I’m thinking about it. She made a bet with me that I didn’t have him. Can you make sure she pays up. I mean, she would have made me walk Mike the dog for a week. Can you?”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t welsh. And speaking of that Mike guy, why do you allow that. You run containment with her. Why do we have a man who thinks he’s a dog still in Beginnings.”

Robbie snickered. “Frank, it’s funny. Besides, he’s Ellen’s pet. I can’t take her dog from her.” He began to search for a chair, gave up and sat on the edge of Joe’s desk. “Let’s start.” He clapped his hands together.

Joe, hand on chin, leaned back staring perturbed at his very upbeat son. “Robert. This better be good. For all the Frank dramatics you’re pulling.”

“What?” Frank looked up.

Joe waved his hand at Frank. “Go on, Robbie.”

“O.K.” Robbie smoothed out his hands on the air. “I had a great trip. A very successful trip. I brought Ellen back her personal soap star. I brought back a SUT.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “In a dress. Now what was the meaning behind that?”

Robbie snickered. “It was funny. Frank, wasn’t it funny?”

“I have to admit, he looked funny. Dad?” Frank turned to Joe. “I have that SUT locked in holding, are we keeping him drugged or let him bang against that wall like he’s been doing for an hour.”

Joe didn’t know. “Jason, you’re a doctor. What do you think.”

Jason thought about it. "Is he banging his head Frank, or just his body?"

Frank shrugged. "Body I think."

"Then let him go." Jason waved his hand.

Joe shook his head. "Robbie. Not impressive. A SUT in a dress. A man with no skills, except to probably get the women in an uproar, and a very large collection of obscene pornography."

"Yeah." Frank said. "Where's the horseshoe?"

"Frank!" Joe yelled with a bang of his hand. "Your brother didn't bring back a goddamn horseshoe. He said he brought good fortune."

"And I did." Robbie said.

"Ha!" Frank pointed. "See. See. Told you."

Joe grumbled. Jason laughed. Frank gloated until he saw Robbie reach into his pocket and pull out that small article.

Robbie handed it to Joe. "Our next time trip. Our next step." He grinned widely. "Searching for answers on when the scientist got here. I think this may be our biggest lead yet. At the very least, it will tell us what we have that the scientist want. Check it out."

"What is it?" Frank asked.

"Son of a bitch." Joe smiled. "This really could be it."

"What?" Frank asked again.

"It is." Robbie said. "Look at the date. The coincidences. A tiny article hidden in Chester's things. It has to mean something."

"It does." Joe nodded.

"What!" Frank yelled.

"Very smart." Joe commented and handed the article to Jason. "What do you think?"

Frank grumbled trying to see. "What?"

Jason smiled as he read. "We have the time, we have the date and we have the place."

Frank, totally frustrated, growled and snatched the article from Jason. Suddenly his eyes lit up as he peered to Joe. "I never knew this." He gave it back to his father. "A car explosion?"

"Neither did I." Joe said pleased. "And it makes sense. No one

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dies like this, unless they know something. Only the government could pull off the cover-up. The government meaning the Society.” Joe held up the article. “Let’s put this together so it can be done perfectly. Let the car explode. Stop the death. No ripple.” Joe smiled. “Because we not only found the person with the answers. We found . . . the man.”

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Next.” George said as he moved a paper from a pile. He sat at the end of a long table before a group of men including his ambassadors and Sgt. Doyle. “Our virus.” He exhaled and sat back. “Nothing yet. No rumor from the mobile. Our so-called top virologist bio man, Dr. Radovich has informed me that, yes, we do have other viruses and chemical weapons and such, but only one . . . one has a completed antidote sequence. We have the recipe. Beginnings has the sample. He says we need an antiserum slash antidote in order to make sure that whatever we work on does not get out of control. I agree. In order for us to use something other than what Beginnings has a potential cure to, we in fact would have to create a cure. Which could take as long as creating a whole new strain. Could be a month, could be years. So . . .” George tossed up his hands. “Any suggestions.”

Steward lifted his hand slightly. “What about possibly taking the time? Make a new one or use an existing one. If it takes longer not only will Beginnings not be ready for it, they would think the risk has passed.”

George shook his head. “Sort of on the opposite lines of what I said. I want to hit them early so they don’t expect it, you want to hit them late. Can’t be done. We can’t wait. We need Beginnings. Time is just as important to us. Any time we use now, will be for recreating the antidote, testing it and perfecting it before we even use that virus. My wife, and a lot of people we needed died because of a bad vaccine we thought we perfected. The world ended once, we can’t let that happen again.” Moving into the table in a mode for next discussion, George peered to Sgt. Doyle. “Any word yet

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about what went down at the ‘Spoiling camp’.”

“Just what Dr. Lynch said.” Sgt. Doyle answered. “One of our men went mad. We’re sure it’s one of our men because a few of the guards recognized him from base. Right now we’re trying to locate what he did with the seven women waiting in preparations.”

“I’m sure if you look hard enough, you’ll find those women.” George said. “Seven bald women running around D.C. shouldn’t be hard to spot. All right moving . . .” George looked up when the phone rang. “Maybe not, Steward could you?”

“Yes, sir.” Steward lifted from his chair at the table and walked across the room to the desk where the phone was.

George continued. “Moving on. Down in Norfolk, Ambassador Lyons selected . . .”

“Sir.” Steward interrupted as he held out the phone. “It’s your Beginnings person.”

George stood up slowly and walked over to the phone. With his back to the meeting group, George placed the receiver to his ear. “Yes.” His head lifted. “You’re sure? Well how do you . . .” A long silence only bred the rubbing of his eyes. “Thank you.” George hung up the phone. His fingers tapped on the receiver before he turned around. Breathing out, he walked to his chair. “Seems Beginnings is suddenly thrown into an excited frenzy.”

Steward was confused. “They found no virus in the future.”

George winced. “No. Don’t jinx us. Gees. That was nothing about the virus. It was however about another past time trip.” He laid his hand on the table. “They’re calling it another information gathering. So this one’s not a secret. This one is one the whole community is thrilled about and are preparing for . . . immediately.”

Steward snickered. “They’re excited about just an information gathering?”

“This is a little bit more than just an information gathering.” George grew serious. “And we have to determine how much information they actually can get from it. It seems gentleman, Beginnings is not only trying to figure out how to stop the death, but also how to bring from the past into the present, our very own . . .” George looked around the room.

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“Dr. Forrest Caceres.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Flat Run, VA

The feel and the sound of the cheering prisoners that had been freed were still fresh on Elliott's mind. So was the silence that immediately followed the attack on the concentration style camp where they held over one hundred men awaiting their mind execution. Silence. How confused they had to be about the death and fighting that happened right outside the fence. The fast fierce attack that started with a mimic of a savage scream by the Captain. An attack that ended with the society soldiers, though not many, defeated. And then the Captain, along with the small group of men selected, merely walked up to the gate, shot down the locks and opened it.

The Captain said nothing. Elliott knew he didn't have to. After the brief hesitation and dismissal of a trap, the men held prisoner, cheered.

Through the late hours that crept up, Elliott and the Captain made their final sweep through the prison camp. Taking weapons, food and such, like scavengers. It was nothing they prided themselves on doing, but it was something that would hold them over until they headed west and to the new home. The mouths to feed and bodies to protect had multiplied in numbers. Fast provisions were needed.

Everything that could be taken was. Those who chose to go moved onward toward the buses and the two society trucks they had acquired from the raid. Elliott and The Captain were the last to remain. From inside the camp, through the fence, they walked.

Elliott stopped at the body of the lone guard just outside the entrance booth. His body in a sitting position, back against the wall of the booth. Elliot stared at the wound that killed him. A single penetration would, clean, three inches wide. So neatly done, the blood failed to flow forward, it drained through the rear of the tilted back neck, causing a thick puddle behind the soldier. With a deep breath, Elliott looked at the Captain. "I knew the second you swiped that sword from the mansion, you would find a way to use it."

“Jealous?” The Captain smiled.

“Very. Marked kill. Thumbs up.” Elliott nodded but spoke with a little resentment.

“Cheer up, Elliott.” The Captain gave a swat to Elliott’s back. “I couldn’t have made that precision slice had you not taught me to fence all those years ago. You were so good.”

“Yes, well some people have parents who push baseball. I had a father who pushed fencing. But I loved it.” The tone of Elliott’s words slipped into almost a daze as he spoke and stared at the body. “Every competition. Every match. Every win. And the kids who fenced, the ones who were diehards, like me. We always had that dream of the day when it would be for real.”

“Um, Elliott?”

“Yes.” Elliott snapped out.

“Never speak of my dementia when you as a kid fantasized of puncturing human flesh with a sword.”

Elliott laughed. “You’re right. And we’d better get going. We want to get far enough west before sun up.”

“Some good night driving hours. Hoping Elliott, that the women will sleep?”

With a grumbling, ‘hmm’. Elliott began to walk with the Captain.

“Oh.” The Captain stopped. “I can’t believe I almost forgot.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small rolled up piece of paper no longer than four inches. A string tied around it kept it closed.

“What’s that?”

“I wrote a little note to the society. Just our thoughts, or rather my thoughts. Excuse me.” The Captain darted back to the gate, put the note on the body and hurried back to Elliott. “Something for them to read. A tease.”

“Were you always so dramatic?” Elliott asked.

“I was never without flare.” The Captain winked.

“You do know they may not spot that little note.”

Again the Captain stopped walking. “You’re right. They may never see it. Thank you Elliott. Your idea is much better.”

“What idea?” Elliott asked. But before he received an answer, he received a blast of cold air against his bald head when the Captain swiped off his red bandana.

Running back to the body, the Captain placed the note in the knot of the bandana and laid it on the soldier’s chest. He went back to Elliott. “*Now* they’ll see it.”

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Beginnings, Montana

Ellen had to yawn first before she spoke. If she didn’t let the long sign of her tiredness out, her words would be hard to understand. “Dean.” She yawned again. “It’s two in the morning.”

“Thanks for letting me know. We’re just doing quick reviews. Hand me the next slide.” He held his hand out.

“Can I quit now?” She handed it to him. “Hey . . .” A slight smile crept on Ellen’s face. “Jenny Matoose’s sample.”

“Knock it off.” Dean took the slide. “Mark her name down, we’ll need blood from her when we get out of quarantine.” Pencil in hand, Dean put the slide under the microscope, looked quick took it out and started to write. Mid word, Dean stopped and put the slide back in. “This can’t be right?”

“What’s wrong?”

“El? What did the ‘future me’ have marked down as Jenny’s strain?”

Ellen lifted the clipboard. “Strain two.”

Dean shook his head. “This is mutated differently. In fact it looks nothing like strain two. Why did I mark this strain two?” He spoke more to himself than Ellen as he stood up.

“Dean, what are you doing?”

“I’m getting the virus mutations we have. I want to do a comparison.”

“Right now. At two in the morning. Maybe Dean you’ve been

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staring so long at the different mutations everything is looking weird. You may be tired. Stop for the night. Refresh and do it in the morning with a clearer mind and less tired eyes.”

Dean lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Maybe stopping for the night isn’t a bad . . .” He saw Ellen had moved across the lab. “What are you doing?”

“Shutting down, you said to stop for the night.”

“Barely. But, we might as well.” He placed Jenny’s slide in the slide rack and lifted it. “I’ll put these in the fridge.”

“O.K.” Ellen stepped to the sink and began to wash her hands and arms. She shook them dry and grabbed a towel. Leaving the water running for Dean who approached the sink, Ellen left the special lab.

After he had finished washing up also, Dean too left the lab expecting Ellen to be in the trailer. He didn’t expect her to be leaning against the wall by the big window, staring out into the darkness. “El?” He walked up behind her and rested his chin on her shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Watching Reverend Thomas. Look, isn’t he nice praying for us like that out there.”

Dean’s eyes lifted and he swallowed when he saw the tall Reverend lingering in the shadow. “How . . . how do you know he’s praying?”

“What else would he be doing out there? He was there last night too.”

“Ellen.” Dean raised his head. “Could you tell Henry, I need to speak to him?”

“About Reverend Thomas?”

“No, no. About that power strip he was supposed to fix. It made a noise when I turned it off.”

“Oh.” Ellen stepped away. “I’ll get him.” She spoke apprehensively walking to the side door while watching Dean just stare out. As she stepped into the trailer she saw Henry. He came from the bathroom, still wet from a late shower. A towel wrapped around his waist.

Henry jumped in surprise. “El, I thought you guys were still working.”

“Obviously if you’re running around half naked. Dean needs to speak to you.” She pointed back with her thumb. “I asked him if it had anything to do with Reverend Thomas praying outside, he said it didn’t. It had to do with . . .” She saw Henry take off, still wearing the towel, to the mobile. “Henry, he’s gonna make you play with wires. Should you be wet?” Henry was gone. “Oh well.” Shrugging and feeling hungry, Ellen headed to the kitchen.

“Dean.” Henry raced into the mobile. “What’s going on?”

“Look.” Dean pointed outside. “He’s just standing there watching. Ellen said he was there last night too.”

“He is such trouble. He’s up to something.”

“No shit, Henry. What do we do? Should we radio Frank?”

“It’s too late. We’ll let him know in the morning.” Henry, holding his towel, walked over to the cabinet which set in the corner. He opened it up and pulled out a revolver.

“Do you think we need that?” Dean asked.

“Do you want to chance we don’t? Let’s shut the lights out in here. Everything is locked.” Henry began to head to the side door. “Dean, you know we can really solve the whole Moses problem. All we have to do is invite him in here and serve him some . . . rabbit stew?” He gave a pointing twitch of his head to the lab, before smiling and walking out.

Dean chuckled at Henry’s suggestion. It gave him certain pleasant thoughts as he stared out to the big rubicund man who looked more like a stalker in the night rather than a preacher. And even though Dean put stock in the fact they were locked up, safe and secure. His mind still worried, not about Rev. Thomas getting in, but rather what he was doing and what he was planning. It couldn’t be good if it warranted the reverend running about at such late hours.

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As quiet as he tried to be, Sarge’s heavy boots made a crunching sound against the hard ground and the semi-frozen leaves up by perimeter

seven. He didn't carry a flashlight to light the way around the dark area. He let his eyes adjust, and used the moon as the slight illumination for his vision.

It wasn't his shift, not a scheduled one that was. It was his every other day, two hour watch. Something Frank had asked him to do. Keep hidden, and keep an eye on that perimeter between the hours of two and four a.m.. The security team would down the beams between those hours just incase Sarge saw someone outside of the perimeter. He could chase them, grab them and find out if anyone was touching that beam without having to waste time radioing in for the perimeter to be downed. No radio contact was ever needed unless the watch was to yield something. Automatically the monitor team downed it at two and put it back at four.

Sarge didn't expect to see anything, that's why it surprised him. A shadow up by the beam. It was hard for Sarge to determine in the darkness which side of the invisible wall the figure stood behind. But, even though it was a shadow, it was definitely a figure. Someone bending down, using an object, without a doubt, moving that beam. Sarge was fast, and he knew it. Charging up from beneath his bush hiding space, he ran full speed ahead tackling the figure to the ground. Sarge hit him with such blunt force of his body, he and the figure rolled outside of the sanctity of Beginnings. Feeling the weight of the person beneath him, Sarge raised up some, fully planning to render this person unconscious. As soon as Sarge's back arched up and his knees dug firmly into the hard ground, he heard the slight whistle. It was soft, high pitch and it grew louder. Before he could turn to the sound, before he could turn his head, a searing burning pain shot through his throat, from the back to the front. Shaking Sarge's huge body, choking him, inhibiting any air to get into his system. Gasping, Sarge wobbled to his feet. He could feel the warm blood seep from his neck and down his chest. He could see the steam of its body temperature as it mixed in with the cold air. Feeling his legs grew weak, Sarge shifted his eyes down to see what had got him. Looking down, his views could not get past the arrow head that protruded so far out from his throat. Reaching for it, trying to break it, to free it, Sarges arms fell. He watched the darkness around him grow even darker. His pain stopped and Sarge fell, without his life, to the ground by perimeter seven.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

December 7

Beginnings, Montana

Ellen not only amazed herself on how good her coffee ended up tasting, but she amazed herself on how wide awake she was after only a few hours sleep. Proud of her brew and anxious to get started for the day, Ellen savored her energy because she knew in a few hours she would be dying for a nap.

Carrying, not only her mug of coffee but one for Dean, Ellen stopped at the bedroom where he and Henry slept. She knew Dean was up. She had heard the shower running. Though she didn't see specifically who it was, Dean or Henry, she figured it was Dean. No one showered as fast as he did. She supposed it was because his body was so small.

Hands full--despite her injury--Ellen used her foot to knock on the closed door. It opened slightly, and she stepped inside. "Morning." She said to the two men. Dean sat on the edge of the bed putting on his shoes. Henry, staggering about in grogginess, was putting on a shirt.

"Morning, El." Henry said as he walked by her.

Dean, hair wet, looked up surprised. "Why are you up?"

"Ready to work. And I must tell you, if I didn't know better. Things would look pretty suspicious right now between the two of you." She winked. "Here Dean, I brought you coffee. And no, I'm not flipping you off."

Dean shook his head with a smile, then glanced at her splinted finger. "You've been up for a while, haven't you?"

"Yep. And I feel good. So let's take advantage of it before I want to go back to sleep." She stepped into the hall, nearly bumping into Henry who was returning. "Coming to the lab?"

"Actually I'm working on the chip."

"Oh, because you'll miss it." Ellen still chipper started to walk down the hall toward the lab. "It is day four. Do or die. Or rather, do the

rabbits die? It's time to see if our fluffy friends have the virus and if they do, we're good. And if that's the case four more days and we should be out of here." With a smile she continued walking. She wasn't out of the trailer very long before Dean and Henry heard her shouting with so much disgust. "Oh my God!"

Henry jumped, then raced with worry, Dean right behind him on his heels. "El . . ." Henry slid to a stop as he plowed into the mobile. "What's wrong?"

"Who did this?" She pointed to the window. A picture of two lesbians was pinned on the outside. "Look at this." Ellen grunted. "And we can't do anything about it either. It's on the other side."

Dean looked, snickered ornery and walked back to the trailer to retrieve his coffee.

"I'm gonna have to make paper clothes." Ellen said.

"That'll work." Henry commented. "And you know it was Robbie or Frank. Only those two are sick enough to think it was funny."

Dean with his coffee, pulled Ellen from her stare of the picture. "If we can stop admiring the artwork, we'll get started. Henry, you're working on that microchip today. Correct?"

"Yes." Henry followed Dean and Ellen to the back lab. "Unless you need help with the rabbits."

"No, we need you on the chip. Robbie did bring that SUT back." Dean flipped on the light switch and opened the special lab door. As soon as he did, an overwhelming sour, bad stench hit them. "Aw man." He shook his head.

Ellen held her nose and peered at the cages. "Gross, rabbit vomit." She looked at the four rabbits, the ones who were fine the day before, were laying so helpless, their bodies quivering in there own regurgitation.

Dean closed his eyes and shook his head. "Let's get them out of this mess." He looked at the other cages of rabbits. "These guys look fine." He returned to the sick ones. "These ones definitely have the virus. Henry, why don't you . . . Henry?" He saw Henry huddled in the corner. His shirt above his nose. "What is wrong with you?"

“I can’t, Dean?” Henry’s eyes watered. “I’m really bad with smells. And . . . and animal puke.”

Ellen giggled as she placed on her lab jacket then a single glove. “He isn’t lying, Dean. Henry is real good about some things. But stuff like this . . . no way.” Ellen opened the cage and lifted a rabbit. Gently, she set it back down, smirked and walked to Henry. “Look Henry.” She held up her gloved hand. “Bunny throw up.” With her index finger, slightly moist with the animal’s vomit, she touched it down upon Henry’s arm. She laughed even harder when Henry just suddenly bolted out.

“That’s really sick.” Dean removed a rabbit from a cage. “But funny. Now get over here and help me clean up these cages. Let’s see what you and I can do to save these rabbits.”

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It was a chain reaction, a domino effect that Frank hated. The oncoming winter, the cold air, the dampness of the morning that caused the snuffle in his nose. The snuffle in his nose that caused a tickle in his throat which made him start to cough. Which then in turn, made Frank miserable. “Fuck.” He grunted as he made his rounds. He’d walk, spit, then walk again.

Before he made his final approach to perimeter seven, Frank did what he did every morning there. He bent down, searched out a heavy stick, stood back up and aimed toward the beam. A sizzling sound usually told him it was off track. So like he always did, Frank hurled the stick and waited for the sizzle or the sound of it hitting the ground. Frank got neither. Striking him as odd, Frank repeated his action, again, nothing. Was someone catching it before it hit the ground? Clenching his clipboard and pulling out his revolver, Frank made his way closer. The clipboard dropped from his hands, and then Frank dropped to his knees. “No.” He stared down to a face first Sarge. “No.” Rolling him over, the arrow that protruded from Sarge, broke. Hands still upon the cold skin, Frank found himself looking into a wide eyed dead stare. Adjusting the headset with a dropped heart, Frank called out. “Robbie. Dad.” He cleared his throat. “Bring a jeep to seven. Hurry.” Removing the remaining arrow from Sarge’s throat, Frank stood up glaring

out into the area beyond the perimeter, outside of Beginnings. “How did this happen?” He spoke out loud. “How?” Biting his lip in a blame on himself, Frank bent back down, waiting with Sarge.

Joe flicked his cigarette, blowing out the smoke loudly as he paced around the scene at perimeter seven. “All right. The arrow hit him from behind, so seeing the way his body fell, the attack definitely came from beyond the perimeter. Out there.” Joe pointed.

Robbie’s foot moved about the leaves. “There was a struggle, check this out.” He indicated. “Sarge ran from there. Whoever he got, he tackled. They rolled, see the shifting of the leaves?”

Joe nodded his head. “So there was more than one. A group maybe like we thought.” He bent down picking up an arrow. “Savages? Who else uses arrows?”

Robbie threw his hands up. “They’re the only ones I’ve seen. I don’t think it was.”

“It had to be. Do a sweep of the region to check.” Joe stared, shaking his head at the arrow. “How in Christ’s name did it happen though. How did the arrow sail through the beam? That’s a pretty lucky shot if you ask me.”

Frank raised his head. “The beam wasn’t on.”

“What?!” Joe marched closer to him. “Why was this beam not on?”

“We . . .” Frank closed his eyes. “We were trying to catch whoever it was doing this. The beam was down when Sarge was up here. It went back on at four, like clock work. It gave him access to run out if he saw someone. No one knew I had him up here. I’m to blame, it was my idea. If the beam would have been on, the arrow wouldn’t have made it through. It was my fault.”

“You’re goddamn right this is your fault, Frank.” Joe threw the arrow down. “That was a stupid move. Stupid. Do you have any idea what kind of danger you put this community in? Do you!” Joe’s voice raised in such a scolding manner. “Sarge went down, and so was that perimeter. They

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could have come in here. They could have done damage. You're lucky, Frank. Goddamn lucky that did not happen. Savages? You know what they are capable of! Your job is to protect not play undercover agent. And the worse part is, we had to lose a life in order for you to see that."

Robbie stepped in. "Dad, come on. Frank was just thinking . . ."

"No Robbie!" Joe held up his hand. "Frank wasn't thinking, that was the problem. He never thinks. Now a good man lays dead because of that." Joe began to storm off. "We're just lucky a whole lot more didn't join him."

Robbie approached his silent brother. "Come on Frank. I'll help you load up Sarge."

"Thanks." Frank moved to Sarge's legs. "And thanks for trying with dad."

"You were thinking right." Robbie grunted as he lifted Sarge's upper body. He helped carry the body to the jeep. "And Dad's wrong." With a thump, they placed Sarge's huge body in the jeep. "It wasn't savages. If it was, they would have came in. No, Frank. I think you and I ought to closely examine what happened here last night. Really examine it. Because I believe the whole truth isn't laying in that broken arrow. There's more to it. We just have to find it."

With a closed mouth, and not feeling like saying more, Frank climbed into the jeep with Robbie.

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Ellen stopped to shake the pain in her only useful hand, then returned to picking up the needle. "I didn't learn to do this Dean to be a Vet." She tried to insert the intravenous into the rabbit.

Dean walked over to her. "Want me to do it?"

"Yeah." Ellen handed it to him. "It's hard enough without being crippled." She stood above Dean watching him, then she saw Henry return. "Hey Henry? Feeling better?"

"I'm mad at you El." Henry poked her lightly in the arm.

"No you aren't." She waved her hand at him. "It was funny."

“I threw up.”

“Henry, you always throw up.” Ellen smiled and watched Dean. “Really, how in the world would you ever handle having to take care of a child.”

“What’s that suppose to mean?” Henry neared her.

Ellen fixed the tubing on the bunny IV. “Good job Dean, do the next one.” She handed him a needle. She glanced to Henry. “I mean, tell him Dean. Kids do gross things.”

“Unfortunately.” Dean maneuvered the needle.

“Terrible things.” Ellen continued. “The older they get, the diapers get worse. Not to mention newborn baby boys. The pee on you. And gack, you think you’re bad, Henry. Babies throw up all the time. Ask Frank, he was playing with Brian, doing that lifting thing in the air, and his mouth found out the hard way that even when excited, babies gack with great aim.”

Henry cringed, he cringed loudly and with a turn of his body. “Aw that’s . . .” He paused when he saw Frank’s head peeping in slightly through the other window. He made eye contact. “That’s sick.” Henry then saw Frank motion to the radio and point to the trailer. Henry nodded to him. “I’ll be right back, El.”

Ellen looked up. “You aren’t throwing up again, are you?”

“No, I have to um . . . I want to get a drink. My stomach feels funny.”

Ellen saw him dart out, she returned to watching Dean as he moved to the next rabbit. “He’s puking again. Bet me. The Frank story threw him over the edge. Hey, Dean? Do you think any of this will work on the rabbits.”

“Doubtful.” Dean said. “I’m trying variations of what I tried in the future. All trial and error.” Dean set down the needle he was attempting to insert in a rabbit. “This can really get impossible.” Through the corner of his eye, he saw Henry return. Dean’s voice conveyed the shock of Henry’s pale appearance. “Henry?”

Ellen turned around. “Henry, you’re white as a ghost. You threw up again.”

“No.” Henry said with a slight crack to his voice. “El . . . El,”

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Frank needs to speak to you. He's over at the bedroom window of the trailer."

"Something's happened." Ellen said. "What?"

"Just go talk to him." Henry instructed and handed her the radio.

Ellen took it and after looking concerned at Henry, walked from the special lab.

"Henry? What's happened?" Dean asked.

Waiting until he knew Ellen was out of ear shot, Henry let out a long breath, faced Dean with solace, and began break the news that Frank had just handed to him.

The window in Ellen's bedroom of the trailer was no bigger than two feet, and the little blind pulled all the way up, limited more of the window's view. But there was enough there for Ellen to see Frank. Hands gripping the metal edges of the window, Ellen's head was down.

"El." Frank spoke, his voice coming through the radio she had dropped on the floor. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head, then bent down to pick up the radio. "How . . . how bad . . . how bad did he suffer Frank?"

"The arrow went right through the neck. Jason said the brain stem was severed. He probably died within a minute."

"Oh, God." Ellen's eyes closed and she put one hand on the glass. "This isn't fair. We didn't bring him to Beginnings to die."

"I know."

Eyes still shut, Ellen shook her head slowly back and forth. "For six years, Frank. Six years he lived alone out there, surviving. This isn't right, this just isn't right. I really liked him."

"I know you did. And I'm sorry." Saddened Frank spoke. "I'm really sorry. Are you all right."

"No!" Ellen's answer emotionally burst out, then her voice softened. "No."

"I wish I could come in there with you." Frank reached up to

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the window. He laid his hand over where Ellen's was, wishing he could touch her. "El, I wish I could be in there to help you with this. I know you're hurt. If I could . . ." Frank's eyes moved from his view of Ellen. "Dean." He said when he saw Dean walk into the bedroom.

Hands in the front pockets of his pants, shoulder hunched, Dean in an apprehension walked further in the room. His eyes connected with Frank's and then he moved directly behind Ellen. His hand lifted and hesitated before he laid it on her shoulder at the same time he laid his lips to the back of Ellen's head. "I'm sorry." He whispered to her.

Ellen's shoulder's bounced first, then her head dropped further and she began to cry. Her body turned without thinking and she moved into Dean.

Frank watched. His heart dropped. It was innocent and without malice, the comfort Dean gave Ellen. Frank knew that. But it still bothered him. Slowly he removed his hand that laid upon the glass pane. He looked at the empty spot at the window that moments before showed him Ellen's hand. Then after rolling his fingers in a painful, frustrating clench of a fist, Frank looked once more at an embracing Dean and Ellen, then turned and walked away.

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## Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

"No." George spoke calm as he paced a little while on the phone in his office. "No. If you even think he saw you, that was the thing to do . . ." He paused to listen. "I know, But sometimes we have to kill people we like. That's life." George smiled and was proud at his comforting advice. "Now. Our plan of action has to be to stall or destroy any progress they make without bringing suspicion. So incorporate some help, especially that lunatic. He'll work." George nodded. "Good. And what's going on with this Forrest Caceres thing . . . you're shitting me? Why is everyone so hyped. Never mind, don't answer that. We're talking about the people of Beginnings. The same ones that have a goddamn picnic every October. Just get back to me."

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Thanks.” George hung up the phone. Not a second after the receiver met the base, George heard the walking. A pair of combat boots hitting against the floor. The stride was audible and it carried a heaviness as it drew closer.

A hard double knock was struck against his door.

“Come in.” George called out.

“Sir.” Sgt. Doyle walked inside and immediately closed the door.

“Sorry to bother you. We have a problem.”

“When don’t we?” George sat down behind his desk. “What’s wrong.”

“The holding camp down near Frederickson was raided. Twenty-two guards down, not a single prisoner waiting on enhancement remains.”

George sprang up.. “What the hell happened. Savages?”

Sgt. Doyle’s heavy hand came pummeling to George’s desk with a ‘slam’. He lifted, released his fingers, and dropped from his huge hand a red bandana. The tube note rolled out. “Remember Hemsley said he thought it was a trade mark. He was right. We think they’re headed south. Without waiting sir, I put the order out to find them. I sent out what scout troops I could, to canvass the entire southern region. They aren’t a large group, they won’t be easy to find. But we’ll find them. We at least believe this was the last hit.”

“And why do we believe that?” George asked.

“Along with arrogance, there is a sense of sincerity in that note.” Sgt. Doyle pointed to it. “You may want to read it.”

Unrolling the message, George rested his right hand on the bandana as he read the words on the paper that the Captain had written . . .

*We could not leave without saying goodbye. Without taking full blame for what we have done. The Society’s plan to rebuild this country, start it again and protect it from foreign influence are insightful and not without valor. However, the means in which you wish to incorporate this plan is most definitely without heart. Of that we can not be a part. We are few in your world of many. Because of that we must disappear for a time. But we’ll return. Somewhere around the period*

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*where you've reached 'out of sight, out of mind'. Until then . .  
. we bid farewell.*

Sgt. Doyle watched George stare at the note. "Sir? What do you make of it."

George swiped up the bandana in an angry grip. "What do I make of it? With everything else that's going on . . ." He crumbled the note and tossed it. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Beginnings, Montana

Robbie struggled, but his laughing didn't help. Bending down, bracing Mike the dog under the arms, lifting him to his feet. Feeling that he had him in an upright position, Robbie would start to release. "Now Mike, stand." As soon as Robbie stepped away, Mike fell down to his hands and knees again. "No." Robbie grabbed him again. Reaching down for him, Mike snarled and barked, but not at Robbie, but at Frank who was walking into the skills room. "Mike, no! Shit . . . Frank put away the gun." Shaking his head Robbie pulled Mike from the grip he had on Frank's pant legs.

"Do something with him Robbie." Frank said. "I can't be coming in here getting attacked by that mutt."

"Sorry." Robbie looked around. He saw Diane. "Diane." Pulling Mike by the collar, he brought him to her. "See what you can do with the speech thing today. Any luck yesterday?"

"No. But he did give me his paw to shake." Diane smiled and took the leash that was attached Mike's collar. "You know, Ellen is going to have a fit if she finds out you're doing this. She worked really hard on teaching him new tricks."

"Yeah." Robbie sulked. "But my dad told me yesterday after Mike snapped at him, that enough was enough. He becomes a viable person or he goes. See what you can do with him, I have to talk to my brother." Robbie, running his hand over his head, moved to Frank. "What's up?"

"I talked to John Matoose. He said he was in bed last night between them hours."

"Confirmed. I spoke to Jenny. She said John was sick in bed."

"Shit. All right. We still have another option at hand. Walk with me." Frank began to leave the skills room.

"What's the other option?" Robbie asked.

"Mo . . . I mean Reverend Thomas. Check this out. Henry said he was up by the mobile last night watching them. Just watching them. For

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two nights in a row.”

“And I’m guessing you’re gonna see if he’s gonna make it a third.”

“You better believe it.” Frank nodded. “So, I’ll need you to stay with the kids tonight so I can sneak up.”

“You got it.” The buzzing of the containment door caught Robbie’s attention. The site of his father made him grin ornery at Frank. “Wanna run, there’s Dad. You’re not on his favorite person list today.”

“Fuck you Robbie.” Frank said disgusted. “I’m taking off.” Frank slowed his stride as he got to his father. “Dad.”

“Where are you heading off to so fast?” Joe asked.

“Home.”

“Give me a minute.” Joe, laying his hand on Frank’s back, turned him around to speak to him and Robbie. “Robert.” Joe called him with a whistle.

Thinking, *‘Shit, what did I do, he called me Robert’*, Robbie trotted up the hall. “Yeah Dad.”

Joe pointed backwards with his thumb. “Get some crowd control going outside. We have over half the female population standing out front wanting to see Ellen’s new gift.”

Drastically, Robbie facially winced. “Aw man. All right. I’ll let them see him.” He turned his head to whistle in a call for the newcomer.

Joe stopped him. “Before you give the women of Beginnings their little peep show, I just wanted to get both of you boys together. I want to have a meeting with you two, and Jason, concerning this Forrest Caceres trip. I need you two, ASAP to work on something. You’re demented enough. We have to figure out how to stop his death, or at least, let it look like it happened. And decide who is going to go. So tomorrow, early morning, my office. I wanted to take the lot of us up to quarantine and involve Henry in this. He’ll be the logisticalizer again. But, I just spoke to Dean, he says it’s only going to be another four days. We can wait.”

A moment of silence was a chance at escape. Still feeling tension, Frank just wanted to leave, “Are we done?” He looked at his father then Robbie. “I’m heading home. I have a family to take care of. Dad, I’ll see you

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tomorrow.”

“Frank . . .” Joe called out to him. “I was thinking of stopping by tonight. Give you and Robbie a hand with them kids. Is that all right?”

Frank lifted his hands. “Sure.” He pressed in his security code, the door buzzed and he left. A few seconds later, even through the steel door, Frank’s loud mouth could be heard. “Shut up. Do I look like Blake?”

Shaking his head, Joe turned back to Robbie. “I take it he’s still pissed at me for coming down on him?”

“Um . . .” Robbie looked up to the ceiling in thought. “Yes.”

“What else is new.” Joe looked at his watch. “Let me take off too. Go get that new guy and flash him for the women so they can disperse please.”

“Flash him?” Robbie smiled brightly. “Sure Dad, I’ll flash him.”

“Good boy.” Joe reached for the security keypad, paused, turned back to see Robbie walking to the skills room. “Nah.” He shook his head. “He wouldn’t.”

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Logan, Ohio

The words ‘what now?’ were what raced through the Captain’s mind seconds before he stopped the bus and allowed his head to bang into the steering wheel. He was grateful it was Elliott’s turn. They had alternated for each stop. After waiting what he believed to be an absurdly long time, the Captain stood, apologized to his bus load and then stepped off to the old highway.

Elliott looked frazzled when he walked off the other bus and to the Captain.

“Well?” The Captain asked.

“You’re not going to believe it.”

“Try me.” The Captain tossed his hands up. “Though I can’t imagine what it is. Did I not stop for, not just clothes, but better clothes.”

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They can't possibly have to go to the bathroom again, I limited their fluid intake. And we already stopped to allow their stomachs to settle. Oh, wait, Let's not forget, cleared the row on the bus to separate them from the men because they were getting stared at. Stared at." His voice raised. "They're bald for crying out loud, I can't stop staring at them either."

Elliott laughed.

"I'm glad you find humor in this, Elliott. Now, why are we stopping this time?"

"Ready?" Elliott cleared his throat. "To find . . . feminine protection of sorts. One of them has begun menstruating."

It was a gasp, but more so a sound of shocking disgust that came in the form of a grunt from the wincing Captain. "Were our women this bad?"

"Well . . . kind of sort of."

"Kind of sort of?" The Captain asked. "I don't think they were. In fact, I don't ever recall a single one of our women . . . menstruating."

"Captain." Elliott said with a snicker.

"Maybe they're just a bad batch." After making that observation, the Captain shook his head at his own thoughts and calmed down, "No. They're women. And they're women in a world where there are few. Just like we did, whoever they lived among, spoiled them. Did everything for them." He took a thinking breath, "The way I see it is, we either break them of that spoiled habit, or we continue in it."

"Which do you suppose we do?" Elliott asked.

"Whatever brings us the most peace." The Captain said as he headed back to his bus.

"Which one would that be?"

"Which one do you think." Before stepping aboard, the Captain turned back to Elliott. "Put it this way. It's going to be a long, *long*, ride home." With a nod of his head, a flash of smile, the Captain stepped on the bus leaving Elliott standing there. A moment later he popped his head back out. "And you'd better hurry Elliott, you have feminine protection to locate."

With a disgruntled, 'swell', Elliott walked back to the women's bus.

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Beginnings. Montana

Tomorrow. That was the answer Dean gave himself. The day started out positively, facing rabbit vomit and possibly the answer to incubation periods. But with each passing hour the day grew worse. The news of Sarge's death took over anything and everything. Dean couldn't even remember what he had worked on the night before, his mind was so cluttered. The three of them tried to work, but it was useless. No one said much, and conversation was needed. Dean supposed the next day things would be clearer. Sarge was too much on their minds. A man that came into their lives with a blast, and left too quickly. An asset Beginnings would never know.

The quiet moment of the evening reminded Dean of his college days. He peered up from his notes that he tried to review. Notes that seemed to fade to the back of his mind when other thoughts took over. He looked over to Henry who sat up on the bed across from his. Sitting up, sleeping, head fallen forward. Papers sprawled all over Henry's bed and lap. Dean debated on waking Henry, but opted not to. Henry would argue that he wasn't asleep and Dean didn't feel like getting into that with him. So Dean let Henry go, figuring Henry would either wake up and go back to work, fall over and continue sleeping, or stay like he was and get up with a hell of a stiff neck.

So quiet it was in the mobile. With the exception of Ellen's muffled voice seeping through the wall from the next bedroom. And Frank's loud mouth as he spoke to her over the radio outside. They argued about something. Dean didn't really try to hone in on the whole conversation. He heard the mentioning of John Matoose's name and that's all he needed to hear. Frank's occasional 'shut up' made Dean shake his head with a snicker. Wasn't Ellen realizing that if she were trying to tell Frank some sort of secret, she wasn't exactly being confidential by saying it over the airwaves.

Not tired, but not feeling like notes he'd rather save for the next

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day, Dean set his folders and such aside. When he did, he spotted it on the night stand. A gift of sorts. A box of memories Ellen brought for Dean to look at if he got bored. It was perfect to take his mind off of things and Dean reached for it.

Hand gliding through the box that used to contain size thirteen shoes, Dean looked at the objects inside. Pictures, notes and such. All stuff to help jar a memory he didn't have. And every picture, every word written might as well have been in a different language. Because to Dean they were foreign and he didn't understand any of them.

*'Keep it that way. Lab lights on. Blinds down. Stay out of sight.'* Frank's handwriting was on the note he slapped against Ellen's bedroom window.

Ellen read it. "Why?"

"Don't ask. Just do it. O.K.?" Frank said.

"But Frank . . ."

"El, I have to go. I have another reason to be here. In." He pointed. "Blind down. Now. Good night."

Ellen took a deep breath. "Night." Almost in a huff she tugged on the pull string letting the blind smack hard against the window sill. Folding her arms, still clenching the radio, she turned around and almost jumped when Dean was standing in her open doorway. "Dean?"

"Busy?" He asked.

"No. Come on in."

Holding the shoe box, Dean closed the bedroom door. "I couldn't work. I heard you arguing."

"I'm sorry," Ellen walked forward. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I just . . . I was trying to get through to Frank. He doesn't want to hear it."

"About John Matoose?" Dean asked.

"You heard."

"El?" He smiled in a quirky way. "Anyone with a radio heard. If you suspect John Matoose. If Frank does, do you think he'd tell you over the radio."

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Ellen slightly chuckled. "I guess you're right." She turned back to the window and separated the blinds and peered out. "But now he's out there. Lurking in the dark. Waiting."

"Who? John?"

"No. Frank." The simple pat against the window made Ellen shriek and release the blind.

The radio hissed. "El." Frank spoke. "Stay away from the window."

"God." She winced and shut off the radio. "So. What's up." she walked over and sat on the bed.

Dean held up the shoe box. "I just figured since we're on borrowed time here, I was hoping to borrow some of your time." He sat down on the bed next to her. "I want to know about this stuff. Some of these pictures. And I know after quarantine, I won't get the chance to ask."

"Dean." Ellen whispered. "It's not forever. It's just until me and Frank work it out."

"But how long will that take?" Dean questioned. "I mean. You two don't have an easy time working things out. And now, you're just gonna move right back in with him." He heard her snicker. "What's so funny."

"You sound like Henry. He . . . he doesn't think we should follow Rev. Bob's advice. He thinks I should continue to build the friendship back with Frank. He says living apart keeps our relationship platonic enough to do that clearly."

"Henry doesn't think you should sleep with your husband?" Dean asked.

"Nope. He says sex has a way of burying things. And if I move back with Frank we'll . . . you know." Ellen swallowed a little in uncomfortableness. "But I think he made a wise point."

"And odd. Henry's Frank's best . . . never mind." Dean raised an eyebrow. "Weird." He let out a breath. "Anyhow. Yes? No?" he lifted the box again.

"Yes." Ellen snatched up the box, plopped down sideways onto her side on the bed. "I really think this is what I need." She patted the spot across from her.

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“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Dean asked as he laid on his side facing her.

“Absolutely. Especially after today. I need to not think of Sarge.”

Dean’s fingers fiddled with the items in the box. “I just, I just want to know this stuff. You know. And when I look at it, sometimes I feel like I stepped into someone else’s life. I’m living it. I want to know it.” His eyes gazed up to her. “Does that make sense?”

“Yes it does. And I’ll do my best, Dean.”

“As long as it doesn’t bother you to talk about it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Ellen smiled. “Dean. I loved my life with you.”

Quietly and without warning, Dean leaned over the box of memories and softly kissed Ellen. “I would give it back to you . . . in a heartbeat.” his fingers reached out and gently brushed over her lips. After a second of a stare, Dean took in a breath, and changed his demeanor. “But . . .” He pulled back. “Choices are made And after quarantine. I’m . . .” He winked. “Little man history.”

“Are you laying on the guilt?”

“Yes.” Dean just smiled then reached into the box. “Memories?” He lifted a picture.

“Memories.” Ellen looked at the photo. The smile fell from her face. “Ouch, bad choice.”

“Really?” Dean peered at the picture of him, Ellen and Robbie.

“Nah. Kidding.” Ellen giggled. And really appreciating the ‘feel good’ she was getting from getting ready to share the memories, Ellen scooted closer to Dean in a more of an intimate hovering share of that box.

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For as cold as Frank felt standing outside, hiding out near the mobiles waiting in the early morning hours, that was how hot he became when he saw him. It was hard at first. The dim porch-type light barely lit him up. But Frank saw that red hair. That long red hair, and like its color, that’s

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what Frank saw.

Moses--Reverend Thomas walked slowly up, standing ten or so feet from the trailer. He peered in the mobile window first, backed up, then face the trailer again. Standing there not doing anything. Just standing. He didn't hear anyone out there with him, nor did he expect it. When he felt it, when he heard him, it made his insides fall and Moses tried not to show his emotions. He felt the shifting slightly of his hair, then he felt the cold hard metal surface of it pressing to the base of his skull. He knew it was a gun, and he knew it was Frank.

Speaking in the deepest softest voice he had, Frank pressed his revolver harder into Moses. "I hope you have a really good reason for fuckin standing out here at three in the morning." Frank saw Moses move some. "Don't! Don't move. Answer me. Why are you here?"

"My brother, I am praying for their work. That is all. Just praying. The Lord will watch over them if they are guided by prayer."

"Listen to me." Frank moved his mouth closer to Moses' ear. "You stay away from my wife, from Henry and from Dean. You don't speak to them, look at them or pray for them. If you do, you answer to me. And from this moment on, from sun up to sun down, this area is off limits to anyone without authorization from me. If I catch you up here again, you will be breaking the rules. Break the rules, you either go or get shot." Frank clicked the hammer on the revolver. "And trust me when I tell you I'd rather put a bullet in your head now, then wait until after you've done something. I'm on to you. Remember that. Now go."

"Frank, I'm sure Joe . . ."

"Go!"

Moses raised his hand slowly in a surrender. He backed up and made eye contact with Frank. Without showing any emotions, any fear, he slowly--in a taunt--left the area.

Waiting for him to be gone, Frank replaced his revolver. He looked once more at the mobile before moving on. His gut told him it wouldn't be the last time Rev. Thomas made a late night appearance at the mobile, and Frank only prayed, that the next time, he wouldn't be too late.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

December 8

Beginnings, Montana

A night of barely dreaming, waking up and tossing about. Ellen would have rather of not slept at all. When she did sleep, little dreams, memories or occurrences magnified were what barricaded her dreams. And every time, mid mini dream, Ellen would end up getting the urgency to awaken, as if she over slept. And she would. She gathered that the news and emotions over Sarge's death, coupled with the stroll down memory lane with Dean the night before, just seeped deep into her subconscious.

And she drew a final straw when somewhere in the middle of dreaming about William chastising Dean over his choice in baggy clothes, Ellen swore she heard Brian screaming. Fearful that Joey had taken Brian from the crib and dropped him again, Ellen in a rush, sat up, swung her legs--twisted in the sheet--over the bed and in her dash, fell face forward to the floor with a loud thump.

It took that 'bang' onto the old carpet to realize she wasn't home, but still in quarantine. Staring at the night stand that was inches from her face, Ellen chuckled and shook her head. She gave a good kick of her legs to free them from the sheet she brought with her, and straighten the long tee shirt she wore over her mostly nude body. Wanting to eliminate any extra steps in her grogginess to get to the bathroom, Ellen reached for the door so close as she brought herself to stand. The gripping of the knob was her leverage to pull herself into an upright position. The moment she opened the door, was the moment she saw Henry.

Henry stopped mid walk down the hall. "Hey, El, morning." He smiled. "What did you do, fall out of bed?"

"Yeah." Ellen ran her fingers through her hair. "Going to the mobile?" She asked half asleep.

"Yep. Dean must have gone over early because he's not in . . ."

Henry stopped talking. He looked at Ellen, then beyond her.

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“Henry?” Ellen asked then noticed Henry’s stare was no longer on her. After her eyes took a second to widen, Ellen took a second to blink long. Slowly she peered over her shoulder to Dean in bed, pulling the covers Ellen snatched from him, over his naked body.

He looked at Dean for a long few seconds, then Henry, after giving a single piercing glance to Ellen, walked off.

Ellen pulled the door open. “Henry.” But no sooner did she open it wider, Dean scurried from the bed, reached out and shut the bedroom door.

“This isn’t any of his business.” Dean whispered to her as he stood behind Ellen. “It isn’t. O.K.?”

Ellen only nodded as she still stared at the door.

“O.K.” To the back of her head, Dean placed a kiss, then he stepped back and reached to the floor for his clothes.

Ellen stayed at the door, just standing there, for a little bit longer.

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#### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Joe Slagel had a little meeting bright and early this morning.” George said. He closed his office door then walked toward his desk past Steward who sat in a chair. “Fortunately, in a way, we were able to be present.”

“Our person attended.”

“Yep.” George moved to behind his desk and sat down. “Confirmed. Working on a virus. A virus that strikes the future.” He raised an eyebrow and folded his hands. “As of yet. No progress. The antidote, which is actually an antiserum, in the vials, can not be copied. Basically, Dr. Hayes is at square one.”

Steward smiled. “We’re ahead of the game.”

“Absolutely.” George said. “We have the recipe for the antiserum. We just have to make it.”

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“Anything about the Caceres time trip?”

“All our person knows is Beginnings wants to bring him to Beginnings. What does he know Stew? You were there. *You* were the one who was accredited with getting the order to kill him.”

“That was so many years ago.” Steward said. “Too many. I was a young, eager aid at the time. But, the president liked me. Dr. Caceres’ death was what land marked me into the society. You were there too.”

“Yes. But I wasn’t as forefront. That was when Timmins ran things.” George took a second to rub his jaw. “All I recall is that the little man with a big mouth threatened to go public with the ‘behind the scenes’ plans of the society. That year was the first public year of the conference.”

“That was all I know. Joanna Holmes was a top notch back then as well. She placed the call to me. What exactly he knows . . .” Steward shrugged. “Remains to be seen.”

George let out a deep sighing breath. “He can’t possibly have the knowledge of everything. Can he?”

“We’re in trouble if he does.” Steward said.

George tossed a pencil in frustration. “Or at the very least, no matter how big we are, we’ll be at a disadvantage.”

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### Beginnings, Montana

The steam from Ellen’s coffee made a small circle of condensation against the large window in the lab. She lifted her hand in a wave to Denny and Josh who sat in the grass not ten feet away. “I see we have our daily audience.” Ellen smiled, then saw the piece of paper on the window. “And I’m guessing by the covering, we have our daily dose of pornography as well.” She lifted the sheet of paper to expose the picture underneath. “Why is it that I had to stare at a lesbian picture yesterday, but today, get two men and one of you two cover it up.” Ellen looked over her shoulder to Dean who worked at a computer and Henry who sat at the counter with the microchip. She shrugged and returned to peering at the

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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picture. "This looks like it hurts. Would this hurt, Dean?" She pointed.

"Ask Henry." Dean answered.

Henry bitterly slammed his hand. "Why would you even say that?"

Above his glasses Dean peered. "A joke."

"It's not funny." Henry snapped and returned to work.

"Dean?" Ellen walked over. "They don't look like they're in pain."

"Ellen." Dean shook his head. "Enough. And no, don't ask again. Because I haven't a clue."

"You would assume if it's painful they're wouldn't be so much of it going on in . . ."

"El." Dean interrupted her. "Enough. Work."

"Demanding." Ellen moved to him. "What are you engrossed in?"

"The Jenny Matoose sample and get the smile off your face."

Ellen swiped her hand over her mouth. "Sorry. What about it?"

"Remember the other night I noticed it was different from strain two. Well, it is. Yet, the 'Future me' has it marked as strain two. Why is that?"

"It's strain two." Ellen answered.

"No." Dean shook his head. "It's different. Different from the other samples."

Ellen looked over Dean's shoulder at the computer screen and to Jenny's sample. "Dean the difference isn't that much in the comparison slides. If you were stressed, I can see you missing it."

"Miss it?" Dean chuckled. "I would have had to been blind not to . . ." He nearly jumped from his stool when Ellen dropped her mug of coffee. "El?"

Ellen stared in a daze, hot coffee encircled by her feet.

Henry jumped up, ran to the sink and grabbed towels. "El? What is it?"

"Nothing." She shook her head, gave a nervous snicker and grabbed the towel "Just something I read in Dean's notes that struck me as

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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odd and then Dean said . . . nothing.” She shook her head and bent down to the floor. “God, what a klutz.”

Henry shook his head and returned to his work space.

Dean bent down to help Ellen. “What did you read?”

“Nothing.” She forced a smile. “I’m embarrassed. I can’t believe my mind even went there.”

“What?” Dean asked again this time with concern.

“I said it was . . .” Ellen looked over her shoulder when she heard a tapping on the window. She saw Joe standing there. “Look. Company. He’s pointing to you Dean.”

After looking at Ellen once more, Dean stood up. He walked to the window and grabbed the radio. “Hey, Joe, what’s up?”

“How’s it going?” Joe asked.

“Going.”

“Have a minute? I want to tell you what we discussed in the meeting this morning before I head up to see a little demonstration given by my boys.”

“Sure.” Dean pulled up a chair and sat down.

Tossing the last of the broken mug into the garbage, Ellen rinsed off her hands and dried them. She listened a little, or rather eavesdropped to Dean and Joe’s conversation, then she walked over to Henry. “How’s the chip coming?”

Henry only shrugged.

“Henry.” Ellen’s soft word seeped out. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad. I’m disappointed in you.” He watched Ellen’s head lower. “Are you not getting back with Frank?”

“I am.”

“Then why, El? Huh? How could you do this to him.”

“I don’t know.”

“It was wrong. So wrong.” Henry told her. “You let me down. You let Frank down. It shouldn’t have . . .”

*SLAM!*

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The bang of Dean's hand on the counter not only brought a silence to their conversation but it conveyed his anger. Back to Ellen, Dean leaned forward into Henry. "Don't make her feel guilty over what happened. You hear me?"

"I wasn't talking to you." Henry tried to ignore him.

"Well I'm talking to you, Henry. Don't." Dean gave a point with his finger and stepped back to his work space. "It's none of your business. Keep it that way."

"It is my business, Dean." Henry stood up.

"How do you figure!" Dean yelled.

"Frank's my best friend. You slept with his wife. Do you realize what kind of awkward position that puts me in. I talk to him daily. I have to face him and lie? Protect you from getting killed?"

Dean's fist hit against the counter again. "Then tell him! I don't care! I can face my own consequences. You think I wouldn't tell him? The only reason I don't is because of Ellen." trying to calm himself, Dean sat down. "And I won't argue with you on this. It's none of your business. So let's drop it."

Angry, Henry's jaw shifted as his eyes did from Dean to Ellen. Not wanting to argue further either, Henry swiped up his stuff and stormed across the lab.

Ellen watched Henry breeze by her. "Hen . . ." She jumped at the slam of the door when he walked into the trailer. "Dean I . . ." A jolt hit her when Dean struck the key loudly on the computer. "I . . . I think I'll just . . ." she moved to the special lab. "Check our dying bunnies." With a whistle, Ellen went off to the special lab. She closed the door, took a breath and prepared to work. Two steps into the lab, she stopped when she saw them. In a box, tossed to the side and deemed 'useless', were two disks marked, 'future notes, one month pre plague.' After looking through the glass to an occupied Dean, Ellen slipped those disks into her lab coat pocket.

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"Andrea, can you move a little faster?" Joe kept tugging on her

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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jacket as they moved to the open area near the back gate. "Today some time."

"Joe Slagel, kiss my ass." Andrea kept her own pace. "I will not tire myself out for you."

"Tire yourself, Andrea. This turtles pace is getting on my nerves." Giving up on waiting, Joe walked faster and moved further ahead.

Waiting in the area with Frank, Robbie smiled as he saw his father. "Where's Andrea? I thought . . ." He saw her appear over the small grade. "Never mind. Our always missing council member. Glad you could join us."

Andrea just rolled her eyes. She wanted to flip him off, but Andrea was too Christian.

Joe folded his arms and looked at the excited looks on his son's faces. "Why are you two so happy about this?"

Frank decided to tell him. "We worked real hard, Dad. Robbie worked all night building and designing it."

"I'm cool." Robbie smiled.

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "And we got this demonstration down to a science. We just need to try it out. And you need to see it."

"I do, do I?" Joe snickered at their enthusiasm. "I knew this was up your ally, but I didn't expect it to happen so fast."

"Well." Robbie cleared his throat. "We're hoping you'll let us go. We want to go and do this."

"No." Joe said. "Absolutely not. You two?" He almost laughed.

Frank looked offended. "Yeah. Dad. We have to go. It was 1990. 1990? We want to see it. We want to feel like that Dean little man guy in the 'Back to the Future' movie."

Robbie grinned. "Yeah. Back to the days of left over big hair."

"I liked big hair." Frank nodded. "But on women."

"But of course." Robbie came back. "And let's not forget . . ." He held his hand out to Frank.

Frank finished the sentiment. "It was the year that Donny Osmond made his big come back with *Soldier of Fortune*."

"And no body cared." Sadly, Robbie lowered his head.

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“Sigh.” Frank added and lowered his.

“Enough” Joe shouted. “The demo. Christ.”

“Cool.” Robbie, excited like a kid, handed Joe what was a controller to a remote car. “Here. This is yours. Man, I am so proud of my mechanical inclinations. This too.” Robbie then handed Joe the base and wheels of a remote control car. “This is your explosive. You control it with that hand held controller.”

Joe threw his one hand up. “What? Do I look stupid. Go on.”

Clapping his hands together, Robbie moved ten feet back. “Let’s say for visual purposes this Barbie camper is Dr. Caceres’ car. And the Ken doll is Forrest himself.” Robbie picked up the Ken doll, lifted its arm. “Hi Joe.” He set Ken back in the camper. “Now we’ll assume the explosive device is probably connected to the alternator in Caceres’ car. Anyhow . . .” He took an after-rambling breath. “Telling Forrest to get in the drivers side, and slide out the passenger side is tricky, so the explosion has to be timed right. That’s why you will use the remote. As soon as Forrest gets in, you drive the explosive device to directly under his car. When Forrest slides out, you press the red button on that control. Boom. Simple. Now Frank and I worked real hard on the explosives. Using the Barbie camper, we calculated a less explosive to scale to demonstrate what would happen. So go on Dad. Roll that little car near the camper.”

Hesitantly, Joe made the toy vehicle go. He drove it to the Barbie camper with a smile on his face. Seeing it near the pink car, Joe pressed the red button on the control. Not only did the Barbie camper explode into a thousand pieces, but the sound of the explosion actual tremored the ground, rang a deafening sound and blasted dirt and grass out and about like it was rain. Listening for the final sound of the falling debris, Joe lifted himself from the shielded position he had over Andrea and himself.

Robbie quickly looked at Frank. “Whoops.”

Joe marched up to Robbie, peering at the now four foot hole in the ground where the Barbie camper was. “Jesus Christ Robbie. We want to explode a car, not a city block. And this was calculated to be a lesser explosion?”

“Sorry.” Then Robbie pointed. “Frank did the math. You suck

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Frank.”

“Bite me. You could have calculated it yourself. But no, you were too busy stealing the Ken doll from my daughter. And now look.” Frank bent down and picked something up. “All that’s left of him is his fuckin head.”

Robbie took the Ken head and tossed it aside. “You added instead of subtracted didn’t you?”

“No, I’m not that dumb.” Frank argued back.

“Please. You make Denny look brilliant.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you. You almost blew up Beginnings. That was your fault.”

“My fault? No, your fault. A little hole in the . . .”

Joe whistled loudly before his sons went any further. “I don’t give a rat’s ass whose fault it was. Recalculate and fix the damn formula. Christ, bring that explosion to scale or people will think it’s a terrorist threat. And fix the goddamn four foot hole!” Joe scolded as he stormed away.

Andrea began to follow, but stopped. “My son is not dumb.” She threw her head back and marched away.

After a subtle, whining, mocking, ‘my son is not dumb’, snickering, Robbie walked over to the hole in the ground. “The explosives did work though.” Robbie whistled, pointing to the ground so impressed. “*That* is a cool hole.”

“Yeah.” Frank peered down as well. “Too bad Dean’s in quarantine or we could bury him in there. Make it a search game for the community. Instead of Where’s Waldo. Where’s Dean?”

Aft first Robbie gave a look of seriousness to Frank. Then both brothers proceeded to laugh in demented ‘hide and go seek Dean’ thoughts.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bowman, North Dakota

A nearby fresh water lake played one part in the decision to settle there. The dam played another. The start up crew did their groundwork. They harnessed enough hydro power to run the water filtering system, and enough was left over for minimal lights in the small town. On conservation they were and would be until the knew what they were doing, or someone happened upon them with the skills.

There was nothing about the progress done that didn't please the Captain. Even things that hadn't been done didn't bother him. Why would it? They had the time to accomplish things. The most important steps were taken, and anything else that needed finished would be done with ease. They had a hundred and thirty-three more people than when they had left.

"Greenhouses?" The Captain asked Elliott as they walked down the one stop light street in the town.

"I'm gonna say it was a good thing we moved them early." Elliott replied. "Minimal, minimal loss to crops. Our biggest problem is that seven of them are in full blown harvest. Scottsdale says we have to pick and can ASAP."

"I'll get a crew together," The Captain said. "And the . . . coffee beans?"

"Excellent. We lucked out with mature plants in Mexico."

"Now." The Captain slowed his pace. "Most importantly. The . . . the . . ."

"Women?" Elliott snickered. "Housed down. Safe and secure. And away."

"Yes." The Captain said with excitement. "I want their home finished as first priority. Before anyone else." He got an agreeing nod from Elliott. "They get full power. No conservation for them. Also food. And get two men who can play guard at their door. We have to do that or else we won't be able to pull off the story we told them."

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"Is that wise?" Elliott asked. "I mean making them think they aren't safe running around."

"Yes. Yes it's wise. At least until we're settled. Or would you rather have them running around. It won't be twenty-four hours on a bus, Elliott. It will be always. Complaining about this, yelling about that. Needing . . . feminine protection."

Elliott swallowed. "I'll find two guards."

"Good." The Captain smiled and saw where they stopped. Center of the little community, like something out of a story book was a red brick corner building. The marble sign had the words 'town hall' etched in it. "See." The Captain pointed to the sign. "I love this. Is this where you're bringing me?"

"Yes." Elliott opened the recently cleaned doors. "Everyone's inside."

Wondering who everyone could be, because the Captain knew most of the men were settling down from the trip, he followed Elliott. Past the large oak staircase and down a hall to another set of double doors.

They walked inside. It looked like a small gymnasium. Stage, tattered curtain, piano in the corner next to a flag. One long table sat center, around it eight men.

Elliott motioned his hand to the empty seat at the head of the table. "For you, Captain."

An ornery grin graced the Captain's face as he sat down. "Elliott a meeting? I have to say I'm impressed at your authoritative measures." He snickered. "Wait. This isn't one of those damn drinking games you used to get us in before, is it? I'm too tired to kick you ass."

"No." Elliott chuckled. "No drinking game. And trust me, I learned my lesson drinking with you. Not all of us were bottle fed whiskey as an infant. This is a meeting of sorts." Elliott didn't sit, he paced some as he spoke. "I picked . . . I picked this particular group as a start. You Captain, because though never officially named, it's always understood that you lead us. I don't think there's a person who would argue or want you out of that position. The forty-eight of us would not be organized or together if it wasn't for you. Now . . ." Elliott breathed. "Us nine, well . . . from years of watching

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and also the past twenty-four hours. People tend to come to us for answers. We are the ones that are always sent to ask you things. Give the answers. So I thought it would be us that has this meeting before we bring in the rest of *our* men.”

“Our men?” The Captain asked. “Meaning our Hawaii crew.”

“Yes.” Elliott nodded. “These people we picked up. Including the . . .” Elliott swallowed harshly. “Women. They want answers. Need organization. Want structure. We have that yes. But, it is not official. We have a lot of people now. Hating to say it, delegation of power and rules is now necessary.”

Joshua Owens, younger man, who sat near the Captain lifted his hand to speak. “I agree.. Some of us have talked about this. We know you have a plan, Captain. You’re never without one. Maybe while you are perfecting that plan you can incorporate into it, the structure of authority.”

The Captain leaned back into his chair. “My focus was primarily on getting to the Society, but I guess I could do that. Elliott, knowing you as I do, I’m guessing this little non drinking get together is basically a meeting of the minds to establish a temporary means?”

“Yes.” Elliott nodded. “Work assignments and such. Just until we know exactly what we’re gonna do.”

“Good.” The Captain grinned widely and stood up. “I’m glad you’re thinking that way. Have a seat Elliott.” He moved from the way to let Elliott sit and spoke upbeat. “Because it just so happens that I’ve been thinking about it too. I . . .” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “Made a list of ideas. May I . . . share?”

Elliott sat down at the same time, laughing ‘it figures’ mumbles erupted from around the table.

The Captain laughed also as he stood before the men. “But in all seriousness gentlemen.” He paused with a breath and a change in his upbeat demeanor. “I believe, all of us, discovered a cause we did not know we were going to face. And . . . no longer are we a group of service men who just want to survive.” The Captain raised his eyebrow as he lifted his list. “We are now a full blown community with a purpose.”

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Beginnings, Montana

How long had Frank stood outside that mobile lab. In the dark, not seen, staring at the lab and to the window watching Dean. His insides turned, gnawed some. And he tried with everything he had to control his anger.

With a twitching jaw and his father's words of advice to 'let it go', Frank adjusted his headset radio and moved to right before the huge picture window.

Dean was wanting to shut down for the night. At least for a little while. Having just wrapped up two more dead rabbits, Dean needed a break. The 'bang' against the glass sounded too close. Turning his head, he could see Frank outside. The look on Frank's face said more than anything. The slow curl of Frank's finger in a 'come here' signal to Dean, confirmed he wasn't there to see Ellen.

After taking the time to wash up, Dean walked from the special lab and straight to the window. He picked up the radio that sat on the small table. "El's in the shower."

"I'm here to see you." Frank's words were deep and hard.

"What is it?"

"It's the perfect little fuckin scenario for you in there isn't it? Alone with my wife. Or so you think. It ends, Dean. It ends the second she steps out.." Frank paused to swallow. "Whatever happened between the two of you last night, better not happen again. Or pending doom or not, you're a dead man." After one more hard glare, Frank turned and walked away.

Dean could have been shaken. But he wasn't. Instead he became engulfed. Engulfed with an outrage he hadn't felt in a long time. Setting down the radio, Dean turned and with a fast stride, went to the trailer.

Down the hall he moved with determination not even seeing Ellen come from the bedroom. He stepped into the livingroom and to the table where Henry sat and worked on the microchip. "Stand up." Dean told

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Henry in a near calm fashion.

Henry ignored him.

"I said . . . stand up." Dean increased the strength of his words.

"Dean, I am really busy right . . ."

"Stand up!" Dean's whole body shouted.

As if it was the most annoying thing he had to do in a while, Henry set down the microchip and sluggishly stood up. Slanted Henry's six foot lanky frame was, as he stood with attitude. The moment his head slowly swung Dean's way in an 'you bother me fashion' was the moment Dean nailed him.

The crack of the hit rang out and Henry spun fast, knocking into the chair and falling face first to the floor by the kitchen doorway.

Dean shook his hand then pointed it in an angry motion. "The next time you want to open your mouth, think about the people involved!"

Sneering, Henry wiped the blood from his nose as he quickly picked himself up. After wiping the blood again, he turned, tossed the chair form his way and dove toward Dean.

Ellen's loud shriek out 'no!' followed by the leap of her body in an interception, sent Dean back and away from Henry. "Stop this!" She shouted out, her face close to Dean. "Stop." She tried to calm her breathing. "What is going on?" She asked Dean.

"Him." Dean pointed.

Henry, again wiped his dribbling blood as he glared at Dean. "I thought you could face your own consequences."

"I can!" Dean shouted. "But it wasn't just my consequences! Asshole!"

Henry charged. Dean charged. Ellen rushed into Dean. "Knock it off." She laid her hands on Dean's face, pulling him to look at her. She could feel the heat from his face, his heart and breathing so strong. "What happened?"

"He told Frank. He . . . told Frank."

With a release of Dean, Ellen in shock, slowly turned and looked at Henry. "You told Frank?" She asked emotional. "Why?"

"I didn't tell him you slept together." Henry defended. "I told

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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him you guys were getting close.”

Dean spoke before Ellen did. “You shouldn’t have told him anything. It’s none of your business! None!”

“Bullshit.” Henry stormed forward. “It’s my business when you’re using quarantine to get that last round in!”

“I’m using quarantine yes! But as my last chance to get Ellen back!”

“You can’t have her back, Dean.” Henry stated strong. “She is Frank’s wife. Don’t forget that!”

“And who the hell cared when she was my wife! When she was with me! Who stepped in on my defense when he was stealing her behind my back!” Dean argued. “Not you! No one. And I’m suppose to just back off of what I feel because it’s wrong to do that to Frank. Well Frank never cared!”

“And that makes it right?” Henry asked. “Does it? Because Frank dogged you, it’s all right to dog Frank? This isn’t about pay back, Dean. It’s about Ellen.”

“That’s right.” Dean snapped. “And if you remembered, if you weren’t such a little bitch you wouldn’t have gone to him about last night. No matter what you told him.”

“Frank’s my best friend! I had to tell him something.”

Dean laughed. “Best friend? Oh, some best friend you are. Thank God!” Dean tossed his hand up. “You aren’t even my pal, Henry. Because I wouldn’t want you to do me the favors you’re doing Frank.”

Henry scoffed. “What the hell are you talking about, Dean?”

“It’s really swell of you Henry to tell you best friend his wife may be cheating. Way to hurt him. Or better yet. Try to convince his wife not to move back in with him. You are either the lamest friend or you want Ellen for your . . .” Dean’s eyes widened. He shifted them to Ellen then to Henry. “. . . self. That’s it.”

Henry took a long breath and in an ignoring mode, moved back to the table and began to gather his things.

“That is it. Isn’t it?” Dean stepped closer to the table.

Ellen tried to stop him. “Dean. Just let it go.”

Dean pulled away from her reach. “She lives with you Henry.

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Talks to you. She's always there for you."

Henry glared up. "You know nothing."

"I'm right." Dean nodded. "Does your best friend know this?" Nearly in a taunt, Dean spoke. "No. He's too dumb to see it. Make him mad. Break them up. Stop Ellen from moving away." Dean stepped aside when Henry picked up his belongings and started to leave the room. "Because you know . . ."

"Dean." Ellen's voice, soft and firm, silenced him as she stepped directly before him. "Let him go. Drop it. Please?"

Dean watched Henry leave, then he looked at Ellen. "Did you know this? Did you know how he felt?"

"Yes." Ellen halted Dean from saying anymore. "Despite what Henry says, it's not me. It's . . . it's just what I am. He's just caught up. Just let it go. He doesn't mean any harm."

"Why are you defending him? Do you know what he did tonight."

"Yes. And I'm defending him because he doesn't want to lose, even if it's just a fantasy, what he has."

"What's he have EI?" Dean asked.

"Something so basic and simple, that you and Frank take it for granted. A rarity. A woman, even innocently, that pays attention to him. When you think about how many men in this community who don't have that, think about Henry. He's one of them." Ellen stepped back. "Excuse me. I'm just gonna talk to him."

Dean took a long breath as Ellen left. He looked at the room in disarray. He knew if they weren't so lucky, their lives--because of Henry's innocent protective manipulation of Ellen--could have ended up looking just as messed up as that room.

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What was it? The third or the fourth shots worth of whiskey Robbie watched Frank down. He didn't know, but he knew Frank had enough. Seeing his big brother pour another, Robbie reached for the bottle.

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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“Easy.” He pulled it from Frank’s hand and set it on the coffee table. “You have kids here and you have to work in the morning.”

Frank gave a single sharp look at Robbie. “I think I’m a big enough guy to handle my whiskey.”

“Yeah. You are Frank. And you’re also a big enough guy to handle your problems without it.”

“You’re right.” Frank brought his hands to his face, took in a heavy breath and leaned back on the sofa. “Did El say how Henry was.”

“She said he’s fine.” Robbie capped the whiskey. “Dean just clocked him. And in my opinion, Henry deserved it.”

“How can you say that?”

“How can you not?” Robbie came back. “He’s starting trouble. For you and them. Look at the situation. They are stuck together. You’re out here. What can you do about what he told you? Nothing but get drunk, angry and frustrated.”

“She’s my wife.” Frank reached for the bottle.

Robbie pulled it away. “And she’ll be back to being your full time wife the second she steps from quarantine. You have that. Let this go.”

“What am I letting go?” Frank tossed his hand up. “Huh? Did something happen last night?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Robbie scratched his head. “All that went down with the future trip, Sarge’s death. I think . . . I think it’s a strong possibility that they turned to each other.” Robbie saw his brother’s anger begin to rise. “But Frank. Stop and think about. Even if it did, even if something occurred. In the scheme of things, with all that’s happening with this pending virus. Isn’t this . . .” Robbie let out a fake snicker. “Isn’t this Dean and Ellen thing really trivial.”

A curl of his lip in disgust along with a sneer was what Frank gave Robbie. “No.”

“Just thought I’d ask.” Robbie plopped back on the couch in defeat. He knew his calming and reasoning with Frank was over with, especially when Frank stood back up and grabbed the bottle of whiskey

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again.

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Bowman, North Dakota

The sign ‘buy one get one free tampons’ faded and torn, screamed at Elliott as it hung in the corner drugstore window. Elliott thought it was a destiny conspiracy, a painful reminder of the days at home with his sisters when they all would be on the ‘cycle’ at the same time. He glared at sign as he reached for the door next to the drugstore entrance.

There was a stairwell that immediately greeted him. It was dark and Elliott had to use his flashlight his entire journey up the wooden steps. He could feel the dust with each step he took. He could smell the dirt of the building which still needed to be cleaned. Remnants of a chaos town still lingered.

Pushing aside the sprawled papers with his foot, Elliott reached the top of the stairs. He entered into a small hall. A door was to his left and right. Thinking how ridiculous it was, Elliott turned to his right and knocked.

The smell of cleaning solution, along with a bright smile from the Captain greeted Elliott when the door opened.

“Captain.” Elliott had complaint to his voice. “Do you realize how absurd this is.”

“You’re so rude, Elliott. Come into my home.” The Captain opened the door wider.

“Apartment.” Elliott stepped inside. “There are multitudes of houses to choose from. Why the apartment.”

“I love it. I love living in apartments. Always have.”

Elliott looked around the place. A large livingroom that could have been two rooms. The small kitchen could be seen along with the bedroom. “This is small.”

“It’s perfect. I’m one man.” The Captain stepped back. “Want to have a seat on my . . .” The Captain pointed. “Couch.”

“This is insane.” Elliott said. “Everyone else is blocks away. All

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

settled in little homes while you perch yourself above a drugstore like some . . .” Elliott grinned. “Oh, I get it.”

“Get what.”

“It’s symbolic. You’re above us all, so you place yourself physically above us as well.”

“That has got to be the most retarded statement ever to come from your mouth.”

Elliott turned his head away mouthing the word ‘retarded.’

“Elliott?”

“Retarded?” Elliott shook his head. “Anyhow. Do you have them?”

“Such haste.” The Captain walked to his two seater diningroom table. “And yes. I do.” He handed him a few sheets of paper. “I did a little job lottery. Just until I figure out who can do what and where to assign.”

“This will work. I’ll pass it out tomorrow.” Elliott looked at the papers. “Night.”

“Elliott?” The Captain followed him. “No, hanging out and talking.”

“No. Not tonight. You’re scaring me. You have that gleam in your eyes and that mind is churning. I hate when you get like this, because I remember that look well. A mere private I was. I was so excited you were the new Ex-O. You call me in the office, you tell me, ‘Elliott, missel specialist isn’t for you. I believe your calling lies in maintenance engineering’ I didn’t know what the hell that was. I was thrilled until I found out I was going to be a janitor.”

“I pledged to fill positions.”

“I believed you.”

“You still do.” The Captain grinned.

“Unfortunately. And I also believe you are taking far too long with this . . . master plan.” Elliott ignored the Captain’s chuckle. “Too long for it to be simple.” Elliott raised an eyebrow. “It’s big and you want to have every minuscule detailed ironed out before you tell us. Right?”

“Well . . .”

“Oh, my God.” Elliott shook his head and moved to the door.

“Elliott quit being so melodramatic,” The Captain pulled him back. “Yes. It’s big. And I have to say good. But you shouldn’t fear I’ve gone overboard . . . O.K., maybe just a little.” The Captain leaped to get Elliott when he tried to leave again. “But it’s good. Trust me. A few more days. Elliott . . .” The Captain closed the door all the way. “Look what I got.” He stepped back and ran to the kitchen. He came out with a bottle of whiskey. “Come on. Sit with me. Let’s have a drink. Enjoy my new home.”

“Apartment.” Elliott snatched up the bottle.

“I’ll get glasses.” The Captain walked from the room.

“All right.” Elliott dropped down to the couch. The second he did, he sprang back up when the hardness surprised his backside. Lifting the thick, old, book he sat on, Elliott looked at it and reviewed the title. *The Horse Soldiers; Skills of the Calvary.* Shaking his head and thinking, ‘The Captain even reads weird’, Elliott tossed the book, and stole a swig of the whiskey before the Caption returned with the glasses.

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### Beginnings, Montana

The tremble wasn’t just confined to Ellen’s index finger. It traveled like a bad infection, through her hand, up her wrist and straight to her heart, bringing with it a pain that could kill her. In the main lab, only a corner light on, Ellen’s finger hovered over the ‘down’ arrow of the computer keyboard. Her face, somber and drawn peered at the screen. Her eyes barely left the words as her finger scrolled down. And every once and a while, Ellen stopped, closed her eyes and swallowed before reading some more.

The creak of the trailer door startled Ellen a little, and told her someone, Dean or Henry was coming. Hearing the door to the lab open, Ellen quickly reached up, time limited, and shut off the monitor only.

“Hey.” Dean spoke softly as he walked into the lab. He wore only his jeans, no shirt and his hair looking as if he crawled form bed. “What . . . what are you doing?”

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Nervously, Ellen turned on the stool. “Nothing. Just, you know, working.”

“On?” Dean walked closer.

“Old stuff.” Ellen shrugged. Her hand stayed on the counter, flat to avoid allowing Dean to see her shake. “But I’m done. All booted down.”

“Are you mad at me?” Dean asked, stepping to her. “You got out of bed in the middle of the night and didn’t say anything.”

“I was in one of those, antsy moods.” Ellen took a deep breath. “Can’t sleep.”

“Oh.” Dean smiled. “Good.” Hands on her legs, Dean stepped to her. His fingers slid up her thighs pushing forward her long shirt as he leaned down to her, placing his lips on her neck. “Come back to bed.” He whispered, widening his mouth with each sweep to her skin.

“Dean, stop it.” Ellen fought him off. “Not here. Not in front of the window. Someone can see.”

“I don’t care.” he continued his pursuit.

“I do.” Ellen moved his hand. “I do.” She looked at him seriously. “I told you last night I would give you this time. But you have to give me what I want.”

“It’s bullshit.” Dean whispered. “This . . . this between you and me. It’s right. And what am I supposed to do, huh? Give up on it. If you were giving me this out of being nice, first of all I wouldn’t want it. Secondly, it wouldn’t be so hard to know that in a few days, you are going to be out of my life, back with Frank, in his house and in . . . in his bed.” Dean backed up.

“I have to try with Frank. He’s my husband. We have too many years. And despite what you think Dean, I do love Frank. I have to give it that shot. I owe it to myself and him.”

“And then I’m out. It’s gonna be ‘morning Dr. Hayes’. And ‘when will we exchange kids’. No more special talks. Laughing, nothing.” Still not facing her, Dean shook his head. “I don’t need a lover in my life. I just . . . I just need you. Why can’t you see that?”

“And why can’t you see it won’t be for long. Just until things settle. And I promise you, with everything I am. Everything, You will not be alone. I won’t leave your side.”

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There was a certain curl to Ellen's voice that sent out emotional signals Dean caught. Over his shoulder, slowly he turned his head to face her. "That was too serious. Un-Ellen. What's up?" He watched her shake her head and then he watched Ellen do something he wasn't supposed to. She caught a single tear that rolled down her cheek. "El." He moved back to her. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You don't cry over nothing." Dean laid his hand on her arm to stop her from getting up. His eyes grew wide when he felt the vibration of her trembling through her skin. "Something is up. What is it? You just aren't . . ." In the midst of speaking, hands moving, head turned, Dean saw it. The power light on the computer terminal. "I thought you said you booted down."

"I did,"

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying. Is the computer on?"

"Yes." Dean pointed to it. "Why would you lie about something so simple as booting . . ." Quickly, before Ellen could stop him, Dean reached up and turned on the monitor. "What is this?" He looked at the notes.

Ellen turned the monitor. "I . . . I wanted to tell you, but I had to figure out if I was right. I am. And now, and now I just don't know how to explain it."

"What are you reading?" Dean asked.

Ellen took a deep breath. "The reason I can promise I will never leave your side." She saw how confused Dean was. "Dean, we brought these disks back from the future. But they were so far pre-plague, we didn't need them. I started to read, but you said to stop. I read this . . ." Ellen clicked a few times on the keyboard, then read the entry. "*Seems Hap's psoriasis is spreading. I wish I could see how bad, I guess is have to take Ellen's word for it.*"

"O.K." Dean said, "We disagreed. What's the big deal?"

"That's what I thought, then I read this, this was the last one I read before tonight." She clicked again. "Three days later. *At least my typing has improved. Less errors. My old typing teacher would be proud. A lot accomplished when*"

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*forced to not look at keys.*” Ellen peered up to Dean. “Odd entries. Unlike you. But you said something today that made me read more. And I did. I found out why you missed the Jenny Matoose sample, Dean.” Ellen’s voice dropped to a cracking whisper as she clicked on the keyboard. “Read.”

In a ‘what the heck’ manner, Dean leaned over Ellen’s shoulder and looked. His heart dropped along with his expression, “Oh, my God. This can’t be right.”

“It is.” Sadness laced Ellen’s words. “I read and read and read. Every single entry. It’s right.” She swallowed and faced Dean. “It something we should be glad to know now. We can prepare. It may have so much to do with why we didn’t beat the plague. At least we know it’s the reason why Jenny’s sample was wrong. You didn’t look at it. I did. I’m not you. I make errors. These notes only go back one month before the virus. By what I read, the problem’s been there a lot longer. Do you understand, Dean? Do you? I can’t leave your side. I won’t.”

Dean’s eyes stayed transfixed on the screen. His face was pale with horror. “What are we gonna do, El? Huh?” Dean asked with so much emotion. “How am I supposed to beat this. If in the future . . .” He looked back to the screen, then to Ellen. “If in the future . . . I’m blind.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

December 12

Beginnings, Montana

The small note that said, 'happy anniversary' laid upon Ellen's packed bag. She lifted it, read it and smiled. But still a hint of sadness was on her face.

"The irony." Dean said, standing in her open bedroom doorway.

"What?" Ellen turned around. She held up the note. "Thanks."

"That note is what I mean. The irony. It's our anniversary and today is the day we leave quarantine and you go back to Frank." Dean walked into the bedroom.

"I know." Ellen nodded slowly. "And I won't forget about you. We have this new problem to conquer. I'll be there every step of the way. We'll get ahead of it. We already are. We didn't know about the blindness in the future. Now, we can look for signs and symptoms of it coming."

"And I can start teaching you." Dean said. "Just in case I still lose my sight. But explain to me something. How are you going to do this? Work with me on the virus. Learn from me. Help me with the newest problem. All of that means time spent with me."

"And we'll be able to have that. I promise you." Ellen said with sincerity.

"How's that?" Dean asked. "Isn't part of Rev. Bob's plan for you to cut me out?"

"Yes. And I spoke to Frank already. We . . . we worked something out."

"You told him?"

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I didn't and I won't tell anyone. Rev. Bob's plan to cut you out was only to cut out the threat of us. Frank, isn't threatened. He'll be O.K. with our time together." Ellen showed her uncomfortableness.

"Frank O.K. with our time? What did he agree to do, share you

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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with me?” Dean snickered. “Oh, I don’t believe that. You’re lying. You’re gonna sneak the time in with me.”

“No, Dean. He’ll know. And in a sense he is sharing.” Ellen blinked rapidly as her eyes drifted away. “Not physically. But emotionally. That’s why he’s not threatened.”

Dean laughed even harder. “Even if it’s non physical, Frank wouldn’t have an emotional understanding with me.”

“No.” Henry’s voice seeped into the room. “Maybe not with you.”

The moment Dean saw Ellen’s head lower, his heart sunk and he slowly looked behind him to Henry. “No.” He looked back to Ellen. “No. Tell me Frank is not having an understanding with Henry.” When Dean’s eyes connected with Ellen’s, his insides gnawed. “When?”

“Last night Frank and Henry decide . . .”

“Whoa!” Dean halted her. “You weren’t even part of this decision? What the hell? Now he can pimp you out?”

“Dean.” Ellen gasped.

“No, Dean.” Henry interjected. “He’s not pimping her out. This isn’t about sex. I’m not after sex. I don’t want the physical part. I want the emotional. And If I can help fill the gap that Frank can’t then . . .”

“There’s no room for me.” Dean stated in shock. “And I bet Henry, you just fed this right into his mind.” Dean grumbled loudly in almost a scream,. “This is bullshit! He can’t share you El. He can’t. It’s bad enough I have to face you being with Frank, but with Henry too.”

“I won’t be sleeping with Henry.” Ellen defended and dropped her voice to a whisper. “And you and I need the time together. *This* is the only way Frank will trust us.”

“If Henry’s always around?” Dean laughed emotionally when Ellen nodded. “And Frank trusts Henry? You know what? I refuse to take this seriously. Refuse.”

“Dean.” Henry spoke up. “It’s a reality you are going to have to face.”

“Right.” Dean scoffed then turned his head to the sound of a buzzer. “The only thing I have to face right now is the virus. Excuse me.” In

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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a harsh brushing manner, Dean moved by Henry and out of the bedroom.

Ellen let out the nervous breath she was holding and looked up to Henry. "Well." She sighed again. "He took that much better than I thought."

"Me too. El, you know, if you don't want to do this with me . . ."

"I do." Ellen forced a closed mouth smile. "We get along great. It's the best way." One more time, Ellen looked back to the door.

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"What do you suppose Dean wants you to stay for?" Robbie asked Frank as they neared the mobile lab.

"I know exactly what he wants. Henry probably told him, him and me are having an understanding."

Robbie stopped cold. "You what!" A turn of his body and toss of his hand, showed Robbie's disapproval. "Why in the world would you, you of all people have an understanding. And with Henry!"

"Shut up Robbie. Every other man who has a woman shares her. I hear about it all the time. I don't want her running to Dean. I don't. But she has to work with him. If she's too busy with Henry, then she won't have time to do her Dean-thing. Plus, Henry is the only man I trust with this. It's not about sex. He's not allowed to touch her. I'm just giving him time with her."

"I can do the same thing Frank. I would like to have El in my life to talk to. Hang with."

"Yeah, but you'd try to sleep with her."

"So will Henry." Robbie said. "Only I'm honest enough to admit it." With a shake of his head in disgust, Robbie started to walk again. "I can't believe you're giving an understanding to Henry. Henry sucks, Frank. He's an asshole." With a snap of his finger as they approached the mobile, Robbie slowed down. "Oh, yeah. Before I forget. Ellen has that bet over Blake to pay up. While your with Dean, can I snatch her up."

"Yeah sure. Go ahead take her." Frank stood before the window.

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Again, Robbie grinned. “Thanks, Frank. You’re a cool big brother.”

“I am.” Frank said proudly, then peered through the window of the lab anxiously, waiting for Ellen’s release.

Ellen looked at her watch, then shrugged. She walked from the window to Dean.. “Some time today, Dean. You said ten minutes. It’s be thirty.”

“El.” Dean clicked on the keyboard. “Just . . . be patient. My result should be done soon.”

Henry entered the lab setting down the bags. He stopped, folded his arms and whined when he looked out the window. “Great. Just great. Why is Robbie here?”

Ellen turned her head and waved to them. “Any minute Henry. Just ignore him.”

“I hate him, El. Look he’s giving me the finger.”

Ellen looked again and Robbie was waving to Henry.

“Asshole.” Henry shouted at the window.

Frank knocked on the glass, then spoke through his headset. “I would like to see my wife. Henry, what is taking so long?”

It was the wrong thing to ask Henry. “How should I know, Frank.” He snapped. “You think we’re staying in here on purpose? You think we want to be in there? There’s dead rabbits all over the place. And it stinks, Frank. Really stinks. El says it doesn’t. And now Robbie’s out there. Why is Robbie out there. Does he need to be . . .”

Frank nodded his head slightly.

Robbie nudged him. “I didn’t bring my radio, Frank. What’s he saying?”

Frank still nodding, looked to Robbie. “I haven’t a clue. After his first few words I shut off my radio.”

Dean tapped his fingers on the counter. He smiled, turned slowly to Ellen and Henry and spoke. “Done. Let’s get out of here.”

Before he could even finish what he was saying, Ellen and

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Henry, fought like kids to see who was getting to the door first. Ellen prevailed, rushing out, and taking a second to breath in the fresh air. “Henry, we’re free.” She threw her arms up. “I’m free . . .” Her long trailed out word ended in an ‘ugh’ when she felt the thump to her stomach and her body lifted up and tossed over a shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Mind spinning, she thought Frank was sweeping her off her feet literally, until she saw Frank. Ellen screamed. “Help!”

“Robbie!” Frank yelled out to his running brother.

“Sorry Frank.” Robbie backed up, and smacked Ellen’s backside to silence her. “A deal is a deal. A bet is a bet. You’ll get her back.”

“But . . .” Before Frank knew it, Robbie had tossed Ellen into a jeep and sped off.

“Frank!” Henry hit Frank with a back hand to his gut, causing a grunt. “What is wrong with you? You’re letting her pay off that bet?”

“He’s my brother Henry. I don’t want my wife to welsh.”

“Asshole.” Henry stormed off.

“What!” Frank threw his hands up. Disgusted, he stomped, then turned around to the tiny annoying tapping on his shoulder.

“Let’s go.” Dean curled his finger and walked back to the mobile.

“O.K.” Frank followed with attitude. “But I must warn you, Dean. I don’t want to hear whining from you about my understanding with Henry.

Dean paused before stepping into the mobile. “Not whining at all, Frank.” Dean smiled. “I plan on being very civil to you. Actually I think the understanding is a smart move. Henry’s a good choice. Ellen likes him . . . a lot.” Continuing, Dean walked in. “More than you realize.”

“Right. And you can’t play mind games. My mind is too strong.” Frank pointed to his own temple. “I know what you’re doing. And, despite that, I too will be civil.” He stopped before walking through the door. “Is it safe in here?”

“Um yeah, sure, absolutely. So . . . How were the kids?” Dean asked in idle conversation as he moved to a small fridge.

Apprehensively, Frank moved into the lab. “Good. I didn’t kill

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them if that's where you're getting at."

"No." Dean chuckled and carried a syringe over to the counter.

"Did you at least read to them?"

"Why?"

"It's important Frank. Those kids need to be literary. Even . . . um."

Frank grinned. "Bobby."

"Yeah. Thanks. Bobby." Dean snapped his finger. "No, that's not his name. Joey. Asshole."

"For a scientist, you aren't bright. And for your information, you don't need to read to be literary."

Dean only looked up. "Only people who aren't literary can make a statement like that."

"Hey, now, I'm the literary guy." Frank gasped dramatically at Dean's scoff. "You don't think? Bet me. Bet me I can be literary."

"In whose eyes?" Dean laughed with sarcasm.

"The whole community."

"Oh, this is too beautiful. Fine, you're on. I'll bet you. What do you want to bet?"

"If the community says I'm literary by the end of the year, you Dean, have to type up my security rosters for a whole month."

"Fine. But if by the years end the community *doesn't* acknowledge the literary you. You have to stop the understanding with Henry."

"Ha! I knew it bothered you! Fine." Frank shook Dean's hand. "I have to go. This was worth coming up here for this. See ya." He turned and walked to the door.

"Frank! That's not why you're here." Dean hid his laugh when Frank stopped. "Sit." Dean pointed to a stool. "And take off your jacket and shirt."

"Dean, I am not that type of guy. But . . . just to give you the thrill." Frank tossed off his leather jacket then lifted his sweatshirt over his head. "Yep." He rubbed his hairy chest and sat down. "Take a look. A real man's chest."

"There is something mentally unbalanced about you." Dean

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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uncapped a syringe.

Frank's eyes shifted with some horror. "You're giving me the virus."

"No. Close." Dean said. "I'm . . . I'm giving you the antiserum."

With such shock, Frank looked up. "Me? Why? No. If there's extra, give it to the kids Dean. Give it to them. Not me."

"We need certain people Frank through this whole ordeal. Because of your strength and the threat of the society invasion while we deal with the virus. We, hating to say this, will need you. So you get the antiserum." Dean pushed up the sleeve on Frank's tee shirt.

"This couldn't wait until tomorrow?"

"Absolutely not." Dean answered as he injected Frank. "Done. Now . . . You may experience some side effects. But they subside in a day or two."

"No problem." Frank placed on his jacket. "Dean, explain to me this. Why? Why would you give me the antiserum. I'm pretty tough. I'll beat this thing. It won't get me down if it happens. You should have . . ." Frank saw Dean turn away. "I don't beat this thing? How do you know?"

"Let's just say, I know."

"How do you . . ." The slow zippering of Frank's jacket coincided with the realization of what Dean meant. "Shit. Does Ellen know this?"

With a closed mouth, Dean looked up at him. "And more. Don't mention any of this to her please." Dean began his clean up. "Whatever you do, do not remind her of what we saw."

Frank swallowed, he swallowed hard. The truth sometimes was too hard to take. And aside from the antidote, Dean just delivered to Frank, a painful truth of a future that very well may still happen.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Elliott could have sworn it was a scene from a movie he had seen in the past. Standing by the fence watching the Captain on horse back

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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trot his way. The speed of the horse steady, the stride gentle. The Captain looked happy as he rode. Elliott would have thought the scene was cast with a misty fog, but he knew that inability to focus was more so from his blackened and swollen eye than any imaginary special effect he gave the vision.

It was ornery. It was arrogant. It was so much the Captain. “Elliott.” He grinned, then suave, dismounted the horse and grabbed the reigns. “She’s ready for you.”

Elliott chuckled. “No.”

“Frightened?”

“Um, yeah.” Elliott said. “Not to mention totally beat up. No. Seven horses. Seven times bucked, tossed, and dragged. No.”

“But this is the one.”

“You said that last time. And why are you so insistent we ride horses.”

“Um . . .” Cocky, The Captain scratched his head. “Seeing how we have to move about once in a while. I don’t know. Transportation?”

Ellen let out one fake ‘ha’ of a laugh. “You’re funny. What about motorcycles. They use little fuel.”

“Motorcycles? It’s been done.”

“What do you mean it’s been done, By who?” Elliott asked.

“Ever see Mad Max?”

“That doesn’t count.” Elliott had a snap to him. “It was a movie.”

“Still.” The Captain extended the reign to Elliott. “Take her. Get on. She’s yours.”

“I can barely see.”

“She will be your eyes. She’ll take you.” The Captain ignored Elliott’s laughter. “The others didn’t mix with your chemistry. You need one who mixes. Feels you.” The Captain spoke with passion. “One who can understand you. That’s the way it works. And . . . I strongly believe your distaste for animal life is being conveyed in a negative energy to the creatures, therefore triggering the defense mechanisms of these animals to strike out against you as a foe.”

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Elliott's mouth dropped open. "You are so full of shit. This has nothing to do with negative energy or chemistry. They're wild."

"Did I just ride her in?" The Captain asked. "Yes. I did. Perfectly. Gentle she is. *This* Elliott is your horse." The Captain leaned into Elliott. "Do you trust me?"

"Unfortunately."

"Then do this." The Captain smiled when Elliott grabbed the reigns. "You'll ride like a champ."

Preparing to get on the horse, Elliott snickered and shook his head. "If this horse throws me."

"She won't." The Captain winked and stepped back. "I know."

Grinning, The Captain watched as Elliott awkwardly mounted the animal. Then the realization hit him that perhaps he really *didn't know*. The Captain cringed when he watched the animal buck up, toss a yelling Elliott, and drag him a good twenty feet before Elliott was released.

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### Beginnings, Montana

Henry wasn't in the best of moods. And things hadn't gotten any better. He thought he would have felt a million more times at ease after leaving quarantine. But then again, he had to spend an hour chasing Robbie around. To Henry, Robbie wasn't funny and he of all people added to Henry's hideous mood. Every time he felt that bad mood start to leave him, something else would happen to set him off again. He still had work to do at mechanics and taking time to stop for Joe's meeting was irritating him also. And he felt that irritation grow when he saw Joe working outside the bakery building. "Joe? The meeting Joe." Henry told him as he stopped behind him.

"Oh, Henry sorry." Joe switched the tool he was using on the outside breaker box. "I'll only be a few minutes. Josh and Denny were throwing a football in the street and knocked the cover loose. Could you inform everyone?"

"Yeah Joe, I'll tell them." He said less than enthusiastic then

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stopped walking. "Why are you doing mechanical work. We have a division. Joe, your son won't stop being lazy until we stop doing things for him."

Joe stared seriously at Henry. "You done? Good. Go tell everyone I'll be a few minutes late. "Thanks." Joe returned to the box.

Huffing, Henry shook his head and turned. When he did he saw Dean and Ellen just standing there looking at him "What?"

Dean with a snicker held up his hands. "Easy." He took hold of Ellen's arms and moved toward the social hall. "Let's go, El."

"Dean." Sharp toned, Henry raced up. "I hope she isn't coming to the meeting. She's not allowed. Joe said she only interrupts. It's a brief meeting, Dean I want . . ."

"Henry." Dean stopped him. "What is your problem? You're out of containment. No longer cooped up. And . . . and mind you. You've done the impossible. You've proceeded to convince the most selfish man in Beginnings to share. Quit complaining Henry. Life us pretty good to you." Again, Dean took Ellen's arm.

"You would think." Henry griped. "You're not chasing Robbie Slagel around and Dean, you keep interfering as well." Henry grew even more frustrated when Dean just slipped into the social hall with Ellen.

Still hearing Henry's outside complaining, Dean smiled when he walked into the hall. Frank stood at the bar. Robbie in his usual arrogant manner, sat at the long table next to Jason, awaiting whoever else would arrive for the meeting. Immediately, Dean walked up to Frank, snatching the glass of whiskey from his hand as Frank brought it to his lips. "No booze, not tonight."

"Fuck you, Dean." Frank snatched it back. "It's the first time in a long while I don't have the kids. I can drink. Besides, I want to be relaxed for my reunion with my . . ." He raised his eyebrows. "Wife."

"Frank, you are going to experience side effects real soon, alcohol will magnify it." Dean reached for the glass again.

Frank argued . "Maybe for someone like you. Beat off." he finished his drink quickly.

"Fine." Dean threw his hands up. "Suffer." He stormed off

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taking a seat at the table.

The ‘boom’ of the social hall door opening, caught everyone’s attention, but they paid it no mind when Henry burst in. He shifted his eyes to the bar, then hurried to the table, grabbing Ellen’s arm before she sat down by Robbie. “I prefer you didn’t sit by him. He had you enough today.”

Arrogantly Robbie laughed. “Man, Henry, a bit possessive? It was a joke.”

“It wasn’t a joke, Robbie.” Henry came back. “And Frank, you have to tell your brother. He can’t steal Ellen like that.”

Carrying his bottle of whiskey, Frank moved to the table. “Robbie don’t snatch Ellen up again. Henry doesn’t like it.” Laughing he sat down.

“Oh, funny. Real funny.” Henry snapped. “You won’t be laughing when . . .”

“Henry. Please.” Ellen tugged on Henry’s arm, pulling him to sit. “Robbie. Frank. You know he’s in a bad mood.”

“Like we care, El. This is fun.” Robbie rocked some in his hair. “Where’s my Dad?”

Henry answered. “He’s going to be late. He’s fixing something.” His eyes lifted to Robbie. “And why is that? Why is Joe fixing something? We have a mechanical division. Of course nothing was done in mechanical division while I was in quarantine. We’re weeks behind. Why is that Robbie?”

“Gee, Henry. I don’t know.” Robbie tapped his temple with his middle finger. “Let me think about it though.”

“See!” Henry pointed. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” Robbie asked hiding his laugh.

“Flip me off.”

“I was flipping you off?” Robbie raised his hands. “Did anyone see me flip you off? I wasn’t flipping you off. Fuck Henry, go back to quarantine. We’ll make that the equivalent of the looney bin, because you’ve lost it.”

“Is it any wonder when I have to deal with you.” Henry argued back.

“Dealing with me?” Robbie snidely spoke. “What is so hard

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about dealing with me? I am the easiest going person in the community. Not you. You're too much like a woman."

"At least I do my work Robbie." Henry's words were sharp. "You, you start and never finish anything."

"Like what?" Robbie leaned back with a smirk, lighting a cigarette.

"The ceiling fixture in the chapel."

"Your job."

"The generator door on three."

"Your job."

"Inspecting the tunnel pipes."

"Your job."

Henry grew angrier. "Well what exactly is your job Robbie?"

"Pissing you off and I do a very good job at that."

Henry immediately stood up, his chair sliding loudly across the floor. "I'm leaving. I'm not about to stay another minute in this room with that . . ." Henry pointed at Robbie. "Arrogant asshole."

Dean saw it coming, so did Jason who still snickered and Ellen who looked worried as she stood facing Henry. Frank, he was too engrossed with playing with his drink.

Robbie, stood up with rage. "What did you call me?!" he stormed even closer. "You Henry, have your fuckin nerve calling me arrogant, you little prick!"

"It's not nerve." Henry moved Ellen away as he stepped to Robbie. "You're so full of yourself you make me sick." Henry's body leaned to him with each sharp word.

"You'd better be prepared to back up that mouth!" Robbie's hand came down palm first into Henry's chest, shoving him back.

"And you'd better be prepared to back up that shove." Henry's hand covered Robbie's face and with an angry grunt, Henry pushed Robbie back.

Catching his step, Robbie flung himself forward to Henry.

Ellen shrieked as Robbie and Henry grabbed on to each other. "Frank! Do something!"

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With the slamming of his drink, Frank stood up. "All right." He spun around, reaching in between the two and separating them both harshly and stepping in the middle. "Stop the shit!" Frank saw both of their fists raise. "And lower them hands gentlemen. I have no intention of stepping from between you two and I'm in no mood to be hit. Got that!" Frank looked at Robbie. "Now sit down!" He turned his head to Henry. "And you! Fuckin chill or something. God!" Frank grabbed his own head. "Making my head spin. What is wrong with you Henry?"

"Frank, your brother just . . ."

"No!" Frank spoke strongly. "You came in here bitching. You know the way people are, they're gonna ride you when you get like that. Just . . . just calm down. Take a walk, get some air."

"No. I'm fine." Huffing, Henry placed the chair back at the table and sat down. "I just want this over with. I'm busy."

Everyone's heads turned to the mocking and nasal, 'nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah.'

Dean laughed along with Jason, but quickly stopped when Frank slammed down his hand.

"Robbie." Frank yelled. "Enough. All right? Quit picking on him."

"Sorry." Robbie snickered.

Henry rolled his eyes. "You know, it was a much better Beginnings without you."

"Yeah, well." Robbie said snide. "Probably not as good as a Beginnings with out you."

"Ah." Joe's voice entered into the room. "Conversation pleasantries." He walked to the table. "Ellen get out. You're not allowed to be here."

"But, Joe, I want to stay." Ellen said.

"No. It's a brief meeting. I purposely didn't invite those who would make it longer than brief. And see, you already have. I'm arguing with you. Go." Joe pointed to the door.

"Fine." Ellen stood up. "Dean instigates. Jason laughs. Frank gets drunk, Robbie and Henry fight. I say nothing, they act like third graders

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and I get kicked out.” In a storming mode, she left the social hall.

Joe was ready to engage in the meeting until he saw Frank’s puzzled look. “What’s wrong, Frank?”

“I’m confused.” Frank scratched his head. “How is my getting drunk, acting like a third grader. I don’t ever recall a third grader drinking whiskey . . .”

“Frank.” Joe tried to stop him

“Unless he has a problem” Frank winked. “I don’t recall ever drinking when I was in third grade.”

“Frank.” Joe spoke stronger.

“No, wait that’s a lie.” Frank shook his head. “You let me sip your beer. Wait. Is that why Ellen said I acted like I was in third grade. Did she mean that.”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Enough about the third grade comment.”

“Joe?” Dean raised his hand some. “You let your son in third grade drink beer?”

“No, no.” Joe shook his head. “Don’t even go there Mr. Scientist. Not when your prescription for teething infants is moonshine. All right.” Joe let out a breath. “If we can get to this meeting. First order is, we will go tomorrow. And . . .” Joe noticed Dean waving his hand. “Yes Dean.”

“Why do I have to go Joe? I don’t know anything about this car bomb stuff.”

“Because I said you go.” Joe told him. “Aside from administering the antidote to the virus, you were the only one anal enough to keep every single drivers licence you ever had. Hence, you have a valid license for back then. We need that to rent the car.” Not really in the mood for any more interruptions, Joe continued on. “Now, there is something I’d like to say so I don’t forget. Tomorrow, if we succeed, which I’m certain we will, we will be bringing back to Beginnings one scared, little older gentleman. So please, during this few days, or weeks time that he’s adjusting, don’t scare the hell out him. Because I believe he holds answers to questions we haven’t even begun to ask.”

Joe noticed it all during the meeting, and even more so as it died

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down and ended. Frank. He said not two words, his face drew paler and paler as the hour passed. As he stood from his seat he saw Frank leaning over the bar. "Frank? What's wrong?"

"I'm really sick. I can't remember being this sick." He only moved his eyes to Joe. "My head. It's killing me and I just feel bad."

With a deep breath and fatherly concern, Joe used his instincts and laid his hand on the back of Frank's neck. "You're warm."

"Dad." Frank shook his head and reached for the bottle.

"Maybe it's that antiserum Dean gave you. Let's see." With a short, ear piercing whistle, Joe not only caused Frank to wince, he caught Dean's attention before he left. "Dean! Come here!" Joe shouted.

"Dad, please." Frank winced in pain.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked when he approached the bar.

"Frank's sick. Headache. Not feeling well. Fever."

"God, Dad." Frank poured a drink. "I'm not a child."

"You're my child." Joe corrected. "Is he all right, Dean? You mentioned mild side effects."

"I'd say that's what it is." Dean stated, shifting his eyes and seeing Frank lift a filled glass to his mouth. He reached out and pulled it down.

"Anything you can do?" Joe asked.

"Nope. He's been drinking. Everything's worse. He just needs to sleep. Wait it out. Best I can tell you."

"Thanks." Joe gave a pat to Frank's back and a look of concern. "I'll head to the house and give Ellen a hand. See ya in the morning." Joe walked off.

Frank stopped Dean before he too, could leave. "You gave me this antidote tonight, on purpose, didn't you?"

"Frank." Dean gasped. "You mean give you the antiserum that I know would cause drastic side effects on the same night that not only happens to be my former anniversary, but the same night you have a physical reunion with Ellen? I wouldn't do that. I'm insulted you'd think that way."

"Sorry. But I'm just checking. Thanks."

"No problem. And no more drinking."

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Grumbling in pain, Frank waited until Dean walked off and he grabbed the bottle again. If he was gonna feel badly, he figured he'd be so drunk that maybe he wouldn't notice.

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Bowman, North Dakota

There were a few things that alerted Elliott to the Captain's return to Bowman. The horse gallop, slow and echoing, the muffled voice of the Captain saying something and the sound of drunken singing. Elliott thought he recognized the song as *Nearer my God to Thee*, that the male voice sang. But he couldn't be sure. For all Elliott knew, his memory was just bad, not the gentleman's singing voice.

Elliott heard these things, and confirmation came from the secondary night shift guard who knocked on Elliott's door to summon him.

Leather jacket, red bandana and perturbed attitude was what Elliott wore as he made it from his house to the main street of the small town. As warned from the guard who saw them coming and the sounds that were their alarm, Elliott watched the Captain walk along side his horse. With the Captain were four men. Three walked with him, and the drunken man rode the horse. At least Elliott assumed he was drunk, not just by his singing, but by the way his body failed to stay upright with every easy move the horse made.

"Elliott." The Captain said with a smile as he stopped. He reached his hand up to help the older man from the horse.

With a sloppy 'thank you' the older man missed the Captain's hand and in a slide fell from the animal's body.

Quickly, the Captain helped him to his feet. "There you go. Are you all right?" He asked then returned with a smile to Elliott.

Elliott had a parental scold on his face. His eyes canvassed the horse that toted a cart. A cart that wasn't attached to it earlier. It was full of supplies, bags and boxes.

"Elliott?" The Captain snapped his finger. "Hello?"

"Theirs?" Elliott asked pointing to the full cart.

"Some." The Captain looked back. "What's wrong?"

A deep breath came from Elliot first. "I'll wait," He gave a motion of his head to the newcomers.

"Oh." The Captain snapped his finger. "Brock, Kyle and John." The Captain introduced. "Kyle spent six years in the Air Force. Isn't that wonderful."

"Yes. And what about . . ." A point of Elliott's head indicated to the drunken man.

"Get this." The Captain grinned from ear to ear. "I am so excited." He tugged the drunken man forward. "Elliott. Meet . . . ready? Father O'Brien. Fr. O'Brien, Elliott Ryder." High pitched like an excited child, the Captain spoke. "He's a priest. An honest to goodness Catholic Priest. I thought since you played piano, you can be our church organist, Elliott. What do you think?"

"He's drunk." Elliott said when he tried to shake the hand of the man of the cloth and caused him to nearly fall forward.

"Minor problem." The Captain waved his hand. "He's a priest. Father, we have a church. It's yours. And Elliott . . . he has kept his vow of celibacy all this time."

"Um . . . so have I Captain." Elliott nodded his head.

Fr. O'Brien drunkenly chuckled. "If . . . if he's the Captain. What are you?" He asked Elliott.

The Captain intervened. "He was a sergeant."

"Sgt. Ryder." Fr. O'Brien lifted his hand to salute and missed.

Elliott rolled his eyes.

The Captain smiled pleased. "Look Elliott, he's Christened you a name. Sgt. Ryder." About that point the Captain noticed Elliott's demeanor wasn't lightening up. "Someone's a bit testy. OK, I know what you get like when you get groggy." The Captain turned to Kyle. "Kyle, could you lead the others and our Catholic Priest to that building over there." The Captain pointed to the 'town hall'. "Doors open, I'll be right there."

Kyle agreed, took the reigns of the horse and Fr. O'Brien by the arm and led the men across the way.

Out of ear shot, Elliott faced the Captain. "Do you know what time it is?"

"No. Haven't checked recently, why?"

"I thought you died!" Elliott's whispering voice screamed out. "Dead. You have been gone since morning. You said you had a few things to get for the grand plan."

"I did and I got them." With a swat to Elliott's arm, the Captain nodded. "Anything else?"

With a heavy breath and a shake of his head, Elliott tossed his hand in the air. "No. When . . . when do we hear the unveiling of this plan?"

"Tomorrow." The Captain said with excitement. "And it is so good I've thought a lot about it. It has merit. I'll tell you before everyone though."

"Tell me now."

"Can't. Much too in-depth. But . . . I'll give you a hint." The Captain chuckled at Elliott's whine. "You don't want your hint?"

"Yes." Less than enthused Elliott answered. "Give me my hint."

"When we were in the service. Our branch of the service had a theme. What was it?"

The corner of Elliott's mouth lifted in a sarcastic smile. "The few, the proud."

The Captain gasped. "How dare you blaspheme by calling us Marines. Try again."

"Um . . ." Elliott shook his head so annoyed. "Be all that you can be?"

"Nope. Not that one."

"What one?" Elliott grew impatient.

"Elliott. Please. This one . . ." Dramatically the Captain held his hand up. "It's not just a job it's a . . . It's a what, Elliott?"

Elliott closed his eyes. "Oh, God. Adventure."

"Good boy." The Captain gave a slight shake to Elliott's body. "That should give you a hint. See you in the morning." The Captain began to walk away. "And get some sleep. You're cranky,"

The plan. The grand plan. Elliott knew it had to be 'out there'

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for the Captain to work it out for so long before presenting it. And with the Captain coming up with it, surely it wasn't without flare and dramatics. Watching the Captain walk away and listening to him sing his own rendition of *nearer my God to thee*, Elliott put the guess work of the plan out of his mind. Knowing the Captain as well as he did, Elliott knew he could guess all night long and still not come even close to what the imaginative Captain came up with.

CHAPTER TWENTY

December 13

Bethesda Biological Research Center, Maryland

The wide dull grey eyes. The pasty pale skin with fresh blisters. The bloody regurgitation dripping from the mouth. The thick mucus that oozed from the nostrils. *That* was the look on all four bodies behind the glass wall.

George turned away. “When?” He asked Steward.

“Lab aid discovered them this morning.” Steward replied. “Couldn’t have happened very long ago. Everything appears pretty fresh.”

“Any idea what they were working on?” George asked. “Is it the virus we hit Beginnings with?”

“Don’t know. Still waiting for Burke.” Steward shrugged. “Obviously we can’t ask our top biologist and virologist.” He pointed to the window.

George groaned at the site of Dr. Radovich’s dead body. “Well, this proves my theory that Radovich didn’t know what the hell he was doing. As soon as . . .” George looked up. “Burke.”

Dr. Burke, thin and lanky, seemed to move in a side to side manner as he came down the hall. “Mr. President.” He looked into the window and cringed.

George rolled his eyes. “You were on this project. A flunky, but on this. What the hell happened.”

“As top dog now.” He held up his finger. “I can tell you they were working on viral strain ISP-327. Variation number twenty-six.”

“What the hell is that.”

“An experimental virus strain that combines a mutated bubonic plague along with cholera. Fast acting, blood borne pathogen highly contagious and deadly.” He peeked in the window again. “Obviously.”

“Is this the Beginnings virus?” Georg asked.

“No. ISP-327 variation number Twenty-six is not the Beginnings

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virus. ISP-214 variation number five is.”

“Why were they working on a virus other than one they knew they had a recipe for an antiserum.”

“They haven’t perfected the antiserum to ISP-214 variation Number five, A.K.A. Beginnings virus.” Dr. Burke said. “They wanted to surprise and impress you sir.”

George nearly scoffed. “Oh, they surprised me all right.”

“They thought this one was more potent, which it is. And . . they also believed that they had perfected the antiserum to this one.” Burke pointed into the room.

“Did they forget to give it to themselves.”

“Oh they did.” Dr. Burke sated. “They thought it would work.”

“They thought wrong.” George huffed. “Did they not think to test it first.”

“On what?” Dr. Burke asked.

“I don’t know, let’s say . . . animals.”

So offended Dr. Burke seemed. “Animals. That would be inhumane.”

“And that isn’t.” George pointed into the room. “Get a clean up crew in there when its safe. And no more working on anything but that ISP whatever the hell it is, A.K.A. beginnings virus. That is top priority. Get the antiserum perfected . . .” George began to walk away. “And get some goddamn animals to perfect it on.” He ordered as he moved down the hall with Steward.

Dr. Burke took another moment to reflect upon the scene behind the glass wall. Seeing that there was no clean up crew and himself and the lab aid were it, Dr. Burke was glad he heard for himself that the Beginnings virus was top priority. Using that as an excuse, he shut out the light, darkened the lab and walked away to work on the Beginnings’ virus.

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Beginnings, Montana

Ellen spoke so softly, so motherly, as she did her invasive procedure. “Good job.” She rubbed Johnny’s head as she removed the needle from his arm. “And you didn’t even flinch.”

“El.” Johnny reached for his shirt. “I’m a big boy now.”

“Now, you’re going to feel pretty bad in a couple hours. So I suggest you do what you need to do now. It kicked your father’s ass last night.” She tossed away the needle. “But Dean wanted you to have your dose so we can start working on the virus in two days.”

“Where is Dr. Dean now?”

“Up at Jason’s with Joe. They’re leaving to get Forrest in . . .” She looked at her watch. “An hour. Tell me.” Ellen leaned back against the counter. “How is Denice feeling, how’s the pregnancy?”

“Good. Hey El, when will I feel it kick? She’s four months.”

“Let me think.” Ellen crossed her arms. “Soon, it should be soon. You’re father loved that when I was pregnant with Brian.” Moving from Johnny, Ellen began to gather her supplies.

“Are you done? Having kids.” Johnny rattled some at the sound of Ellen dropping her tray. “El? What’s wrong?”

Ellen turned to look at him. “Is just an odd thing to say to me right now. It’s . . .” She smiled. “Henry.”

Henry looked shocked when he walked in, his hands immediately went behind his back. “Uh, hey El. How come Johnny is still here?”

Johnny stood up from his seat. “We were just talking about Ellen being pregnant.”

“El?” Henry smiled widely. “You’re pregnant. Oh that’s great.” He moved to her embracing her. “This is great. Especially since I’m the understanding I get to be a part of . . .”

Ellen tried not to laugh. “Henry I’m not pregnant.”

“Oh.” Henry nodded. “Anyhow . . .” He reached behind him. “I found it.” He handed her a folded paper. “I hope it works.”

Ellen unfolded it, smiled then walked over to the counter laying it down. “I hope so too, because she is going to be here any minute. This spot should work.”

"I think so, too." Henry commented. "I wish I could stay and see, but . . ."

"I'll fill you in. And you go." Ellen waved him away. "Good luck with Forrest."

Henry smiled with a nod and moved toward the door. "See ya guys."

Shifting his eyes to Ellen with a sneaky smile, and to the paper Ellen laid on the counter, Johnny was about to ask what was up, but opted not to when Jenny Matoose walked in. The big smile on Ellen's face answered his question.

Jenny swallowed harshly as she stepped into the clinic lab. "I'm here. Where do I sit?"

Ellen broadly smiled. "Hi Jenny." She patted a stool. "Over here. And we really appreciate you lending us your blood. We really need it."

"I hate needles."

"I'll be gentle." Ellen unfolded Jenny's arm laying it on the counter. "I'm the best at this you know." Keeping up the fake pleasantries, Ellen uncapped a needle, placed it in Jenny's arm and injected. "There." She watched the tube fill up. '*Come on Jenny see it. See it.*' Ellen beckoned in her mind, but nothing. Removing the tube of blood, and tourniquet, Ellen placed a small piece of cloth on Jenny and turned to the counter to write on the tube. Leaning and knowing Jenny hadn't seen it, Ellen brushed the paper from the counter and it landed on Jenny's lap.

"What is this?" Jenny asked with such disgust as she held it up with two fingers.

"Dean." Ellen tsked. "That's his new fetish. Go figure. Lesbians."

"Oh my God, this is awful." Jenny laid the picture down.

Controlling her laughter, Ellen moved closer to Jenny, picking up the picture. "Not really." Ellen flashed the picture to Jenny and soften her voice as she leaned closer to her. "Actually Jenny, I was hoping you would find it as interesting as I do."

"What . . . what are you doing Ellen?" Horrified, Jenny jumped off the stool and walked backwards.

“Gosh you have great eyes.” Ellen complimented. “Jenny, would you, would you be interested in trying this with me. I find you . . . dangerously attractive.”

“Oh my God. There’s something wrong with you.”

Ellen had to turn away from her, she didn’t want Jenny to see her laugh.

“I can not believe you just hit on me.” Jenny continued trying to make her escape. “Frank, your wife just hit on me. Do something.” She said to him as she flew out.

Ellen’s head lifted.. “Frank?” She spun around and Frank leaned in the doorway, his arms folded. “Frank I . . .”

“Man El.” He walked in. “Talk about finding out something about someone after all these years. Hey John.”

“Hey Dad.” Johnny stood up. “I’m taking off. Got lots of blood to get from kids.”

“Have fun.” Frank stepped closer to Ellen as Johnny left.

Ellen watched as Frank moved so snidely to her. “It was a joke Frank. And what are you doing here?” She noticed the way he dressed. A black sweatshirt and faded pair of jeans. “And look at you. I can’t remember the last time I say you dressed out of uniform.”

“I’m very handsome, aren’t I?” Frank laid his hand on his chest. “But . . .” He cleared his throat. “To show off my physique is not why I’m here. Since I’m off sick today. I thought we could head up to the quantum lab and spy on the Forrest trip. You know since it’s off limits to spectators.”

“Oh, that sounds fun. Let me clean up.” She moved to the sink. “How are you feeling.”

“Good. A little off. I did take time to work on my novel.”

Ellen froze. Suddenly she looked up. “Your novel? You’re reading.”

“El, please. Do I read? No.” Frank shook his head. “I’m writing one. I am the literary guy now. I wrote three pages.”

Ellen dried off her hands with a smile. “Oh, my God. I am so impressed. Can I read it.”

“When it’s done.” Frank held up his hand. “Not that I worry

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about you stealing my idea. But you know, writing . . .” Frank sniffed. “It’s a personal thing.”

“I understand. This is great.” Ellen walked with him from the lab. “Will you work on it tonight?”

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely.” Frank kissed Ellen on the cheek. “Only after we have that long awaited reunion.”

There was a slight hesitation in Ellen’s stride that she didn’t understand and hoped Frank didn’t see. She just smiled. “Our reunion. So . . . I’m married to an author.”

“Yeah.” Frank grinned and stopped walking. “Book cover pose.” seriously Frank crossed one arm over his waist and brought his fist to his chin. “How’s this?”

Ellen gave a chuckle and a thumbs up, then they continued their walk from the lab.

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Slamming the door to Jason’s quantum lab, Joe walked in, shaking the chill along with the coat he wore. “Done.” He spoke as he walked up to Henry, taking the motorcycle he was holding before the archway.

Jason fiddled with his computer. “Did you handle them.”

“Yes.” Joe answered. “Like two damn kids hiding in the bushes laughing.”

Dean gripped his motorcycle, readying to go through. “Did they make fun of you Joe about riding a motorcycle. They were talking about doing that.” He watched Joe nod. “Did you tell Ellen to get back to work. She’s on her . . .”

“Dean!” Joe yelled with annoyance. “Yes. They are dealt with.” Joe motioned his head to Jason. “We’re ready when you are.” He turned back to Henry. “Henry are you . . . what’s wrong?”

Henry wasn’t smiling, he looked so serious. “I hate this Joe. I really hate this. Don’t screw around with anything, either of you. I’ll get really mad. Really mad. Especially if I come back and things are different. I’ll go

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over the edge Joe, I know I will. Who knows what I'll be capable of . . .”

Joe's hand quickly covered Henry's mouth, silencing him. “A simple question. A simple goddamn question is all I asked.” He looked to Jason. “Start this thing will ya. Before I strangle him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
The Forrest Caceres Time Trip
July 18, 1990 - Billings Montana

Leaning into the steering wheel, Joe peered out the windshield, through the raindrops and the wipers that moved at a steady delayed pace. “Read those directions again.”

“I can’t read the directions, Joe.” Dean slumped in the passenger seat, his foot pressing against the glove box. “I’m very car sick. If I read anything I’ll throw up.”

“All right. Hand them over.” Joe held out his hand to Dean, waiting to feel the small slip of paper where directions by a gas station attendant were written on.

“And must you smoke?” Dean scooted over to the window. “This is a very closed in space, the air conditioner is running.”

“Yes I must smoke, and . . .” Joe reached for the large cup in the holder between the seat. “And sip my convenience store coffee, too.” He placed the cup back down and glanced at the directions. “Two more streets on the right is the turn.”

Dean coughed dramatically. “And you aren’t wearing a seatbelt.”

“Dean.” Joe jerked the car to a stop at the light. “This is why you and I never spend any time together. You get on my nerves.” Finishing his cigarette, Joe made the right turn. “There, I can see the sign for the hotel. Shit, look at all these cars.”

Dean sat up from his slump. “Which one is his?”

Only shifting his eyes, Joe looked at Dean. “How should I know. We are going to have to find Forrest, then watch him go to his car.”

The lobby of the hotel was not as large as it would have seemed to be from the outside of the building. Joe sat on the lobby couch, staring across the grey and green interior, watching for the elevator doors. He thought of Dean in the car, baking in the hot July sun. He thought of Henry

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doing the same. Joe chuckled, wiped the pleasant and funny thoughts from his mind and kept his focus ahead at the elevator.

Then Joe spotted him. Forrest Caceres. He looked very little like the picture of himself in the dust cover of his book. Forrest was shorter than Joe thought--he made Dean look tall. Rounder too. But the unmistakable mad scientist grey hair, sticking out at the temples, and the nervous way he waddled holding tightly to his briefcase, made Joe know he was the one.

Standing from his seat, fixing his tie, Joe approached the jittery old man. "Excuse me, Dr. Caceres?" Joe pulled out his identification as he stepped in front of Forrest, halting him. "I'm Joe Slagel, CIA." He showed his identification. "I need a moment of your time."

In his French, thick broken English accent, Forrest spoke. "I coon newt stoop." He waddled past Joe.

"Dr. Caceres." Joe became anxious. He grabbed the short man's arm. "Listen very carefully to what I am saying. We have reason to believe . . . no, we know . . . someone is going to try to take you life." He watched the expression drop from the little man's face. "I need to know which one is your car out there and I need you to follow my instructions to the tee. Understand?"

"How do I know, dat you are note un of dem?" He tried to get by Joe.

"I have come so far to ensure that you do not die today. I can not take the chance that you don't listen to me. It is important. If you walk away from me. If you get into that car, that will be the last you see if this earth pal. Understand? Now walk with me outside, show me where your car is, and then I will explain it all."

Forrest felt Joe's tight grip on his arm. He clenched his suitcase tightly. Frightened, he listened to Joe while they walked.

Like a toy, it's high pitch motor sound scrambled its small 'used to be a toy car' body the thirty or so feet to directly under Forrest's car. Joe squatted some, his back against his car door, watching. Watching as Forrest slid in to his driver's side. The nervous little doctor tapped the steering wheel,

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his eyes peering to Joe, then ahead, then back to Joe. "What the hell are you doing? Don't start that car." Joe knew it, his gut told him Forrest was in debate. "Shit." Turning his body, Joe opened the car door. "Dean, you are gonna have to do this. I have to get his ass." Joe handed him the remote. "When you see us a good twenty feet from the car, you hit that red button. You hear?"

"But Joe . . ."

"Do it." In a lowered stance, Joe crawled his way to Forrest's car keeping an eye on his as he did. Forrest held the same apprehensive position. Reaching up as he reached the car, Joe opened the passenger's door. "What the hell are you doing? Come on. You don't think they're watching?"

Forrest only turned and looked to Joe with a scared expression, still holding on to the steering wheel.

"Forrest! Don't make me drag your ass out of there. Now get the hell out of the car. Get down low, or I swear I will shoot you myself. Now!"

"All rut, all rut, all-ruddy" Forrest slid down, pushing out his briefcase and sliding from the car.

"Stay low." Joe held on to him. "Now when you hear the explosion run, to our car. Got that?" Getting a nod, Joe placed a leading hand on Forrest back as they made their way back to Dean. As anticipated, at the right distance, Dean did not fail Joe. A swift hot wind smacked Joe and Forrest in their backs, knocking them to the trembling ground and causing them to cover their heads from the flying glass. "Run now!" Waiting for Forrest to get up some and dart in a wobbling way to the open back door of Joe's car waiting for him, Joe turned back to check out the explosion. A huge flame shot straight in the air, forty or fifty feet from where the grey car was once parked. "Good job boys." With a proud nod, Joe sped forward to his own car. He reached for the driver's side door, peering to the back to see a sweaty and frantic Forrest. "Let's go."

"Joe!" Dean's eye's widened. "Watch . . ."

Joe felt it, Dean's words didn't need to speak. The hard cold metal pressing to the back of his head.

"Give me the doctor." The deep male voice spoke. "And you

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and your buddy here can just go. Otherwise, I kill you old man.”

Mouthing the words, ‘old man’ Joe closed the driver’s side door a little, clenched his weapon and assessed his assailant in the reflection of the tinted glass.

“Did you hear me!”

Scoffingly, Joe responded. “Yeah I hear you pal.” Using his revolver to heavy his fist, Joe clenched tight and spun around, nailing the man of his own height, center jaw. The hit sailed the man’s face to right and surprised him off his balance. With a grunt, all his strength and an angry face that matched, Joe grabbed the man by the shirt and quickly charged him forth careening him face first down onto the hood of the car. Like a ball the man bounced up. He swayed some and fell backwards. Tossing his revolver in first, Joe slid in his car. And in one action motion, he shut the door and turned over the engine. “Let’s get out of here.” Pulling away fast--but without a peel--Joe fled the parking lot of the hotel.

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After paying cash for the rental car Joe and Dean took Forrest on motorcycle from Miles City. Forrest didn’t say much, not at all in the trip from Billings. Joe preferred it that way. A scholarly man like Forest surprised Joe with the heavy accent.

Riding with Forrest on his motorcycle, Joe pulled on the dirt road off the highway. The dirt road that would take them to the back gate of Beginnings. It was then that Forrest began to scream. It was barely audible through the motorcycle noise, yet it was ringing in Joe’s ear as they rode through the tunnel and across the land of what was then, the empty Garfield project. Picking up speed, so as to return in a haste, Joe was relived to see Henry standing in the field. They stopped the bikes, and turned off the engine. “You got it Henry?” Joe said as he stepped from his motorcycle.

Standing without moving, Henry reached a pouch to Joe, he was stumbling in his words and demeanor. “Is that him?”

“Yep.” Joe answered, taking off his helmet and laying it on the motorcycle. “Henry, you’re all wet.”

“I’ve been sitting in the rain Joe.” Henry complained still staring

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at Dr. Caceres. "Sir, I'm Henry, I'm very . . ."

"New, new! Woot have I dune? You huff brit me here to dis plus! New!" He shuddered and sputtered as Henry reached for him.

"Shut up!" Joe pulled off the helmet from Forrest, jerking the little man's head around as he did. "What are you stupid? Christ, you are going to fit right in at Beginnings. Cause that's where we're taking you. . . . Dean." Joe handed out the pouch to him. "Hit him."

Dean looked horrified. "Oh no Joe, I can't hit him, he's old. Why would I . . ."

"Dean!" Joe's hands shook as he brought himself to a calmer level. "The anti-virus, hit him with that you moron, it's in the pouch. Christ. No wonder I feel a migraine coming." Joe took an annoyance breath as he saw Forrest back up from Dean. He grabbed the good doctor, bracing him while Dean injected him. "Hold still pal, this is for your own good." He felt Forrest shake some in fear then hold on to his newly injected arm. "You cry now, but in about ten seconds you're gonna see that book of yours be a reality." He led Forrest to Henry. "You hold him Henry when we go through, I have my bike. Ready?"

Henry grabbed hold of Forrest, and lifted the pendant. "Ready." He looked back to make sure Dean was close enough. "Joe, I really hope you guys didn't mess around with anything."

"Just open the goddamn archway." Joe had reached his end.

Punching in his birthday of January ninth, the archway illuminated and Henry pulled a reluctant Forrest through. The moment they stepped through, all of them, the moment they were greeted with a smiling and cigarette smoking Jason, Forrest, with a spinning head, swayed and fell face first to the floor.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Beginnings, Montana

“Back.” Dean exhaled and dropped his shoulders in a dramatic exhaustion.

Ellen turned from the counter with a smile. “Hey, how was 1990.”

“El.” Dean walked in. “Weird. The woman at the car rental. Ready? She had a perm.”

Ellen gasped. “Oh, my God. Big hair?”

Dean shrugged. “It was in that ‘I wanna be big but fashion is saying no’ phase.”

Johnny snickered. “Big hair? Too funny. How’s the time machine memory loss?”

“Hasn’t hit me yet, In fact we’ve been back a couple hours. I feel fine. Henry too, for that matter he’s bitching about Robbie not fixing something.”

Johnny nodded his understanding. “The bakery circuit box. Gees, Henry’s complained to everyone about it. Oh . . . I take it by the mob sneak in, you guys got Forrest. How is he?”

“Exhibiting signs of the virus.” Dean said. “Good thing we hit him with the antidote before he breathed in our air. Other than that. Scared really scared.”

“Talk about scared.” Johnny stated. “I had kid-blood duty. Man was that tough. Except for Joey. He’s so much like my Dad. Didn’t flinch.”

Dean stopped in his tracks. “You don’t say.” he said more in a daze, then continued to walk. “I’ll start separating it tonight. El, want to help?”

“Sure I can . . .” Ellen saw the look Johnny gave her. “Dean.” She softened her voice. “I can’t tonight. I . . . I promised Frank we’d spend the evening at . . . at home.”

Dean swallowed. “Oh, I forgot.” He shook his head as he

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walked to the counter with the racks of blood. "How is Frank. Still sick?"

"No." Ellen answered. "He feels a little off today. But . . . Dean, check this out. Frank, he's writing a novel."

Dean was grateful his grip on the blood was so good, or else when it toppled the tubes would have rolled out of control. "Frank is writing a novel?"

Johnny burst into laughter. "My dad's writing a novel? Oh, my God."

"Hey." Ellen said defensively. "I am so proud of him. He wrote three pages already. And that's a lot. Can you write three pages of fiction off the top of your head, Dean? No. He's quite the literary guy."

Dean exhaled with a roll of his eyes. "That's it. That's the reason. All right. I get it."

Oddly Ellen looked at Dean. "What? You don't think Frank's literary? He is. He even used big words today." She saw the disbelieving looks she got. "He did." She paused. "OK, maybe to you and me they weren't big words. But to Frank they were."

Dean chuckled as he fixed the blood. "Just what the world needed a new version of 'see spot run'." After shaking his head once more at the thought of Frank writing a book, Dean returned to work.

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Henry slammed down his tool box with a thunderous force. It rattled as he dropped it less than gently to the ground in utter annoyance. He stood before the main circuit box of the bakery building, shaking his head in disbelief. "Not like I don't have other things to do today." Henry pulled out his list from his back pocket, looked it over and placed it in his mouth. "Asshole." He popped open the cover to the circuit box peering in. Pulling the list from his mouth, he replaced it in his back pocket. His index finger fanned about in a circular motion as he looked over the inside of the circuit box. "If you want things done right . . . or in Robbie's case, at all . . ." Henry bent down, flipping the lid to his tool box open with a vengeance. He retrieved what he needed and stood back up.

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“Hey!” Robbie’s voice yelled.

Henry closed his eyes. “Now he shows up.” Lowering the tool he had just started to raise, Henry turned to Robbie. “What?”

“I’ll do that.” Robbie set his stuff down. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Well it’s been on your list of things to do for three days, Robbie.” Henry scolded. “Three days. I told you this morning it absolutely can not be blown off again. It’s a simple task. Tie in a spare breaker. And you couldn’t find the few minutes to do it?”

“Henry I was busy. I have things to take care of.” Robbie remained calm. “Now step away and I’ll handle it.”

“I’ll handle it. Go do your other things. This is just another prime example of how you don’t do things and it makes me look like the prick for getting in your shit.” Clenching his jaws, Henry merely stared at him. “You seem to forget I have other things to do.”

“You seem to forget the same. I work in three other division Hank. You aren’t the only one who is busy around here.”

“No I’m not Robbie” Henry spoke so resentful. “But when I have a list of things to do. I do them and I don’t quit until I complete my tasks for the day. Maybe you should learn that.”

“What? And kill myself. Fuck that. A spare breaker isn’t important. Now move.”

“I’ll do it.” Henry insisted.

“Fine Henry. Be female.” Robbie leaned downward to retrieve his stuff. As he did he saw it, his eyes widened and like a lightening bolt, a surge of fear hit him, especially when he peered up to see Henry bringing his screw driver into the box. “Henry!” Quickly, Robbie raised up his hand, claspig Henry by the wrist and pulling his arm back. Three deep breaths came from him as he stared at Henry, still holding onto his arm. Robbie swallowed. “Look.” He shifted his eyes down, then led Henry with him as he drew close to the ground. “Look.” Robbie pointed and released Henry.

“Shit.” Henry dropped his tool and nearly lost his balance. He looked closely to the grounding. The copper had been severed so slightly that from a top view it would not have been seen. “It’s not grounded.”

“Nope.” Robbie let out another breath, standing and running his

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hand through his hand. "I thought you were a dead man."

"I would have been. Thanks Robbie." Henry shocked, stood to his feet.

Robbie looked down at it again. "You know, it's possible it was accidental. Weather worn. But, someone did this on purpose. It's too neat and clean."

"Who?" Henry asked.

"I don't know. But think about this. My task, my reputation. You anal tendencies, your reputation. Seeing how everyone knows how we are . . . seeing how this needed done. It leaves me to question." Robbie lifted his list from his chest pocket and held it up to Henry, pointing to breaker box task. "Which one of us two, was this meant for?"

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### Bowman, North Dakota

Many books were stacked before Elliott on top of the long table. But none caught his attention visually and physically as did the huge oversized hard book the Captain dropped before him.

A cloud of dust caused Elliott to cough. When the smoke cleared he was faced with a grinning Captain. "No." Elliott shook his head as he swept the dust from the title. "I knew it. I knew this was where you were going."

"Isn't it brilliant?" The Captain asked.

"No." Elliott was adamant. "This is not right. Why?"

"We have to stand out."

"And fighting the society won't do that?" Elliott stated. "If you need a gimmick, what about riding motorcycles instead of horses?"

"There you go with the bikers from hell again. Elliott, get out of that teenage fantasy of yours."

"Why? You haven't." Elliott said. "What is to gain by doing this? How . . . how will dressing like this make us any better fighters?"

"Don't you think the whole persona of it all will enforce a sense of patriotic pride?"

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“This is crazy.” Elliott pushed the book forward. “You want to transform everyone. Not only by the way they dress, but act as well. You . . . Captain will never be able to get these men to agree. For as good as you are. You won’t. They’ll fight. But this .. .” Elliott pointed to the books. “Is pushing it.”

A little dejected, the Captain swiped up the large dusty book. “We’ll see. We’ll let the men determine. What they decide, we do.”

Elliott nodded his agreement to that. The meeting would be the final determination.

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His combat boots clunked with a deadened sound on the gymnasium floor. Crowded and packed with everyone but the women, The Captain found his spot before them. He allowed enough room to encircle himself so he could pace. And he did. Hands behind his back, walking as he talked. Elliott was a mere couple feet from his side as he approached the men of the town.

“One meal.” The Captain said. “One meal. I can promise you fresh water, and I can promise you at least one meal a day that you do not have to scavenge, fight or search for. Rations will dictate any more. There is a lot of growth this little town can make.” The Captain spoke deeply. “But is this the place where I want to grow old? Though I’d like that, I also would like to be able to grow old and move about this land of ours. Move about without fear of running into militant soldiers. Or people turned animal. Move about without fear for my life. I know each one of you would like that as well. The forty-eight of us who envisioned this town, never once envisioned the horror that builds on the eastern side of this country. Realistically, what is happening on the east will eventually make it to the west. And with that, to us in this town. I know we as a group are far from strong enough to hit the head base of Quantico. So we have to defend and eliminate this threat, not by might. But by strategy, skill and heart. This is why I asked you here.” A few more paces and the Captain stopped. “We, the forty-eight who founded this town would like to invite you all to officially be a part of us. But I must tell

you, we are structuring. We all were in the United States Service. And we decided, that regiment of living is what we want to reinstate amongst us. It breeds a sense of organization along with strength and camaraderie. Yes, yes,” The Captain nodded his head. “I’m slipping back into that mode I was in years before the plague. The recruiter. And I wish to recruit you. But this is different. In the old world I recruited for numbers. Yes I recruited men who wanted nothing but to earn a paycheck in their lives . . . Like Elliott Ryder.” The Captain pointed to Elliott.

Elliott cringed.

“Men who wanted to work for their father and spend the rest of their life in Cleveland . . . Like Elliott Ryder. Men who dreamed of being rock stars, like . . . Elliott Ryder. However these same young men who joined the ranks of the United States service, became through the service, the type of man who could stand proud and the type of man who would, in a heartbeat, give up his life for you . . . like . . . Elliott Ryder.”

Elliott lowered his head with a slight shake to it.

“But we want to do it different.” The Captain stated. “I would like to take it one step further. I have a plan in this structuring of a new military power. I would like us to stick out. Be different then society soldiers or anything else out there. Different in the way we dress, walk, act, think, talk and mostly the way we fight. The skill I want us to acquire will be of skills that the society will not know how to defend. Skills long forgotten. Why do I want this difference? Knowing why goes hand in hand with the purpose for doing so. History. History continues. It will be documented somewhere, some how. I want when a page is turned in the history books. Immediately upon sight and without hesitation, I want that reader of history to look at our picture and know exactly who we were. Who I want us to be are not a band of survivors. Not the great defectors, but rather the great defenders. The freedom Fighters.” Soft went the Captain’s voice. “We gentlemen may not be fortunate enough to have a child in our lifetime. But does that mean we can not fight for the child of the future? Children should be born free. Born of parents who loved and planned for them. Not of shelled out women who’s wombs are the value. I want these children to be able to open the history books, able to walk in the sun, across this great nation of ours, do all this

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because, *we* were the ones who fought for that. When we joined the service. We pledged to fight for three things. Our God, our families and our country. I know there is a God. We're alive. And we no longer have our families . . . all that is left to fight for is our country, and by God, it is time to defend it, protect it and take it back."

Elliott realized before hearing any crowd response what the general consensus, undisputed and unanimous vote would be on the Captain's plan. And right then and there, Elliott knew the Captain could have told the group of men they would be fighting in pink tutus and they would wear them. And wear them with pride. The Captain did what he always did. He motivated and moved. And the Captain didn't just get them, he had them.

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Beginnings, Montana

Deep breaths buried themselves within the palms of Joe's hands, folded and brought to his face. His hand covered his nose as he sat on the couch only wanting to go to bed.

"And you know he's doing this avoidance on purpose." Robbie gripped as he paced fast back and forth before Joe. "I told him to come here. But no. He has to wait until you're all ready for bed." Robbie stopped. "So he radioed he's on his way. Where is he?"

"This can't wait until morning?" Joe asked.

Before Robbie could answer, the double knock on the door was Henry's announcement.

"You wanted to see . . ." Henry stopped and shut the door. "Oh. Oh, I get it. Tattle tale."

"It's not being a tattle tale, Asshole." Robbie said with edge. "I'm going to the leader of the community."

"I was willing to wait with my judgement call." Henry waved his hand about. "But no, you had to get a jump . . . nice jammies, Joe . . . on your stupid circuit breaker box theory."

"My stupid theory. No, Henry. Yours."

"You cut in front of me to tell him."

"I live with him." Robbie yelled. "Why shouldn't I tell him you were trying to kill me."

"Me?! No, Robbie *you* were trying to kill *me*."

Joe whistled shrill and stood up. "Hold it. This is over the breaker box?" Joe looked at both of them. "I thought you two were going to work on this together to figure out if it was rigged, and if so, who."

"We did." Henry nodded. "And I figured out, Robbie was trying to kill me."

Robbie laughed in a scoff. "That was my job, why would I rig it for myself."

"Boys." Joe grumbled an intrusion.

"Because you knew if you didn't do it, I would."

"Oh, bullshit" Robbie stated strong. "You were the one who rigged that grounding."

"Boys." Joe tried again.

"Right." Arrogantly Henry defended. "If I was trying to kill you, why would I be the one touching the box!"

"Because you have time machine memory loss! You forgot you were trying to kill me!"

"If I was trying to kill you." Henry snapped. "Trust me, that pleasurable thing, I wouldn't forget. And . . . I wouldn't have failed."

"Oh listen to you trying . . ."

"Boys!" Joe screamed nearly popping a vein. "Enough! This has got to be the lamest goddamn argument I have ever heard."

"But, Dad." Robbie intervened. "You have to listen to me, Henry did it. He . . ."

"Robbie enough. I don't want to hear it."

"No." Robbie shook his head. "At the meeting he threatened me. And it's bullshit you won't even consider what I'm saying."

"Robert." Joe said stern. "Go to your room."

"What?" Robbie yelled with a laugh. "I'm thirty-two years old. You can't send me to my room, what do you think . . ."

"Robert! My house, my rules." Joe screamed his loudest. "Go to

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your goddamn room.”

“Fine.” Robbie stomped over to the steps. “Thirty-two years old. I don’t want to live at home. I asked to have my own place.” He complained marching up the steps loudly. “But no. What’s next dad. Are you grounding me. Go to my room.” Robbie’s voice faded along with his heavy footsteps. “Fuck!”

Joe heard the all too familiar sound of the childish slamming of the door. He looked with irritation to a snickering Henry. “You think that’s funny?”

Henry wiped the smile from his face. “Um, no Joe. Not at all. Now . . . can we discuss the fact that your son tried to kill me.”

“Out.” Joe pointed to the door. “Get out of my house.”

“But Joe . . .”

“Out!” In a frightening manner, Joe demanded. “Out! Out! Out!”

Henry ran.

When the door slammed, Joe shook his head. “Act like children they wonder why I treat them like children. Morons.” Trying not to think too much more about it, Joe shut off the light, adjusted his favorite checkered pajama bottoms and went to bed.

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Ellen had just turned down the first fold of the bed when she lifted her head to the odd darkness that suddenly happened upon the room. The lights had gone out. No sooner did that happen and she heard the strike of a flame. The slight orange color filled the room and she turned around.

“Tucked in and all asleep.” Frank lit another candle setting them both on the dresser. “Doors locked.” From under his arm he pulled a bottle of wine and showed Ellen. “Welcome home.”

“Frank.” She whispered. “Do you think that this is a good idea?” She walked over to him.

“No.” He poured her some wine and handed her the glass. “I think it’s a great idea. Drink up. But not too much, it’s Henry’s wine. You

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know how you get.”

Ellen giggled, sipped, then set down the glass. She watched Frank down his. “Frank, I mean with you just getting better.”

“I’m fine.” After putting down his glass, Frank stepped to Ellen. “I’m so nervous about tonight. I know we’ve been together more times than we could ever count. But . . . I’m nervous. This is our reunion.”

Ellen swallowed. “Frank . . .”

Frank saw something in her eyes. “What?” He whispered. “El? What is it? Please don’t tell me our last time ruined it forever. I swear I’m sorry for that. I swear.” There was a certain amount of hurt in Frank’s voice. “I love you. I just want this to be right. I want us to be right. But if you don’t want to . . .”

“No.” Ellen shook her head and moved against. “No. I’m just . . . I just nervous too.” wrapping her arms around Frank’s neck, Ellen kissed him. “But this is the last time I’ll be nervous about being with you. Because I don’t think there’s anything that can break us up now. Nothing.” Forgoing anything and everything in her that was taking away her moment with Frank, in her mind Ellen rekindle the promise she made to make her marriage work. And with that, she began the intimate steps with Frank in their prelude to their physical reunion.

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They were visions and thoughts Dean had to put out of his mind. Ellen and Frank. But he knew everything he was feeling, he had to put aside. Dean had to resign himself to the fact that things were different. And work was the only thing that would help. Dean wanted to put his mind somewhere else.

Racks of blood needed separated and readied for testing, and getting a jump on that would be just the prescription he would order himself. Turning on the light in the dark lab, Dean made his way to the fridge to retrieve the first rack of blood. He pulled out the clipboard to keep track that way. But he wanted to have his tape recorder handy as well.

Walking to his desk, Dean opened the top drawer, the recorder

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laid on top. Two steps from the desk Dean, stopped. “Shit. This tape is full.” He ejected that tape, tossed it in the box that held other dictation tapes needing to be logged in the computer and went back to his desk. The extra tapes weren’t in the third drawer so he had to rummage. And rummaging brought him to the last drawer of his desk. Bending down and opening it, Dean saw the file. Curiously he lifted it and read the name ‘Joseph Anthony Slagel’. He remembered having Joey’s chart out, but couldn’t believe he never returned it to the files. Vowing to do so first thing in the morning, Dean set the folder on top of the desk so as not to forget. But just as Dean dropped the file, his memory kicked in. He remembered exactly the reason he had retrieved that chart. He had questioned in his mind so adamantly about the accuracy of Joey’s paternity test, that he kept pulling it out and reviewing those results. Short of running the tests all over with, Dean knew there was nothing he could do but accept the results documented.

Mid return to the blood on the counter, Dean stopped. His eyes shifted from the folder to the rack of blood. He stayed there in thought, shaking his head at what he contemplated. How wrong it would be. What would be the point? Were the original results really wrong? And Joey’s blood sample *was* to be used for virus work.

After debating, really debating on what to do, Dean made his decision. A tiny bit of blood would be worth a whole lifetime’s peace of mind. And with that, Dean went to the rack and sought out Joey’s blood.

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Bowman, North Dakota

It had been so long since the Captain had seen Elliott, he began to grow concerned. Not long after the meeting, Elliott stated his task of tuning the piano for Fr. O’Brien and took off. Hours and hours had passed, no clinks and clanks of ivories were heard. Where was Elliott?

Following the myth of Elvis path of ‘I saw him there’, The Captain investigated. And, though drunk, Fr. O’Brien was correct. Elliott was in the church.

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It was dark with the exception of the few lit candles, but the Captain saw Elliott sitting in the first pew. Walking quietly, the Captain made his way up the aisle. Then in old world, Catholic practice that felt so good to him to have back, The Captain genuflected, blessed himself and slid into the pew.

He took the same sitting position as Elliott, hands folded, leaning forward. "You know." The Captain whispered. "If I didn't know you better, I'd swear you were avoiding me."

The swallow was so hard, the 'gulp' of it was heard. Turning to look at the Captain, Elliott's facial muscles twitched. "I . . . I am."

At first the Captain thought Elliott was joking, then he saw by his eyes, he wasn't. "Why?"

"Because for the first time . . ." Elliott stared down to his own folded hands. "For the first time ever I feel really bad about disagreeing with you."

"Disagreeing?" The Captain shook his head, so lost. "Disagreeing about what?"

"Everything. Every little thing."

"I don't understand."

"Your new army." Elliott looked up. "Reestablishing of ranking, saluting, military codes we gave up so many years ago. You don't want to just regiment their lives, you want to instill a whole new way of life."

The Captain still wasn't picking up the seriousness in Elliott's argument. "Elliott, please. I explained to you. It is needed. They all agreed. A change in them. A pride in what they become will in turn play a big role in what and why they fight. If they feel the part, live the part, they will be the part." The Captain lingered in Elliott's tense silence. "Elliott?"

Elliott shook his head.

"Elliott. If you have something to say. Say it. Speak your mind."

"Fine." Elliott paused heavily. "You have nearly two hundred men out there willing to run around in uniforms that may be enhanced some, but still are something from the civil war or calvary. You want them to carry themselves a certain way. Even speak a certain way. My God, Captain, do you realize how ludicrous it sounded when they applauded the concept of

attending class for that. Walk, talk, act the part. The part? You don't just want them to wear the uniforms, you want them to be the men who *used* to wear those uniforms. To fight the same fight. Well it isn't the same fight." Elliott argued with passion. "It isn't. These men are going up against savage armies. And these men will go up against armies well equipped with modern weapons. Weapons that will demolish them. And how do you want them to fight? Minimal firing power, the raise of the mighty sword and with the charge of the bugle, sail in like heroes on horseback? It's insane." Exhaling an emotional chuckle Elliott sat back.

"My God." The Captain gasped "Disagreeing with me is an understatement. You've been swimming in these thoughts all day."

Elliott nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for what you feel. Don't. Tell me what can I do?"

Nervously Elliott looked at the Captain. "Just know, you have been my best friend for a really long time. I have stood beside you through every good and half baked idea you had. I was there. I would like very much to lend a hand in any way I can but . . . but, Captain." Elliott's voice dropped to a whisper. "If you were merely wanting to secure a section of land, protect it, keep it safe and make it free, then I would fight your fight. But you want to free and protect the entire United States of America. To me that isn't just an impossible fight, it is . . . it is impossible. And I can't . . . I can't with a clear heart and mind, fight that fight with you."

The Captain's heart sunk so hard he swore he felt it hit the pits of his being. With a tightly closed mouth and a nod, the Captain stood. "I . . . I understand." Laying a hand to Elliott's shoulder, and without looking at him, he gave a simple squeeze. "I understand." Eyes ahead, the Captain slipped from the pew, genuflected before the alter, turned in a pivot and silently walked from the church.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

December 14

Beginnings, Montana

“Ow. Ow. Easy, Andrea.” Joe griped while feeling the strong tug of his arm as Andrea moved swiftly. “What. Ouch. You’re pinching me.” He pulled his arm away stopping in front of distribution. “Now do you care to tell me what is wrong.”

“Joe.” Andrea sadly gasped out. Then she said no more.

From Andrea to his watch, Joe looked. He waited but not for long. “For crying out loud. Get it over with.”

“Fine.” The word peeped from her. “Your son.”

“Why do people do that.” Joe tossed his hands up. “Which son. I have two.”

Through her nostril Andrea breathed, the closing her eyes and emotionally dramatic, she reached behind her pulled from her back pocket a rolled up magazine and slapped it into Joe’s chest.

Joe looked at it. “Robbie.” He shook his head at the pornography. “What he reads I can’t help. Sorry.”

“No.” Andrea shook his head. “You’re right there. But my boy found that when he was emptying trash in containment.”

“Oh, Boy.” Joe rubbed his eyes.

“And Joe.” Andrea’s voice deepened. “He was traumatized. Denny told me he asked Robbie if he could look. Robbie said sure and now . . . my boy is having nightmares.”

“Andrea, he isn’t having nightmares.”

“He is Joe. He is.” She argued. “I need . . . I need you to have . . . the talk.” She whispered. “I can’t do it. You had four boys.”

Joe looked again to the magazine then back up to Andrea. “I’ll have the talk with Denny. Tell him to be at my office in an hour, and Josh too, Might as well only get one headache out of it.”

“Thank you Joe.” Andrea kissed him on the cheek. “And that?”

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"I'll handle this." Joe held the up magazine then smiled. "As a matter of fact. Excuse me Andrea." With a whap to his hand, focused in a different direction, Joe began to walk. "Robert." He called out stern.

Robbie stopped cold. "Shit." He debated on running, he didn't know why. But from years of experience, being called Robert usually didn't foretell of something good with his father.

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"Oh, he returns." Henry said with sarcasm as he saw Robbie round the end of the utility building.

"Shut up, Henry." Robbie snapped. "Do you have the new box and grounding?"

"Yes. I'm not letting you touch it though. You'll try to kill me again."

"I didn't try to kill you, prick."

"Oh, that's right." Henry held up a finger. "I tried to kill you. But, because of my time machine memory loss I forgot I rigged the box."

"Thank you." Robbie said. "Thank you for the confession."

"Gentlemen." Frank intruded. "We aren't arguing about this again, are we?" He looked at both of them. "Instead of wasting so much time on each other. How about trying to find out who really did it." Feeling like a peacekeeper, but knowing it would last, Frank took a step and stopped. "Oh, yeah. Robbie. Wanna grab a drink tonight at the hall?"

"Can't Frank. Get this. I'm grounded." Robbie gave a crossed look to Henry who laughed.

Frank had a slight chuckle to him. "You're grounded. As in punished to the house."

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "Dad grounded me. Can you believe that."

"Oh, my god." Frank gasped. "What did you do?"

"That's not the point Frank." Robbie said.

"Of?" Frank asked.

"Forget it."

“All right. I’ll be in Dad’s office.” Frank pointed backwards, took a few steps then turned and headed to Joe’s office.

“Man.” Robbie shook his head. “I love my brother, but can he be dumb or what at times.”

“Uh, Robbie.” Henry said snidely. “You’re talking about Frank being dumb. You’re in your thirties and still allowing your father to ground you.”

“Ha-ha-ha, asshole.” Robbie grabbed some gear from Henry. “Tell me if my father was your father, you’d argue wit him?”

After Robbie walked off, taking a second to think about Joe, Henry slowly nodded. “He has a point.”

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There was something about Joe’s desk that Frank just loved. Sitting back in the worn out chair Joe had searched the ravished world for. A chair that rocked back with ease. A feeling of power. Frank would enjoy it until he heard the door open, then he’d jump up and pretend he never sat behind that desk. Especially since he suspected his father was on a war path of sorts. He himself didn’t want to end up grounded like Robbie.

Frank heard it, the turn of the door, he sprang up and stopped when he saw Denny and Josh walk in. Wanting to appear powerful to the teenagers, Frank sat back down. “Hey, guys. What’s up.”

“Nothing.” Denny spoke as he pulled up a chair.

“Nothing.” Josh repeated as he sat down next to Denny. Both boys sat up straight, tapping their hands on their knees.

Frank stared at them for a while, they just stared back. “Why are you here?”

Denny looked at Josh, then Frank. “To see Joe. My mom sent us up. This is really dumb. My mom said Joe is going to talk to us about insects and birds. Something like that. Right Josh?”

“Right.” Josh nodded. “She said the birds and the bees. She said we need to know.”

“Oh.” Frank leaned back with a grin. “You guys don’t want my

Dad to talk to you about that stuff. He has the old guy point of view. I can talk to you. I'm literary you know. I'm writing a novel."

"Oh, wow." Denny looked amazed. "An honest to goodness book? You must be smart."

A little bashful look crossed Frank face as he winked and tilted his head. "Well. You know. So . . ." He leaned back. "The talk. How about I give it to you in a nut shell." Frank pulled his chair closer. "Plain, simple and to the point. Let's see." Thinking, he ran his hand over his goatee. "All right, listen carefully. Things are gonna start to happen to you. Maybe they already did, I don't know."

"Things?" Denny asked. "Like bad things? You mean like when we broke the cover to the box on the bakery building."

"No!" Frank waved his hand about. "Your body. Things will happen to your body. Changes." He saw they weren't getting his point. "Um . . . *big* changes. Uh . . ." Frank snapped his fingers. "You'll grow. There will be times when parts of your body will grow and change. Get it?" He motioned his eyes downward.

Both at the same time, Denny and Josh looked at the floor under Joe's desk.

Denny lifted his head up. "I don't get it."

"All right." Frank took a breath. "Have you noticed that your *body* is different now than it was, say three years ago?"

Denny's mouth widened. "Oh yeah. Mine is. Is yours Josh?"

"Oh yeah. Go on Dad, we know what you mean now."

"Good, good. We're on the same wave length. O.K. Now because of these changes, you are going to start to get these feelings, these . . . symptoms so to speak of those changes."

Denny looked petrified. "Are we going to get sick? I don't want to get sick."

"No." Frank stopped him, trying not to laugh. "These feeling aren't all that bad, you just won't know why you get them. They happen at your age because your getting older. And . . . you might have them when you're growing." Frank winked.

Josh raised his hand. "What do these feelings feel like?"

“Um . . . give me a minute. They can be warm and tingling. Yeah, good word. Tingling.”

Denny’s eyes half closed and he nodded to Josh. “Tingling. I had that feeling once.”

“Me too.” Josh said. “When I slept on my arm wrong. Dad, what do we do about these feelings, will they bother us?”

“Oh yeah. And in this society gentlemen there’s not a whole lot you can do. Tough break, that’s the way it is. It’s tough to be a guy.” Frank leaned further into them. “But I’ll give you some old fashion advice. Don’t touch yourself too much or you’ll go blind. Look at Dean, that’s why he has to wear glasses.” Frank sat back in his chair.

Denny looked amazed. “Wow Frank, thanks.”

“Sure no problem.” Frank nodded. “That’s about all there is to tell you guys. Anymore would be sort of ridiculous.”

Josh stood up first. “We don’t need to know anymore. That helped.”

Denny stood also. “But what did it have to do with insects and such?”

Frank shrugged. “I never could figure that one out myself. Someone told me once it has to do with the pollen on the flowers.”

Denny opened his mouth with a nod. “I get it. Let’s go Josh, we’ll tell my mom we are more educated.”

“Yeah, and let’s tell her about the pollen on the flowers thing.” Josh opened the door. “She’ll be impressed with us.”

“Good idea.” Denny pulled the door closed and saw Joe approaching. “Hey Mr. Slagel.”

“Boys.” Joe tossed his cigarette. “I thought we were having a little talk.”

Josh looked back at the door. “We don’t need to. My Dad just told us about it. Come on Denny.”

Stunned, Joe watched the darting of teenagers then looked at his office door. “Frank?” He opened it up and saw Frank seated at the desk. “Christ, what did you tell them?”



Ellen walked slow in the clinic lab holding her clipboard announcing her results to an uninterested audience of one . . . Dean. “Definitely signs of the virus in the blood injected rabbit. Yeah definitely. Dean, I’m being Rain man.” No reaction, Ellen moved on. “The intimate rabbits are exhibiting too. Along with the two that shared water and food. But they both came in at three days. Now the ones . . .”

“Amazing.” Dean spoke softly reading from a folder.

“He speaks!” Ellen faced him. “What? These results?”

“No.” His voice was monotone. “Johnny didn’t get sick.”

“Dean?” Ellen set down the clipboard. “Were you listening to a word I said? I was reading the results form up at the mobile.”

“Yes.” Dean answer, stood and walked to a microscope.

“Yes, what? You were listening.”

“Yes, Ellen.” Dean said as if he were busy.

“Then what did I say? Dean . . . Dean . . .” Ellen paced behind him. “What did I say? Dean? If you were listening tell me . . .”

“Ellen!” He snapped. “I’m not paying these stupid games. All right. No. No I wasn’t listening. All right.”

Hostile, Ellen slammed her hand on the counter. “I don’t know what your problem is . . . yes, I do. No, I think do. I won’t say just incase it’s not it. I don’t want . . .”

“Ellen.” Again Dean interrupted with a jolting voice. “Quit talking in circles.”

It was with glaring eyes that Ellen stared at Dean, then without saying anything further, she stormed from the lab. Her quick pace kept up taking her straight out of the clinic. She didn’t want to go far, she only wanted to calm, down. Pacing instead of talking in circles, Ellen was surprised when she heard the voice from behind.

“Ellen.” He stepped to in front of her, his eyes peering forth.

“Reverend Thomas, hi.” She folded her arms.

“Just the person I hoped to see.”

“Oh that is nice, thank you. But I’m getting back to work. I just

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wanted to get some air.”

“Bad air.” Moses said coldly.

“Bad air, good air. It depends what kind of weather you like, don’t you think? But I must get back.”

“Ellen.” He stopped her from walking and held her arm. “I will pray for you on my retreat. When I get back, we will meet.”

Ellen giggled. “You made a rhyme. Did you do that on purpose?”

After a slam of his hand in frustration, a grab of his jacket, Dean walked out into the hall to follow Ellen. Through the glass doors he could see Ellen talking to Rev. Thomas, or Moses as Dean knew him by. Running full speed, Dean flew out side and grabbed Ellen. “Stay away from her!” He demanded.

Ellen spun her head to Dean. “My God, are you being rude. Reverend Thomas came to say goodbye and tell me he was going to pray for me. Dean, apologize.”

“No.” Dean stared at Moses.

Moses smiled with arrogance and stepped back. He faced Ellen. “We will meet when I get back. I’ll let you know what the Lord says about you.”

“Thanks.” Ellen smiled.

Dean pulled Ellen away. “You . . .” He pointed to Moses. “Will stay away from her. Let’s go El.” He began to tug her, against her will, inside.

“Dean.” Ellen gasped. “What is wrong with . . .” She felt the push of her body into the clinic. “Dean.” She stopped, and refused to go anymore. “Something is up with you. What? You have been quiet all morning. What is it? Is it me and Frank.”

Dean’s eyes closed painfully. “No.”

“Then what?” She stepped closer whispering. “What?”

“I guess, now I as good a time as any. Come on.” Leading the way, Dean went back into the clinic lab. Once Ellen was inside, Dean took a deep breath and shut the door. “Before I tell you, I have to say something to you.” He laid his hands on her shoulders. “El, El I love you. I would never in

a million years intentionally hurt you.”

“Dean.” Ellen gave a nervous laugh. “You act like you did something terrible to me. What did you do? It can’t be that bad.”

“Oh it is.” Blowing slowly, Dean leaned against his desk. “El, the other night I was thinking about Joey. When I . . . I look at him, really looked at him, touched his tiny face all I see is Frank.” Dean clenched his fist. “I couldn’t help it. It was eating at me. So I took some blood from his virus sample and I ran a blood test. Joey, Joey is a great kid El. He really is a great kid. But . . . he’s not *my* kid. He’s Frank’s.”

Ellen’s head dropped forward. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Neither do I.” Dean crossed his arms tightly. “I’m sorry might work. I am, I am really sorry. I’ve been kicking myself over this. I can’t believe it. Because of the time screw up, there are some things we are not aware of. Joey is one of them. But still, it’s no excuse. I was wrong, really wrong. I can’t believe I hurt you like that and I can’t tell you how sorry I am for . . .”

“Oh my God.” Ellen lifted her head to look at him. “You’re blaming yourself.”

“Yes, I’m blaming myself. I’m the only one who could have done this.”

“No Dean you aren’t.”

Dean tilted his head with a confused look. “Andrea did this?”

“No, Andrea was an innocent pawn.” Ellen sadly shook her head. “I am someone who could have done this. I *am* the one who did this.”

Dean nearly fell backwards into the desk. “El, how did you do it?”

Ellen took a deep breath and swallowed. “You and Frank were at each other’s throats over Joey’s paternity. I was so worried. The day that Andrea took the blood from him, the moment she took it, Robbie . . . Robbie distracted her and I switched it with a sample of Billy’s blood.”

“Robbie? Robbie was in on this too? How could he do that to his brother? Oh my God.” Dean covered his face. “How could you do this El? How could you and he do something like this? Frank has to know.”

“No.”

“El.” Dean moved to the door. “Frank needs to know Joey is his kid. I am not holding off another second telling him that. It’s wrong.”

“No Dean, don’t tell him.” Ellen grabbed on to him. “Let it go. Just let it go. It’s been going on for three years now, forget about it. You’ve been raising him, you’ve been loving him.”

“And I still will. But Frank will know he is his kid.” Dean reached for the door.

“Then are you prepared to tell him Brian is yours?”

“What?” Dean faced her. “He doesn’t need to know that.”

“Double standards Dean? If you tell Frank that Joey is his kid and make me deal with those consequences, then you will deal with them as well. I will tell him Brian is yours.”

“Don’t!” Dean held his hand outward, his face and voice outraged. “Don’t you dare blackmail me on this one. Don’t you dare do that to cover your own ass! What you did was wrong! Are you afraid that he’ll find out that you’ve been lying?!”

“Not half as afraid as I am that he will hate me forever. Don’t Dean.” Ellen’s breathing became heavier. She fought the emotional tears that crept up on her.

“He deserves to know Ellen.” Again Dean tried for the door.

“You preach to me on what I did was wrong. You were wrong too with Brian. Just as wrong.”

Worse than before, Dean faced her. “What happened with Brian, what we did was not out of malice. It wasn’t out of any deception. Brian was conceived for good reasons. He was conceived for Frank, to call Frank Daddy, to grown up as Frank’s son. He is Frank’s son! Joey, what you did to Joey was intentionally, and morally wrong! Unlike with Brian, you covered his paternity for all the wrong reasons.”

“No Dean! For all the right reasons.” Ellen’s hand shook as she reached out. Her voice quivered. “I did what I did out of love for you. I didn’t want to hurt you anymore. I swear to you on my life that’s why I did it. Please Dean. Please don’t tell him. Don’t. Please.”

Dean removed her grip from him. “I’m sorry Ellen, he has to know. I’ll handle how. But he has to know.” In a final attempt he reached for

the door and walked out.

“Dean!” Ellen stood in the archway watching him walk away. She flung her head back and let out a silent emotional gasp. She just wanted out of the lab, go somewhere. Going out of the clinic was not an option. Not with Dean looking for Frank.

Slowly Ellen walked from the lab, arms folded tight to her while her head hung low. Her footsteps scuffed against the floor in her stride. Not a moment after she turned the first bend it blasted her back as if someone had shoved. Her movements stopped and Ellen backed into the wall when she heard Frank’s voice in the clinic.

“This better be good, Dean. I wanted to sneak in my house and work on my novel.”

Ellen closed her eyes tight. Her insides trembled with such a vibration she thought they would crumble inside. She stayed silently hid against that wall until she heard Frank’s voice fade and a door closed. She peeked around the bend and then Ellen ran as fast as she could from the clinic. She had to find Robbie.

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With a closed mouth and hands on his hips, Frank looked upon Dean. “You know, if you didn’t have such a serious look on your face, I wouldn’t be standing here waiting for you to talk to me. What is it?”

“Frank.” Dean leaned to the counter, gripping the edges firmly. “First let me start by saying, that you and I agree on one thing. We agree that all four kids, they’re the best. All of them. We both love them. I love Brian, Frank. I love him like he’s, like he’s my own. I’ve . . . I’ve been part of his life since he was born.” Dean tilted his head with his eyes closed. “I want to keep it that way. Even though you and Ellen are back, I’d still like to see Brian just as much.”

“Dean, don’t you think that’s asking a . . .”

“It’s important, Frank. It really is. I just wanted to let you know that.” Dean stood up straight and looked at Frank. “The other day I ran a test on Joey. A blood test.” Dean pushed Joey’s folder to Frank. “Take a look,

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third page.”

Frank opened the folder than shut it. “I don’t know what this says. You tell me.”

“It says . . . It says, Joey is not my kid Frank. He’s yours.”

Frank flung open the folder. “It says that?”

Dean nodded.

With a wide grin, Frank nodded. “Oh, yeah. Who was right. Ha!” he pointed to Dean then hit him with the folder. “I told you! Ha! He’s too demented not to be my kid. The question is, did Andrea do this on purpose.”

“I don’t think she did it at all. See . . .” Dean cleared his throat. “Keep in mind we changed time. You and I, weren’t in that time frame. The one I think did it . . . was me.”

“Fuckin figures, don’t it?” Frank shook his head with a grin. “And *that* little man probably thought he could fool me.”

“Frank?” Dean snickered. “*That* Dean did. For three years.”

“Yeah, but what happened as soon as *I* stepped into this time frame. I knew. See. I’m literary.”

“I’m glad you’re not mad at me.” Dean said.

“If you hadn’t changed time with me . . . yeah. I would be, because that meant you knew and you’ve been lying. But you don’t.” Frank tossed his hands up. “If it were Andrea, I’d be pissed. But what do we do, Dean? Joey’s three. He calls you Dad. He’s my kid.”

“I know. And I thought about that.” Dean took a breath. “I say we wait until he’s old enough to understand, then we tell him. But in the meantime, there’s no reason he can’t call you ‘Dad’ too. I mean, I think we should approach the rasing of all four kids as an understanding. They could *all*, all of them, call us both Dad.”

“I would like Alex and Billy to call me that. I really would.” Frank grinned. “Yeah, this can work. We can do this Dean.”

“We have been doing it Frank. For a really long time, we just failed to see it.” Dean caught through the corner of his eye, Ellen and Robbie standing in the door. He fumbled some in his turn to look at them. They both looked worried. “El, Robbie.”

Frank stepped forward. “El, check this out. Dean, he did blood

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tests. He just told me that Joey . . .”

“Frank.” Robbie swallowed, holding his hand up. “Before you say anything, let me explain . . .”

Dean’s eyes widened. “Robbie, no I . . .”

Robbie ignored him. “I’m to blame. I convinced Ellen to switch the blood. They were married Frank. You were breaking up their marriage. If you’re going to get mad, you get mad at me.”

Dean closed his eyes and turned away, the look, the surprised look on Frank’s face told him it was too late to do anything else.

Ellen moved to him. “I’m sorry Frank, I am really sorry.”

Frank’s breathing took on huffs, his face grew red. After a fast look at Dean he daggered his glaring eyes at Robbie and Ellen. “You two . . . you two did this to me?”

Ellen immediately knew he didn’t know. She looked to Dean who just shook his head, “Frank, I . . .”

“No! Robbie, you’re my brother. My brother.” Frank tilted his head. “How could you . . . both of you. You did this to me?” Frank brought his hand up trying so hard to comprehend what he was hearing.

Ellen had to try. “Frank, just let me explain.”

“NO!” He moved from her reaching hand. “NO! There is no explanation for what you did. None! I have to get out of here.”

Robbie reached out to stop him as Frank brushed by them. “Frank, just listen to . . .”

Grabbing Robbie harshly by the shirt, Frank with all his anger slammed Robbie back into the counter. “Stay away from me.” He walked out, spun and pointed to Ellen. “And you!” Frank closed his eyes and swallowed. “You should have told me. I asked you and asked you to tell me. You . . .” Frank swung his hand down in hurt. “You should have told me.” Shaking his head Frank stormed out.

There was so much silence in the room after Frank’s entrance.

Ellen breathed heavily, trying to calm her racing heart. Burning was how it felt every breath she took. She watched Dean quietly move across the lab. “Dean.”

Dean held up his hand. “A lot . . . a lot of people are affected by

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this. And were used. Maybe . . . maybe before words get out about this in a hostile way, it should come out in an apologetic way. In other words. It's time to cut off the piper before he starts to play." With a nod of his head to Ellen and Robbie, Dean left the lab.

Turning to face each other, Ellen and Robbie knew Dean was right. It was time to face others as well.

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Everything that Joe had lifted into his arms from Ellen's desk to carry to the skills room, dropped. It dropped the moment Robbie told him. "Dear God." He gasped.

"I just . . . I just wanted you to know what was going on." Robbie spoke somberly.

"How could you do this Robbie, how? To your own brother how could you?"

"Dad please."

"No!" Joe walked over and slammed the door shut. "Don't you 'Dad please' me. Don't you do it. This is family. My family. Now what in Christ's name would posses you to do that to your brother?"

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking. I just wanted peace around here, that's all. Frank wasn't letting there be peace."

"So you took it upon yourself, you and Ellen to make things the way you wanted them to be? It was wrong."

"Yeah I know it was wrong!" Robbie spoke defensively. "And I'm facing that now. Ellen and me both. I didn't come here for a lecture. I don't need a lecture. I came here, so you'd know." Robbie walked to the door. "Dad, I really am sorry. I am. I'm sorry for doing this to our family."

"Did you tell that to your brother."

"I tried and I will. Right now he doesn't want to hear it."

"Where are you going?"

Robbie took a deep breath. "Right now, I have someone else to apologize to. There's a list of people affected by this and I fully intend to face them all." Robbie lowered his head and with a tightly closed mouth, lifted

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only his eyes to his father with a nod and walked from Ellen's office in containment.

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The open palm slap stung her cheek. It was the hardest hit Ellen had ever felt. But it wasn't the burning skin on her face that hurt. It wasn't the force behind the hit that caused her pain. It was the pain behind the hit that did it. Keeping her eyes closed and head tilted, Ellen took a breath. She turned her head slowly and faced Andrea. "I'm sorry I put you in that position."

"Sorry does not cut it. Not at all!" Andrea scolded. "You have done one too many things around here that I questioned. And this Ellen, is by far the worse." She stormed to the door. "I'm going to speak to Joe right now. I want you out of my clinic. You ethically and morally have no place in here and I want you out!" She flung open the lab door. "The sooner the better!"

Ellen laid her trembling hand to her cheek, leaning into the counter, trying to catch the emotional breaths that escaped her. Her hands shook violently as she tried to put behind her the confrontation--short and hard--with Andrea. She returned to getting her intravenous supplies ready. The same task she was performing when Andrea came in to say hi, and when Ellen decided she should know before she heard from someone else. Sniffing and closing her burning eyes, Ellen took a moment then grabbed a pair of gloves and her tray, and turned to go to work. Her heart dropped when she saw Dean.

He said nothing, he just walked in.

"Dean, I . . . I need to talk to you. I really need to talk to you." She approached him, his back stayed to her. "I know you think what I did was wrong, but . . ."

"What!?" Dean stormed in a spin to face her. "I think? No Ellen, what you did was wrong!"

"I know that Dean. I hurt you, I hurt Frank . . ."

"That's not the worst of it." Dean's jaws twitched as he clenched

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them in a vain attempt to be in control. “This is bad El, really bad. Far worse than you ever thought. And what *pisses* me off isn’t what you did to me or Frank. You robbed your son! You robbed him of knowing his father’s love and that is unforgivable!”

“He had your love Dean, he knew . . .”

“He is not my son!” He reamed outward at her. “And no matter how much I love him or loved him, it doesn’t take away from the fact he deserved to know that from Frank. How did you face yourself with this for three years?”

“Don’t do this!” Ellen charged at him as he walked to the other side of the lab. “You did the same thing with Brian. Don’t judge me.”

“Brian is not my son. Quit using that as a defense. Quit it. You keep forgetting that one was your idea too. You know what El, I’ll tell you a little something about yourself. You manipulate. You manipulate situations to make them what pleases you. You manipulate people’s lives. You can give a shit who it effects as long as you are happy. Well that is wrong! Maybe if you gave a shit once, things wouldn’t get out of hand like they are now. Maybe if you would have done what was right years ago, I wouldn’t have had to waste my time on you!”

Ellen’s mouth opened in a quiver, her eyes shut defensively against the hurt. “I’m sorry. I really am sorry.” Reaching passed him, she grabbed her tray and walked from the clinic lab.

“El.” Dean clenched his fist bringing it down to the counter hard as she walked out. Harshly he ran his fingers through his hair as he stood there getting himself back in control.

Ellen had barged into the first empty room. It was her escape. She needed to get away, and though it wasn’t the room she was supposed to go into to get blood, it was the first one she hit. Wanting to take a moment so as not to lose control, Ellen reached to set the tray on the bed. Mid extension the tray it toppled from her hand and crashed onto the floor, it’s contents spilled everywhere. “Shit.” Ellen whispered as she bent down to retrieve them. The moment she lowered herself, she gave in to her emotions and

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broke down and cried. She held on to the bed for support as her other hand covered her mouth.

“Shh.” The close presence moved to behind her body and a hand reached down and grabbed hers. “Come here.” Dean said softly.

Ellen shook her head.

“El.” Dean hovered her as he bent down to her, he wrapped his arm around her and placed his mouth close to her ear. “I never wasted a second of my life on you. Never. I was angry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Ellen’s head dropped and her body began to shake. She pulled from him, throwing the contents back in the tray.

“Come here.” He lifted her to her feet. “We’ll get through this. O.K.”

Ellen turned her body to face him. As she lifted her head to look at Dean, feeling his hand rest upon her face, she saw Joe, with Andrea walk into the room. Ellen stepped back.

Andrea wouldn’t look at her, she folded her arms leaning against the archway. “Do it Joe or I will. And I won’t be nice.”

Joe swallowed. “Ellen, I have to ask you to leave the clinic.”

It took Ellen’s breath away, she shook her head slowly. “Joe?”

The lump in Joe’s throat grew larger. “I have to ask you to get your things and leave the clinic. You aren’t to return here for any reason unless it is medical.”

Dean spun to face him. “What are you doing?”

“Joe.” Ellen rushed to him. “This is my job. My job.”

“You can work at containment full time now.” Joe stated. “It has to be done. You can’t work here anymore Ellen, at least until council reviews Andrea’s request. This is her division. I have to respect that and agree to pull you for right now. You aren’t to work with patients anymore.”

Ellen stood shocked. “But Joe, I have to work on lab stuff it’s so important . . .”

“Unless it has to do with the virus, you aren’t to be working on it. Anything that relates to the clinic, relates to Andrea and she has requested that you be removed.” Joe said what he didn’t want to say.

Andrea reached forward taking the tray from Ellen. “And that

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means now.” She waited for Ellen to move. “Now Ellen.”

Ellen, looking at Dean once more, then at Joe, ran from the clinic room.

Dean started to follow her but stopped to face off Andrea and Joe. “What is the matter with you? Both of you.”

Andrea moved to him. “What is the matter with me? What is the matter with you? If this was the old world, she not only would lose her license to nurse but she would go to jail as well. She used her knowledge, and her skills to make a situation what she wanted it to be without regards to the costs. We can’t have that. If we let her go this time, what will be next?”

“All this may be your domain, but the lab work is mine Andrea.” Dean hands and body moved as he talked. “I need her to work with me. She’s the only one who knows my work.”

“Then you will work with her somewhere else.” Andrea was cold. “I don’t want her in my clinic. She’s unfit Dean, unfit to call herself a nurse.” Andrea moved with vengeance to the door and spun back. “And sometimes I have to wonder if she’s even fit to call herself a human being.”

Joe held his hand up to Dean to stop him from saying anything further, then he himself followed Andrea down the hall. “Andrea, stop!” He waited until Andrea faced him. “Don’t you think your going a little overboard on this one? I’m not saying what she did was all right.” Andrea started to move again and Joe followed her. “I’m just saying does it truly warrant this behavior from you?”

“Is this her father talking or the leader of the community.”

“This is a person talking.” Joe spoke with agitation.

“Then I will tell this person this. This isn’t just one incident. It is a mere section in a long line of Ellen-deceit events. Think about that.” Andrea walked faster away, she stormed into her office and sent a clear message to Joe that she wanted to discuss it no more. She slammed and locked her door.

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Dean heard the slamming and the banging before he even

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reached Frank's office door. Someone had to speak to Frank, and since Dean was in the same boat--sort of--he needed to talk to Frank. He knocked and then he waited.

"What?!" The door flung open Frank stood red faced huffing.

"Can I talk to you?"

"You !" Frank backed up. "You tried to cover for her."

"And you wouldn't do the same thing?" Dean shut the door, hoping against hope that his calm manner would carry over to Frank. "You would Frank, don't deny it." He sat down.

Frank plopped down hard at his desk. He tossed his face in his hands grunting loudly. "God what has happened? Never, never did I expect this. And it wasn't just to me Dean, she did this to you too."

"I know. That's why I'm here. I thought you and I could talk about this."

Frank slid his hands down. "What's there to talk about? Joey is my kid. Ellen knew that, Ellen hid that from me. Ellen stole that from me."

"But you didn't even know Joey until a little bit ago. We have to consider that. *We* weren't here."

"Come on Dean." Frank's hand slammed on his desk. "Does it make it right? No. And what she did three years ago isn't what bothers me the most. I asked her. You asked her since time was changed. She had the chance to come clean to tell us. She chose not too. She chose to lie."

"That's Ellen Frank. You've known her long enough to know her."

"I've known her long enough not to expect this from her. Never this. This is far worse than anything she has done. It shows me more than I wanted to know about her. And I don't know if it's something I can get past."

"Frank." Dean shuffled in his chair and spoke soft. "What are you going to do?" Dean carried a disbelieving chuckle. "Break up?"

Frank shook his head. "I don't know. I just need time to think. I'll talk to her later. I just can't face her right now or my brother for that matter."

Dean stood up. "I'll leave you alone. But can I give you

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something to think about? In this world now we don't have much of a choice. Women Frank, they have us. We either deal with what they do, or we deal with life alone. Alone." Dean walked to the door. "If you really want to, you can get through this with her."

"Yeah, but should I?"

"Hating to say it." He opened the door. "Yeah. Let it go. If you need to talk . . ." He saw Frank look away not wanting to respond. "I'll leave."

Frank stared at the closed door. He leaned into his desk, once again placing his face to his hands. And Frank stayed in his office. In silence, alone and in thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Washington, DC

The dust was so thick and caked not even a good blow caused it to move. Sgt. Doyle used his index finger to clear a clean spot on the small picture frame. He looked with a slight smile to the young woman with long dark hair. “Your wife?” He asked Steward Lange.

“No.” Steward shook his head as he rummaged through the drawers of what used to be his office. “My daughter. I was divorced.” He shook his head and looked in the drawer again. “I know I wrote that combination down as a phone number.”

“You don’t remember it?” Sgt. Doyle asked.

“It’s been six years.” After an exhale, Steward closed the drawer and scratched his head. “All right. I’ll try, if not, you can shoot the lock off.” He walked across the office to his filing cabinet. Dirt settled everywhere forming little clouds as he moved. “You know this only proves my discontent with post plague movies.” Steward wave his hand about in a point to his office. “No disarray. Do destruction. Just dirt of an unused world.” He walked to a filing cabinet. “I wished I would have taken those photographs though.”

“Now’s your chance.” Sgt. Doyle lifted another of a girl. Much younger than the first. “Another daughter?”

“Same one.” Steward said. “Only had one child. All those pictures are of her.” With a grunt Steward moved out the file cabinet.

“You loved her very much. Can I ask why you opted to be cryogenically frozen in the plague then. I know I had no family.”

“Neither do I.” Steward replied. “Jessica, she um, she died in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” He bent down. “Ah, the safe. Amazing that I kept the information thinking one day I might need it.”

“And now you do.”

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“Odd. I’m a man of limited education. No leadership skills. Just a while house aid.” Steward tried unsuccessfully to open the combination. “Yet, I can chosen for the society based on the fact that I obtained the order to kill one little old man.” He tossed his hands up after another attempt. “Useless.” Dusting off his palms, Steward stood. “How did you get chosen.”

“Me?” Sgt. Doyle pulled out the revolver. “I was a Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps. Highest ranking enlisted man. Infantry Division, assault weapon training.” He walked to Steward.

“So you must have been highly decorated.” Steward saw him shake his head. “How did you get chosen for the Military train operations position.”

Sgt. Doyle did something he rarely did. Smiled. “Remember the saying it’s not what you know it’s who you know.” He checked the loaded weapon, moved steward aside and aimed. “Dr. Joanna Holmes, was my aunt. The moment I made Sgt. Maj. I was inducted.” Sgt. Doyle fired his weapon. The door to the safe popped open. “Not very secure sir.”

“No.” Steward shook his head. “But then, nothing in here wasn’t that confidential. Actually it would have been considered obsolete. How wrong we were.” Opening the door wider, Steward reached inside. An accordion folder, thick and dust free was in there. He pulled it out, opened it and peeked inside. “Looks like everything’s here.” He stood up straight. “Let’s go see the president with this.”

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## Bowman, North Dakota

The thin white streams of smoke that flowed through the refurbished chimney were masked by the grey overcast sky of Bowman. The heat generated on the insides of the structures paled in comparison to the energy generated outside.

It snowed, light and constant, the weather grew bitter, but no one noticed. There was too much buzz, too much movement and too much

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experiment over the launching day of the Captain's grand plan.

It was something the Captain hoped for but never dreamed would happen, the abundance of enthusiasm that followed in the initial preparations.

The Captain chuckled when the swaying head of the slow wayward horse hit into him. "Whoa." He grinned then looked up to the younger man riding him.

"Sorry, Captain." The man no older than nineteen spoke innocently. "I'm still learning."

"You'll get it." The Captain grinned, stepping back and giving the horse a gentle push if guidance. "Keep trying." In his turn that included a slight slide on the snow covered street, the Captain nearly bumped into Joshua Owens.

"Got those sites picked out and routed that you wanted." Joshua showed the Captain a clipboard.

He stopped in his stride to read. "Good. Men?"

"Like you suggested. Four teams. Four men. Rationed two meals a day, for a three day trip."

"Good. But lets send scouting parties to the regions. Though I would say it's safe to assume with the weather that the Indian wanna-be's and the society soldiers are tucked away. Let's take no chances. Send them out, scout, get back to us then we'll send out for the supplies."

"Got it." Joshua nodded and kept moving.

The Captain moved on through the men that moved about the street in what seemed to be a rush of revitalization the town. He had things to do, and he wanted to head to the house where the women lived. It had been a while since he checked in and his mood was up enough that even Grace couldn't bring him down.

"Captain." Danny Lewis called out, and trotted his way.

"Lewis." The Captain said. "You've returned. Everything went safe?"

"Perfect." Lewis said. "We were fortunate that it was untouched. No attacks. Actually it was barren."

"Make sure you tell that to Owens. He's getting scouting parties

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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picked out.”

Lewis nodded. “Sir, the supplies are here and the would be seamstresses are ready for orders.”

“Tell them I will be with them in about two hours. But start organizing their area. Get them the supplies.” The Captain started to move again. “Tell them I want them to set up for measuring every single man.” Snapping his finger in revelation, the Captain stopped and headed back to Lewis. “I’m heading over to the house of women, then I have a meeting with the men I chose for instructors. Can you handle the reigns?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” The Captain moved on.

Elliott watched.

Bustle. That was the best word Elliott could think of to describe the activity on the street. A bustle similar to the last minute holiday rush. All of the sudden the remaining work on the town needed done. And not by Captain’s order, but by the wishes of the men themselves. They just wanted to do it. The old stores were being cleaned out, set up for being used as something else. Search parties that went out at dawn for supplies were returning. Fabric, shoes, clothing. An old garbage bin was being dictated for metal storage. Metal that would be melted down. Though they hadn’t a clue how to begin making swords, they were ready to embark on the production of them.

It seemed to Elliott that with the snap of a finger, the rise of the sun, suddenly everything changed. Elliott knew the sudden motivation the men were experiencing couldn’t have been caused by the Captain’s speech. Yes, it was good. Yes the speech had *some* impact, but it wasn’t a mind blowing experience. It had to be the Captain himself. To Elliott, the Captain could be compared to the plague that wiped out the world. Everything about him was highly contagious, spreading fast and before the men knew it, they had been completely taken by him and too far gone.

Watching the Captain try to make it in his journey down a simple street block without being stopped, filled Elliott with a feeling he hadn’t has

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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since he was young . . . jealousy. Elliott couldn't recall in the whole entire time since the plague, even in a world so dead, ever feeling so isolated and alone.

The Captain made a strange face to a man called Craig. Not wanting to show a disapproval, with a 'put on' fake impressed look, the Captain held up his index finger to the civil war style cap Craig wore. "Personally . . ." The Captain nodded. "I like it. But . . . it won't work for when we fight. Perhaps we can instill that as a work look if you want." He gave a swat to Craig's arm. "Keep up the good work." The Captain turned, stopped and froze. The smile dropped from his face only briefly when Elliott stood there. "Elliott." He said his name with a smile. "How are you?"

"Good. Do you have a minute?" Elliott asked.

"Can you walk?" The Captain asked as he started to move.

"Sure." Elliott placed his hands in his pockets. "Captain, I . . . I was looking at the postings. I wasn't given an assignment. Was there a mistake?"

His pace halted, and The Captain turned to face Elliott. "No. No mistake."

"Why? I told you I would help."

"I know." The Captain said.

"You're doing this on purpose You're not giving me anything to do because you're pissed off at me." Elliott stated. "You're doing it to be a dick."

The corner of the Captain's mouth raised in a snicker. "No, my friend. I am not doing it to be . . . a dick." He chuckled. "Not at all."

"Then why are you leaving me out."

"If I recall . . ." The Captain pointed to his own temple. "You said you didn't want to do this."

"Yes. But I said I would help."

"We don't need it." The Captain saw Elliott look away. "No, listen to me. Take a look around Elliott. Look at these men. Do you see the motivation they have. It isn't because they believe one hundred percent that we will achieve this, how did you put it, impossible dream. They are doing it

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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because for the first time in six years they have direction. They aren't wandering aimlessly, living day to day, no future in sight. They know if we faced the society today we would face defeat. But they also know if we do this right. Take our time, learn, live and build it correctly, then we stand a hell of a chance of making this whole thing work. For these men, finally they have a goal. And finally they will be fighting for something else other than their day to day survival. Their fight Elliot. And as you so painfully put it . . . not yours." The Captain turned and began to walk.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Elliott called out tossing up his hands. "Stand around all day and watch."

"No." The Captain spoke as he walked backwards. "You have a job Elliott. You're the church organist. "

Elliot shook his head when the Captain again, turned with nothing more said. "Church organist." Elliott began to mumble sarcastically as he moved along. "Oh, no. He's not doing this on purpose."

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

"As you can see . . ." Steward said in explain mode, leaning over George's shoulder. "From everything I kept. It's impossible."

Documents piled up on George's desk as he reviewed them. He smiled when he lifted a tattered copy of a thick document entitled, *The Caceres Project*. "Where in the world did you get this from?"

"That is so interesting," Steward said. "It's the original planned detailed by Dr. Forrest Caceres in 1970 for the presidential committee on post apocalypse survival. Actually remember all those marine films on apocalyptic survival. Dr. Caceres was the co creator."

"This is amazing," George flipped through it.

"And you can tell, we've enhanced the original plan. His plan structured around the Garfield land with eventual panning out in, he theorized, ten years."

In awe George read it. "How many times was he at the original

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

Garfield Project.”

“Um . . .” Steward leaned into the desk and grabbed the correct document. “Constantly during construction in 1972. Then biannually with the committee until 1984 when the original Garfield projected was aborted due to the seemingly end of the cold war.”

“What made you keep all this?”

“Fascination. I don’t know. It helps now. I picked up all this information when a group that named themselves the *Caceres Society* approached the government in 1985 to purchase or lease the Garfield Project land. I was finishing my internship back then, and the documentation came across my desk. They were a underground group that had been pretty much in operation under a different name since 1949. They happened upon the Caceres plan, which was what? Surviving the apocalypse. So they adopted his name.”

“Even I didn’t know the extent of the history. Some of it, yeah.” George read as he spoke. “I was a young eager senator heading up the sub committee on population control when they approached me. I joined and not much later they invited Dr. Caceres to join. Then . . . he died. It was years before I found out the reason.”

“And the reason was . . . they trusted him.” Steward stated. “They invited him to the conference, trusted him told him everything and he freaked. At least that’s what I remembered. He threatened to go public with the information, despite the fact that it could be decades before implemented.”

George looked up. “Then he couldn’t possible know the extent of the project’s worth.”

“I would say highly unlikely.” Steward said. “But, he could very well know when all that information would be accessible and available to Beginnings.”

“What do you mean?” George asked.

“Time, dates. When it was initialized, set up.”

“So what, Who cares if . . .” George leaned back in his chair. “Shit. That goddamn time machine.”

“Our person says they can only make three more trips.”

“All it takes is one.” George swiped his hand across his face in thought. “As delightful as it would be, we can’t have Caceres killed. But . . . we can kill something else.”

“What would that be?” Steward asked.

“Any chance Beginnings has of . . . traveling to that information.” George leaned back in his chair. “Get a hold of our Beginnings person.”

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Beginnings, Montana

It was time to face the music again. Evening had fallen and Ellen couldn’t recall putting in such a long day at containment. Not that she had much work to do there, but it was the only pace for her to be. She waded through the ‘not yet’s’ given to her by Joe. But after so many subtle warnings not to venture there, Ellen had bite the bullet and to go home.

It felt quiet before she even opened the door, yet, Ellen heard voice. Male voices conversing in sorts. Glad someone was there, she opened the door and apprehensively walked in.

Frank stood up from the couch.

“Hey, Frank I . . .” Ellen’s eyes shifted to Rev. Bob who sat on the sofa. “What’s going on.”

Frank said nothing, drink in his hand, he turned and walked to the corner of the livingroom.

Rev. Bob stood slowly. “Ellen. A lot has transpired today. Revelations. Decisions have been made.”

Eyes still glued to Frank, Ellen spoke to Rev. Bob. “Decisions? Such as?”

“You and Frank have bee great friends for over half your life. Sometimes things happen that can hinder that friendship. You’ve taken steps to right a wrong. But today’s there’s been a stumble in those steps. Frank . . . he wants to just go ahead and finish the annulment process.”

Sunk.

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Ellen felt it hit her. "Finish the annulment? Frank? I just moved back in to work on this marriage. I just moved in to give it my all with you."

Frank said nothing.

"Frank." Ellen stepped to him. "Look at me." she laughed emotionally. "You can't be serious. What is it? You have Rev. Bob do you dirty work."

"No. He's here to make sure I keep my cool."

"Right. You're too much of a coward to admit you're ending this marriage for a stupid reason."

"Stupid?" Frank glared at her. "You juggled the paternity tests of my son. You . . ."

"You didn't even know that son!" Ellen screamed. "How can you end this marriage based on that!"

"I'm not!" Frank stepped close. "I am ending this marriage because I know where you're priorities lie. You'd rather deny me a child than hurt Dean by our affair. It's not the act El." Frank dropped his voice. "It's not the act at all. It was the reasoning behind it. I believe with all of my heart you and will always remain friends. Always. But we failed as a couple. We kept hurting each other and hurting each other. And despite the fact that we lived apart here recently. We were still a couple. That hung over our heads. That . . . allowed us to hurt each other. Without that. Without the marriage. We can just . . . just stop the hurt. Just be what we used to be."

"You don't want this." Ellen whispered in a mean way. "You're striking out. You're getting defensive. You're making threats Frank. Don't threaten me."

Rev. Bob intervened. "Ellen, listen. Frank is not . . ."

"Stay out of this!" Ellen blasted, "Is this what you want Frank? Is it?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "It's what has to be done."

"Fine." Ellen stormed back to the door. "But keep this in mind. There will come a time that you will change your mind. I know you Frank better than anyone. You'll want me back, and if it is the last thing I do, whether it hurts you or not, friend or not. You will never ever get be back." After flinging open the door, Ellen stormed out.

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

Frank barged toward the still swinging door.

Rev. Bob stopped him. "Let her go. Let her calm down. While she does that. You better think one more time about this."

Frank moved to the door to close it. He could see Ellen walking away, at a slow pace. And Frank just stood there watching.

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Dean didn't have a clue what exactly it was that led him to jump from his relaxing state in bed, get dress, run next for Denny to watch the kids while he found an adult who could stay longer. Maybe it was the virus notes he was reading, or the fact he kept thinking about him impending blindness. Either of those thoughts involved Ellen in someway, they could have spring boarded him to do it. But Dean wanted it to believe that it was concern.

Dean knew it would be particularly hard to find Ellen. He knew exactly where she was. A search for her wasn't out of concerned that she had wandered off, but out of concern for her mental state. The last he had spoken to her at containment she was down and dreading going home. And with every right. The last time Frank and Ellen had a blow out. It was when Frank found out about the affair. And remembering Frank's reaction, made Dean want to find Ellen. Even if it was for a minute, he just needed to see if she was all right. He needed to.

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The social hall was half filled when Ellen walked in. She looked at her watch then around for Robbie. She hoped he would be there. Wishful thinking under the premises that misery loves company. Ellen knew that news traveled fast, how fast it did, did not sink in until the moment the door closed behind her. She wasn't standing there long when John Matoose approached her.

"How can you even show your face?" John snarled the question.

Ellen closed her eyes. She was not in the mood to argue.

"Ellen? Aren't you embarrassed to show your face around here."

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No one will ever trust you again. I know I won't." He began to encircle her speaking so soft, so cold, so bitter. "If anyone else pulled the shit you did, they'd be out of here. Maybe that's what you should do. Maybe you should leave Beginnings Ellen. Do us all a favor. What a better place this would be, without a little bitch like you running around and starting trouble."

He flew, John did, as if he had wings. Three feet up and six feet through the air crashing back first into two joining tables. Robbie dove forward, leaping on him, lifting him by his collar and slamming him to the bar. But that wasn't enough. Catching John as he spun around in confusion, Robbie grabbed him by the throat, punched him in the face. He punched him once, then again and as his fist reared back again he heard Ellen scream.

"Robbie no! He's not worth it." She grabbed his arm. "He isn't worth it." She pulled at Robbie.

Robbie dropped John to the floor. "You're right." Grabbing a bottle from the bar Robbie grabbed Ellen's hand. "Let's get out of here."

Ellen brought her knees to her chest, leaning on them as she faced Robbie sitting on the floor of the garage. "It's cold."

"I know." Robbie showed her the bottle, Ellen shook her head. "I lost it on him." He took a drink.

"I hate him Robbie." She spoke with sadness. "But is there truth in what he's saying? Maybe we should leave for a while. Maybe *I* should leave."

"If you go, I go." He ran his hand down his face. "California. Let's go to California. When's the last time you saw the ocean El?"

"Six and a half years ago, with Dean." She rested her chin on her knees.

"God. And we talked about this. What would happen if anyone found out." Robbie took another drink. "I just never thought they would."

"Me either. We knew it would be bad."

"I'm sorry this is happening, El. Everything about it."

"Me too, Robbie." Ellen lowered her head further, this time placing her forehead on her knees. "Me, too." She drew silent



Bowman, North Dakota

The cigarette was rolled with old cigarette paper that was pretty much beat. But even though it barely stayed rolled, and the tobacco wasn't the best, it still tasted good to the Captain.

The smoke from the cigarette flowed out the partially open window of his home. In a chair, by the window, the Captain sat. The cool winter air mixed with occasional flakes, seeped in moving the curtains slightly along with flapping the papers in his hand.

But the Captain didn't sit before the open window out of some ludicrous desire to be cold. He sat there for the music. As if the huge hollowness of the church were a PA system of its own, it channeled out Elliott's piano playing into the night. The air of Bowman was the speaker that allowed for the songs to carry through the town.

It was just music but it was a part of Elliott. The Captain couldn't recall an evening in the entire six years since the plague and even a while before hand that he and Elliott didn't sit and talk. It became a routine. Talk, drink, talk. And it bothered the Captain that even though in the same town, there was distance between them.

The Captain couldn't say what song was playing, but he certainly knew when the music stopped. A deadness took over the night and that was the Captain's clue to get away from the window and sink into his notes as well as into his warm sofa.

Setting the papers and such aside, the Captain stood up. His hand rested upon the window preparing to lower it. Just as he went to shut it, he heard the bang of the church doors. From where he lived, The Captain could see the church, and he also saw Elliott step from it.

Elliott zipped up his jacket, and looked the Captain's way.

The Captain, not known if he were spotted, lifted his hand in a wave anyhow. Elliott's must not have seen him because he just started walking.

Seeing Elliott walk away made the Captain see what he had to

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do. Even though Elliott said things that hurt him The Captain would have to understand that was Elliott's opinion. And after a few days wait, if Elliott hadn't changed his mind and come around, the Captain would just swallow his pride. And though he may not agree, he would accept Elliott decision and even listen to the reasoning. He had too. Elliott was too good of a man, too good of a friend, for the Captain--like he just watched him do--to allow Elliott to keep walking away.

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Beginnings, Montana

"I can't believe I was so wrapped up in that microchip." Henry stated almost frantically as he walked with Dean. "When did all this go down."

"This afternoon." Dean answered. "Thanks for helping me look for her."

"It's not gonna be hard, Dean." Henry said. "She should just be . . ." Henry slowed his speech down when he saw Frank walking. "Home." He walked up to Frank. "Hey, Frank. Where's El?"

"Don't know." Frank tossed his hands up. "I'm going to the hall. I need a drink."

Dean looked at Henry. "I'll go back toward town, see what you can find out."

Henry nodded and returned to Frank.

Frank watched Dean. "He's not wasting anytime, is he?"

"You mean looking for Ellen?"

"No getting back with her."

Henry chuckled. "What are you talking about. You have the understanding with me."

"Not anymore. El and I . . . it's over." Frank stated.

"For now."

"For good."

"Right." Henry took a few steps. "This is you we're talking

about.”

“And I’m telling you Henry, no more. I’m not doing it anymore. It’s over.”

Henry paused in his walking, he saw Frank’s look. “You’re serious.” He watched Frank nod. “You can’t do that. You can’t break up with her over something she did in a past that you didn’t even experience. That is so wrong. How can you judge that fairly? How do you know what you were like?” Henry asked with an edge.

“Henry, this is only the icing on the cake. It’s coupled with everything else. We keep hurting each other. It has to stop. If it doesn’t, we’ll never even be able to face each other as friends again.”

“And if you do this Frank, you won’t be able to face each other as a couple again. Your relationship can not withstand one more break up. It can’t.”

“I know this.”

“Then why are you doing it?” Henry asked with passion.

“It has to be done. It’s over.”

Henry shook his head. “Don’t do this Frank. Don’t. Go get your drink. I have to go.” Quickly, and with no further words, Henry walked away.

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It sounded quiet, no voices came from the garage when he arrived there. Dean had gone to the social hall again, listened to the story of the fight and how Ellen left with Robbie. That was something to go on. He kept going back home in between stops, hoping she was there. She wasn’t. Finally the night guard said that he saw them go into the garage. Having that, that’s where Dean went.

A light was on, they had to still be there. Opening the door without knocking Dean walked in. He saw them facing each other, a conversation between them stopped when he was spotted “El.” He called her name, hoping she’d turn around. “El.” He walked closer. Her head was down.

“Hey, Dean.” Robbie cleared his throat then finished off the last of the bottle.

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“What’s going on?” Dean asked, still not getting acknowledgment.

“Birds of a feather flock together.” Robbie said. “Moping together I suppose.” He sniffed. “Kind of like the outcasts.”

“I see. Are you going to stay here all night, you two?” Dean watched Robbie shrug. “El? Will you even answer me.”

“What’s there to say?” Ellen lifted her head, but kept her views on Robbie. “I’ve done a lot of thinking. I can’t really face you. What me and Robbie did, we did to you too. And to make matters worse. I . . . I did it to you again, Dean. With Frank. I chose him and he kicked me out two days later.” She shrugged. “I suppose I deserved it. That along with how everyone is treating us.”

“So, after a night of locking yourself away in containment, getting into bar room brawls and hiding with Robbie, you decided what?” Dean asked. “I’m trying to figure this out. El, what are you going to do, stay in here all night. Be the black sheep of the community? Yeah, what you did was wrong. Medically and ethically wrong. But . . .” Dean squatted down to beside her. “I don’t know the circumstances. I don’t know what drove you two to extreme measures. So . . . I’m not gonna judge you. How can I? I’m just gonna stand beside you. If nothing else, but as your friend.” Dean stood up and extended his hand down to her. “Come on, El. Let’s go home. No one there judges you at all.”

Slowly her hand reached up, gripped his fingers, then as leverage, Ellen used his hand to Dean. Immediately she embraced Dean.

A kiss to her cheek then Dean slid his lips near her ear. “Let’s go. Ready?”

Ellen nodded.

Pulling back, Dean grabbed hold of Ellen’s hand.

“Uh, Dean.” Robbie called out, sloppily bringing himself to a stand. “My Dad is kind of pissed at me. Can I come home with you too.”

Dean smiled slightly, “Sure Robbie.”

“Cool.” Robbie picked up speed to catch up to them. “Dean, can you hold my hand too.” He held it out.

With a snicker, Dean shook his head and swiped Robbie’s hand

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away.

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It had to be a Beatles song Jason hummed in his mind when he pulled up to the quantum lab. The Beatles were the only band he even slightly remembered from the old world. And he didn't know why that was. He didn't really know them, and what he heard he found particularly annoying. But there he was humming one of their tunes.

Stepping from the jeep, a night of clinic rounds behind him, Jason prepared to do what he loved to do. Work on his time machine. Even if it was just to power it up with gasoline sending himself rabbits and notes, Jason enjoyed it.

Cigarette in mouth, Jason walked into the lab. On went the lab light, and down went his box of lunch. He laid his cigarette in the ashtray and went about his sequence of event. Bend down, turn on computer one. Move a step, bend down, boot up computer two. Move another step, power up the last.

Another step and anxiously preparing to sit down, Jason stopped cold. His eyes moved first and then his body spun to the final computer. The one that generated the power. He had to mispressed the button.

Chuckling at his paranoid manner, Jason bent down. He didn't even need to touch the power strip to see he had turned it on. But despite that, the screen was black.

Speechless and knowing there had to be an explanation, Jason shut everything down and tried again. Nothing. He tried once more. Still nothing. One of the most important computers in the triple computer relay process, one that was specially designed, was dead. No third computer. No power supply. No power . . . no more time trips.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

December 19

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Scheduled for release today.” Steward said walking around the board table. He dropped the folder of notes before George.

“And the quantum whatever?” George asked.

“Still out of commission. The suggestion from Hathaway to descramble the computer component sequence worked. Godrichson can’t find it.” Steward answered.

“But for how long.” George questioned.

“Remains to be seen.” Steward took his seat at the table that included Sgt. Doyle and four others. “But at least when Caceres gets out of the clinic today they can’t do a thing with what he tells them.”

Running his finger over his top lip, George leaned back. “Why was he in the clinic for so long .Was he ill. This could actually work in our favor of eliminating him.”

“No.” Steward shook his head. “Our source said . . . frightened to leave.”

“Anything on the virus?” George asked lifting sheets of paper.

“Nothing known.”

Across the table, Sgt. Doyle lifted his hand to get attention.

“Yes, Sgt. Doyle.” George said.

Sgt. Doyle stood. “It seems to me sir, this beginnings person doesn’t pull through with the whole information. Not that this person isn’t trying. But the information is unattainable.”

“No shit.” George said.

“Yes, well.” Sgt. Doyle cleared his throat. “I think it’s time to start preparing an infiltrator.”

Inquisitively George looked at Sgt. Doyle. “A brigade of sorts?” He received a shake of a head. “Then explain what you mean.”

Sgt. Doyle continued. “We may already have a spy inside, but

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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keep in mind our spy is also a Beginnings resident. I want to send an elite man in, only after proper conditioning, no one not even the men he is with will know he will defect to Beginnings. He lives amongst them, and how he gains their trusts is showing his betrayal of us. We may never need his services, but if we do, he's in. Who is going to even suspect a man who continues to betray his own side as being the biggest betrayer of them all."

"I'll give it some thought. In fact we may need to do that because . . ." George tossed the folder. "We need help on the virus. Our new flunky bio tram, who have the scientific mentality of an orderly, aren't making progression the antidote. Which means no progress, no use of the virus. We're going to have to come up with another non destructive means to get into Beginnings and get what we need. And this infiltrator could be the man. But he has to be a cut above."

"Nothing less." Sgt. Doyle assured.

"Let me know when you have someone and I'll make my final decision. Good call."

"Thank you, sir." Sgt. Doyle nodded then returned to his seat. The continuing meeting would slip to the back of his mind. He knew his plan conveyed to George was good, and Sgt. Doyle was proud. But he had one problem. An elite man. And even with the thousands of men that had passed into the society, Sgt. Doyle was near certain that not one of them was even anywhere near elite.

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Ten Miles South - Knoxville Tennessee

So frightened she ran, feeling secure her small framed body was hidden within the high weeds of the field. No sounds came from her. Unheard, unseen. She struggled to make an escape. Little did she know, her heavy breaths mixed with the frigid air forming puffs of steam that were like

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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a smoke signal to those who pursued her.

The Society.

Over her shoulder she continued to look in her charging run. The four soldiers raced behind her weapons high. She could hear the shifting of gears from the truck that was not far to her right. And the jeep to her left was just as loud.

So engrossed in her fleeing and monitoring of her chasers, that when she leaped into what she thought was a thicker brush, she leaped over the edge of a small hill. Her footing was lost, right foot over left, her body twisted, and with a buckle of her legs and a slam of her knees, the woman rolled down the twenty foot hill.

The cold ground smacked painfully against her cheek, but it wouldn't stop her determination to get away. Using her hands to bring herself up, the woman froze, when she lifted to see a pair of boots.

Her scared eyes cased up the legs of the tall society soldier. Her views met with the barrel of the shotgun he held and her head dropped. "Please." She sobbed her shoulders bouncing. "Please don't let them get me."

His short blonde hair dangled some in his blue eyes as he stared down to her. The expression on the 'out of the ordinary' handsome face was stone cold.

"Please." she begged, weakened trying to stand.

The Soldier's jaw twitched.

"Boyens!" Sgt. Hemsley's voice called in the distance. "If you see her. Stop her!"

"No." The woman cried. "Help me."

With a swing of his shotgun over his shoulder, Jess Boyens reached his hand down to the woman, helped her to her feet and stepped aside.

"Thank you." She gave a quick glance then began to run again.

Jess watched her run for her freedom, but when he turned around he knew trouble was had. The shifting of the chamber was too close to his ear. And before he knew it he felt the pressing of the cold metal to his temple. Jess Boyens didn't flinch.

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Sgt. Hemsley held the gun tight to Jess as his men joined closer. "Get her. She's not that far." He ordered to his men. "And you . . ." with a short rev back and an angry glare, Sgt. Hemsley reamed Jess in the side of the head with the revolver.

The skin tore like paper on his face, and as the blood shot out, Jess' eyes rolled and he fell face forward to the ground.

^^^

### Beginnings, Montana

*Frank J. Slagel*, his signature on the bottom of the annulment papers blared at Ellen as she leaned forward to sign them. Taking a deep breath, she brought the pen to the paper's surface. And for the last time ever, on that line next to his name, she signed, *Ellen L. Slagel*. Dropping the pen from her hand, she lifted the final paper and handed it to Reverend Bob, she then shifted her eyes to Frank who stood by him. Frank's head hung low. "I have to get out of here." Running the back of her hand across her eye, Ellen darted from Reverend Bob's home.

"El!" Frank chased her. "El wait."

Closing her eyes tightly Ellen stopped walking.

"Are you all right?"

"No Frank I'm not." She turned and faced him. "I'm not."

"I'm sorry." He brought his hand to her cheek.

"So am I." Ellen saw as he pulled away his hand. His left hand, he had taken off his ring already. She grabbed his hand. "This, this is more of a reality than signing those papers." She rubbed the spot where the ring used to be. "I guess I should do this too." She watched Frank's eyes close as she slipped her ring from her hand. "Here."

"I don't want it."

"Here!" She opened his hand and placed it in.

"El, please. We promised each other yesterday we would not be angry or bitter about this. That we were going to just . . ."

"I didn't think you would do it."

"I told you I would."

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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“I guess I just was hoping you wouldn’t be able to.” Ellen ran her hand through her hair. “I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at myself. I did this. And you’re right. We can do this Frank. We can stay close and not be married.”

“I know we can.” He hunched down some and kissed her on the cheek. “Can you please keep your ring? I’d really like you to keep them.” He grabbed her hand opening it. “Please.”

“I’ll keep the band.” She stared at the ring then placed it in her pocket. “I have to go. I have to stop by the lab.”

“The clinic?”

“No, I’ve been banned from there. The cryo-lab, Dean and I are working on things there. There’s some notes I can review while I’m working in containment. I’ll see you later.” She started to walk.

“El.” Frank trotted up to her. “Can I walk with you?”

Ellen smiled at him. “I would really like that.” She felt his leading hand rest gently on her back as they walked. And something told her at that moment, married to Frank or not, things were going to be just fine.

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Jason Godrichson pulled the door to Forrest’s room closed as he exited. He tucked his folder under his arm as he glanced up and saw an awaiting Joe. “Almost.”

“What in Christ’s name is taking him so long?” Joe asked agitated.

“Walk with me.” Jason turned Joe from facing the door and moved him down the hall some. “He is very nervous about this. As far as his health goes, he’s doing great. Though he fully understands why he is here, he’s still having a hard time with it.”

“How about the time travel issue? I know you explained that to him yesterday. Any feedback, any non-belief?”

Jason shook his head. “Took it well.”

“Speaking of time travel, how’s the . . .”

“Slowly making progress. I believe it’s my alternate power source

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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that caused the crash. I'm rebuilding my data. Shouldn't take too long."

"Good." Joe nodded. "Now for him. I have that meeting scheduled. Do you think he has information for us, or are we just kidding ourselves?"

"No, Joe I truly believe he has information for us. In fact I think it's in that briefcase he brought with him."

"How do you know?" Joe asked.

"Because the man holds it like a five year old with his teddy bear."

"Does he even know we need information from him?"

"Yes." Jason answered. "And I think that has put some pressure on him. Along with this party for him you have planned, he feels that you have far too much expectation of him. He doesn't want to let you down."

"He won't." Joe stated. "That's Dr. Forrest Caceres. Creator of this community. Christ, Jason, he's our George Washington. Unless he's a babbling idiot, he won't let us down."

Jason snickered. "A very brilliant man Joe. Very brilliant."

"When I do this meeting, am I going to need you to interpret?"

"No. He reads, writes and understands English very well. Speaking it is just a slow thing for him." Jason looked at his watch. "But I have the time to attend if you'd like."

"That might not be a bad idea. Just incase he gets lost. Plus, he likes you."

"And speaking of my admirer." Jason gave a point to behind Joe.

Smiling so friendly-like, Joe turned and faced Forrest then approached the little man who was no taller than Ellen. "Forrest. Are you ready to take on Beginnings?"

"I hoop so." Forrest tried to give a good smile clutching tight to the briefcase.

"Good." Joe laid a guiding hand on Forrest's back. "Thought I'd give you a little tour before the meeting. "This way. I'll try to keep you away from some of the louder, scarier people in town. You'll get enough of them at the meeting."

Sandwiched in a walk between Joe and Jason, Forrest moved

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slowly and with fright.

The moment they turned the bend into the main hall, Joe stopped. He looked at Jason then cringed. "Forrest. Don't be frightened."

Jenny Matoose, arms folded moved in a hostile walk to Joe. "Joe." She said with edge. "I need to speak . . ."

"Jenny." Joe interrupted. "I would like you to meet Forrest. Forrest this is Jenny Matoose. Jenny is our school mistress. She shapes these young lives. Jenny is a very well known woman in the community and liked. Just don't discuss her with my daughter."

"Ah." Forrest widened a grin at Jenny. "Jennifer."

Taken, Jenny tilted her head to the side, flipping her red hair. She clasped Forrest's hand. "Oh Dr. Caceres it is so, so great to meet you."

"Such beauty." Forrest brought her hand to his lips. "Such a beautiful woo-man to tuck on de honor of shipping young lives."

Jenny lowered her head, trying to blush. "You flatter me."

"Your part in dis new world, flutters me." Forrest smiled again at her.

Joe had enough mush. "Let's move on. Jenny, bullshit with him tonight." Joe grabbed hold of Forrest and began to walk out. He stopped when he heard the calling of his name by Jenny. "Yes Jenny, what is it. I complimented you, let me leave with the man in peace."

"No, Joe." Jenny hurried to him. "What about that problem?"

"Not now Jenny." Joe scolded.

"No, Joe now. There's a social event. Ellen . . . she wants to dance with me. Talk to her Joe, we can't have lesbians running around Beginnings. Tell her to go straight. The men won't like it."

Smacking Jason who snickered, Joe hunched. "Yeah, yeah, I'll talk to her."

"Thank you." Jenny said in relief.

Hurriedly and hoping for no more interruptions, Joe led Forrest from the clinic. The last thing he wanted was for Forrest to be thrown into a Beginnings frenzy before he even stepped foot outside. "About what Jenny said . . ." Joe tried to chuckle it off as they passed through the clinic doors. "My daughter has a sick sense of humor."

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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“When wheel I gut to meet your daughter Josef? You specked of her often when I wuss in de clinic.”

“Soon Forrest.” Joe walked with him.

“I luck forward to it. I will bet she is a very chumming woo-man like Jennifer, no?”

Ignoring Jason’s laughing, Joe sputtered some in his words, “Charming. Um, uh . . . no.”

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Probably it was something Ellen really needed. A laugh. Unsuccessfully she tried to get into the skills room, but it was locked. She could have worried, but the assured calls from Diane that they were only trying to ‘right a wrong’, made Ellen feel like they were planning some sort of annulment party for her to cheer her up.

Ear to the door, trying to hear, Ellen snickered at the shuffling and muffled voices. She felt the tap to her shoulder then looked to her right to see Oscar standing beside her. “Hey Os-Oscar.”

“El-Ellen, I have a fav-favor to ask.” The little man stuttered. “Sin-since you and F-Frank broke up. Would you li-like to g-go on a d-date with me-me?”

“Oh.” A fake smile replaced the real one. “Oh, Oscar I’d love to, really I would but I can’t. Maybe some other time. I have to go.” Hurrying into a get-a-way before he asked again, Ellen turned and saw Dean right behind her. “Hi.” She moved by him.

Dean followed, one hand in the front pocket of his baggy jeans, the other on the back of his neck. “El.” He shook his head. “You broke his heart. Sorry I wasn’t around when you got to the lab.”

“I understand. Come to my office with me?”

“Yep.” Dean walked with her. “So, how are you? Did you sign the papers?”

“Yep.”

“And did Frank?” Dean asked.

“Yep. It’s over.”

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Dean stopped walking, he smiled, he smiled big-time.

Ellen realizing he wasn't with her, looked back before she walked into her office. "I can not believe you're smiling about this."

"Sorry." He fought to look serious. "I'm heart broken." He let the smile back out when she disappeared into her office. He walked in, she was plopped in a chair, her feet extended, her eyes closed. "You're upset about this. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have . . ."

"No." She shook her head. "I have the worst tension headache right now. Plus my stomach is upset. It's been a hell of a day." She sat up some leaning forward.

"Here. Sit up." Dean walked to behind her, he moved her hair off to the side. Gently he placed his hands to her neck and with a firmness, moved his thumbs in a circular motion at the base of her skull. "How's this?"

Ellen moaned slightly closing her eyes. "Don't stop."

"I love when you say that to me."

"Dean." She smiled.

"So, besides me coming to see how you are, I came for another reason." He took a breath. "I have the kids tonight. I'd like it very much if you'd have dinner with us. I know you were coming over, but I'd like to make an evening of it. A family thing. What do you say?"

"I don't know, Dean. Seems awfully convenient you asking me when I just signed them annulment papers with Frank."

"Purely coincidental El. Purely." Dean leaned closer to her ear. "I'll give it two more weeks before it isn't."

"You're giving me a grieving period?"

"Who you?" Dean whispered. "It's not like you and he were living in wedded bliss when you broke up." He kissed her cheek. "Dinner with me tonight?"

Before Ellen answered, Frank's huge voice barreled in the room. "I don't fuckin believe it. Two hours and seventeen minutes. Two hours and seventeen minutes we're broke up and already you're hitting on her."

Dean stood up some looking back at Frank. "My God! I waited that long?"

"Ha, ha, ha." Frank walked in the room. "You could at least give

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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her some mourning time over the loss of our marriage.”

Dean snickered in sarcasm. “What do you want Frank?”

Ellen turned to look at him. “Yes Frank, why are you here?”

“I came to get lover boy and bring him to my Dad’s office. It’s that Forrest meeting. And we all know how absent minded Dean is. So I am here as his reminder.”

Dean continued rubbing Ellen’s neck. “Now Frank?”

“Dean.” Frank brought his hands to his temple. “I’m not going to speak to you while you molesting her. Now, are you coming? I’ll ride you up.”

“Yes.” Dean followed. “I’ll talk to you later El.”

Ellen nodded and slowly moved her head side to side. She chuckled when she heard Frank’s post-annulment time announcement as he buzzed him and Dean out. The Ellen stood. Headache or not, that surprise in the skills room was what she need.

Walking from her office she saw Diane. “Oh, Is it done?” Ellen asked.

Diane nodded. “Just know Ellen.” Her voice quivered. “We tried to revert it.”

Ellen’s expression dropped in confusion. Her eyes shifted totally lost. “Revert it? Revert what?”

Diane only pointed,

Realizing that no gift or party was to be had to cheer her up, Ellen anxiousness to see in the skills room turned to fear. Having to face it she walked in. The moment she stepped into the skills room, Ellen let out a blood curdling scream. She spun and flew back. Breathing heavily she stopped in the hall with a scolding face to Diane and a point backwards. Her voice graveled so deep it was as if Ellen were possessed. “Who . . .” She huffed out a breath. “Who made my dog into a man!”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Fourteen injuries.” Sgt. Hemsley slammed a folder down on a long table. His voice was hard as he spoke to Jess Boyens who sat in a chair. “Fourteen physical injuries that will prohibit her farming for one week.”

Jess kept his stare forward, the blood that had poured down his face was still there, dry and cracking. “That wasn’t my doing. She was running from what she saw.”

“You let her get away.”

“I stepped aside.” Jess kept his voice firm.

“She gave a struggle.”

“You shouldn’t have chased her.”

Authoritive, Sgt. Hemsley blasted. “And since when is it your decision?! It is not.”

“It’s wrong!” Jess blasted back making brief eye contact. “It’s wrong! Can’t you people see that?”

“You didn’t. How many times have you gathered women for farming and breeding.” Sgt. Hemsley opened the folder. “How about I refresh your memory. Thirty two captures. Our highest accredited soldier.”

“And I was just as wrong.” Jess spoke strong. “After today, after that massacre, I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“It’s your job.”

“I don’t want that job. Put me somewhere else.”

“Can’t do that.” Sgt. Hemsley walked around the chair. “It is what you do. There is no changing jobs within the society.”

Slowly Jess looked at Sgt. Hemsley. “Then I want out of the society.”

Sgt. Hemsley lifted the folder from the table. “Can’t do that either.” Saying no more, Sgt. Hemsley walked from the room, instructing the two guards to stay in the room with Jess.

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Seated behind his desk, Sgt. Doyle looked up to the knock on his office door. "Come in."

"Have a minute?" Sgt. Hemsley walked in.

"Sherman. Yes." Sgt. Doyle sat back.

"My name isn't Sherman."

"I know. It's a joke."

"I don't get it."

"Sherman Hemsley? Get it?" Sgt. Doyle gave up. "What do you need?"

"To sign these." Sgt. Hemsley dropped the folder before Sgt. Doyle. "I need your approval to move an insubordination to immediate cyborg enhancement."

"Lange gets these." Sgt. Doyle pushed the folder forward.

"Not in this case. Special subject." Sgt. Hemsley pushed the folder back. "He's a . . . what do you call them in those handbooks you wrote, Class 'A' recruit. So you see I can't let it get passed you until you acknowledge that you are surrendering his old world skills to the cyborg enhancement.."

Immediately Sgt. Doyle snatched the folder up. "Jess Boyens?"

"Yes, sir."

Sgt. Doyle opened the folder, sat back and smiled. Lifting the folder to his eye level he nodded. "Jess Boyens."

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"Jess Boyens." Sgt. Doyle dropped the folder before George. "I believe it was a sign that we talked about the infiltrator this morning. Especially since he was brought to our attention. Take a look."

George swiped up the folder. "Go on."

"Thirty-seven year old male more fit than a twenty-one year old. Look at his specifications. We found him in a small farming town in Canada. He was living there with, get this, his two brothers. And . . . his father had recently passed away. That was the first I heard of that many of one family

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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surviving the plague.”

“Yeah, well, the Slagel clan proved that even death, plague and the end of the world, can’t destroy even the most arrogant and testosterone filled families. Continue.”

“Eleven years in the Canadian Army. Highly skilled, trained, infiltration specialist. With flight time qualification. Captain Jess Boyens was part of the special forces.”

George reviewed the file. “Why is this man in the farming division if he is so highly qualified to be elsewhere? You said yourself you need men to help you train.”

“Yes, I do. I’m working on that. Jess Boyens was an early willing joiner. He was put where most needed. Training divisions weren’t fully established at that time.”

“So how did you rediscover this Mr. Boyens?” George asked.

“He wants out of farming. He nearly let a woman escape.”

“Well.” George rubbed his chin in thought. “Reprimand him then move him to training.” He handed the folder back.

“No, sir you’re missing my point.” Sgt. Doyle said. “I don’t want to move him into training. I want to prep him then move him to . . . Beginnings. This is our man.”

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## Bowman, North Dakota

If Elliott had to sing and play, “*Hail Holy Queen*” one more time he swore, to aggravate Fr. O’Brien, he was going to break out into the *Sister Act* rendition of it. Lifting his hand from the last chord, Elliott sat up some, ignoring the pain in his backside from the hard bench and peered up to Fr. O’Brien. He felt so much like that same ten year old altar boy who used to wait for the approval of Fr. David at St. Joan of Arc.

“Well?” Elliott asked.

A look of drastic debate was on Fr. O’Brien’s face, then finally he shook his head. “No. You can do better Elliott. Keep practicing.” He gave

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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a firm swat on Elliott's back, genuflected before the altar, then moved down the aisle. "Oh and Elliott. Try something else. We wouldn't want to annoy our Blessed Mother anymore by vocally souring a good song about her."

Elliott's mouth opened. Fr. O'Brien had to be joking. Vocally souring? Shaking his head and thinking for sure it was a sick ploy of the Captain's to get him to break, Elliott stood up and reached into the box of sheet music. There had to be something in there *really* annoying. He debated on the sheet music to *The Wizard of Oz*, but passed it up. Then he saw, it and Elliott smiled. There was nothing more annoying--at least in his mind--than that. Smiling at the thick, *Best of Barbara Streisand Collection*, Elliott lifted the book from the box. As he did a single folded piece of sheet music fell to the floor. With a grunt Elliott bent over and picked it up. When he saw what it was, when he grasped it in his hands, Elliott sat back down at the piano. He didn't know what it was that inspired him to play it. But he started with a single chord, simple, unlike what he had played before.

The flap of the flag brought about a huge grin to the Captain. "Don't let it touch the ground. This is our first colors." He looked to a group of four men. "Good job on this."

Young, naive and sometimes sarcastic, Craig pointed to the flag. "Why does it only have one star? It's supposed to be an American flag."

"That's correct." The Captain said. "This star represents North Dakota. When we're strong. When we start securing states, then we will keep adding a star. As for now . . . Let's raise it."

Hand prepared to connect the flag to the rope that dangled from the flagpole, The Captain along with everyone else, stopped.

They had listened for hours to Elliott sing. So much so that he faded like elevator music to the rear of their attention. But with the strike of that one chord. With that one line. Upon the song, all activity froze.

*Oh, Beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain.*

The Captain's eyes shifted down to the flag then to his men. A simple nod without words was his order to raise it high. Elliott's singing was the sign that it was meant to be.

So simply Elliott sang. Differently than all the other songs he

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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had played during the day. The Captain focused, and walked through the gathering men toward the church.

They halted what they did and silenced entailed. The town became captured by the tones not only of the piano but of Elliott's singing. Graveling with guts, his intensity increased with each verse he ensued.

*Oh, beautiful for heroes prove, in liberating strife. Who more  
than self their country loved. And mercy more than life.*

Heart pounding with each step he took, the Captain opened the door to the church and slipped unnoticed into the back. He was mesmerized, and taken. If asked, the Captain wouldn't have been able to speak. Elliott didn't sit behind the piano. He stood. If his singing didn't tell the Captain enough, Elliott's face did. Eyes closed, seeming lost in the song, Elliott belted out so emotionally that the song seared through the soul deeper and mightier than any weapon could.

*Oh Beautiful for patriot dream, that sees beyond the years.  
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears.*

Up the aisle the Captain moved, eyes focused and heart locked into Elliott's performance. It was a song not heard in years, nor sung or thought of. And appropriately it should have been. It struck the Captain that the one man who seemed to lack the patriotism that everyone else had, right then and there reminded everyone what patriotism was.

And then Elliott finished. His head jolted up to the steady clapping, but it didn't make him spin in surprise as much as the applause and cheers that seeped through the church from outside. Elliott hunched in embarrassment and covered his face. "I guess they were glad I stopped playing *Hail Holy Queen*." He widened his eyes and turned to the piano to gather the music. "I didn't realize I was that loud."

He swallowed first then the Captain took another step, He spoke nearly in a daze. "In a world without sound, you can't sing and not be heard. But I have a feeling, Elliott, you could have whispered that and everyone would have tuned in." Breathless he walked to Elliott. "My God. I knew you could sing. But . . ."

"Captain stop." Elliott chuckled, his back still to the Captain.

"No. And any singer can sing from their diaphragm. But it takes

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someone with heart to sing from the soul. Why . . . why did you sing it like that.”

His hand released the music and Elliot peered out before turning around. “Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“It didn’t start out that way. I started . . . I started playing it because it just seemed right. But Captain . . . the more I sang, the more I heard the words. And I knew why that song was written. For the first time since it was composed, the first time, this country is in the same parallel. And as I sang I realized . . . what am I doing?” Elliott shook his head. “I believe I called it an impossible dream. I . . . believe I . . .”

“Elliot.” The Captain stopped him. “You don’t have to explain anything. You feel the way you feel. And I was wrong for even getting angry with you over it. I owe you an apology.”

“No.” Elliott shook his head. “I owe you an apology my friend. I called it an impossible dream. I called it your fight. I was wrong. Our forefathers. Mere farmers, dreamers, they fought the exact same fight you want to fight now. And look what they made of this country. I want it back too.” He spoke with passion. “And even if it is the hardest fight I ever embark on, Captain, I would rather die trying to get it back, then watch with envy what I didn’t have the guts to try.”

With a slight snicker the Captain tilted his head. “Oh my god, Elliott. That was nice.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “See. I’m trying to be serious. I’m trying to ask if I can be a part.”

The Captain gave a squeeze to Elliott’s arm. “You don’t have to ask.”

“No, I do.” Elliott stepped back. “In tradition of what you want to be.” He snapped to attention, arms tight at his side, eyes forward. “Captain I would consider it an honor if you would let me stand beside you again in this fight.”

The Captain held up a finger getting ready to joke with Elliott, but he didn’t. High with pride he lifted his chin. “I would be honored to have you stand by my side as my right hand man. Sgt. Ryder.” Firm and

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straight, the Captain raised a salute.

Elliott smiled and returned the salute.

“Son of bitch, come here.” With a chuckle, the Captain tightly embraced Elliott. “Good to have you back. Might as well put you to work right now.” He released the embrace. “You ready?”

“More than you think.” Elliott smiled and started to walk with the Captain. “Um, one thing. If I am your right hand man. Am I second in charge?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then if we’re reestablishing ranking of sorts, what’s mine.”

“Seeing how I think it would be odd for everyone to start calling me General, Captain will be the highest ranking. You will be Sgt. Ryder.”

Elliott stopped walking. “Sergeant? I’m second in command. Sergeant? Not lieutenant?”

“Elliott, Elliott, Elliott. You abandoned me.”

Elliott grunted, shook his head and started to walk again. “Figures. Next thing I know you’re going to tell me you had Fr. O’Brien make me sing *Hail Holy Queen* twenty times.”

“Actually . . .” The Captain paused before opening the church door. “Twenty-two. But whose counting.” Smiling, and glad to be joined again with his friend, The Captain walked out with Elliott.

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## Beginnings, Montana

“I mooch enjoyed de tour.” Forrest told Joe walking to Joe’s office.

“Good. I tried to avoid the crackpots. So, you’ll get to go to containment later.” Joe shut the door. “We’ll begin as soon as everyone gets here. Well, the ones very vital to the time trip. Have a seat.” Joe pointed to a chair.

Attached to the briefcase he held, Forrest sat down.

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As Joe walked around his desk, he paused when the door opened and Henry walked in.

Badly.” Henry griped to Jason who walked in behind him.

“I was merely driving with caution,” Jason said with a slight snicker. “Can I help it you get motion sickness. Hey, Joe.”

Henry paid attention. “Oh, Hey Joe. Dr. Caceres.” Henry extended his hand. “Glad you are well.”

“An-ray. Please call me Forrest.” He shook Henry’s. “I luck foe-word to us beck coming frunds.”

A crooked smile graced Henry’s face with a tilt of his head. “Um, yeah sure.” He stood a seat at one of the set up chair.

“Arrived!” Robbie announced is entrance as he bolted in. “In record time. Ran all the way from . . .hi.” He stopped when he saw Forrest. “Hey, I’m Robbie. Are you him.”

Joe bobbed his head side to side, “Forrest my son Robbie.”

“Robert.” Forrest nodded. “Josef, you did note men-shoon a son.”

“That was on purpose.” Joe said. “There’s also Frank.”

“What about me?” Frank asked as he walked in.

Behind Frank, with a griping tone, Dean walked. “Not every conversation is about you. How do you know they aren’t discussing other words for short.”

“Now, see.” Frank waved a finger. “If they were doing that they would be using the name Dean. Not Frank. Fuck, Dean learn some vocabulary. Good thing I’m the literary guy.”

“Frank.” Joe interjected. “We have a newcomer.” He nodded his head to Forrest.

“Oh.” Frank reached noticed Forrest. “Hey, Frank Slagel.”

“Ah, Frunk.” Forrest nodded. “I huff heard mooch about a Frunk who pro-tucks de community. Is dat you?”

Frank snickered. “Oh, my God. That’s so funny. What did you say?”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Be polite. Forrest, yes this is the Frank you heard about. My other son.”

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Forrest clapped his hands together once. "Ah, Josef, you are mooch blessed to huff two sons."

"I got that." Frank snapped his finger. "And four he had four. Of course we never counted Hal. Did we Robbie."

"Not if we didn't have to." Robbie said.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Forrest, you remember Dean."

Dean gave his acknowledgment in the form of a smile and a nod.

Moving to find his chair, Frank nudged into Dean with a whisper. "See Forrest? You In twenty years."

Joe shook his head. "Can we just maybe get started on this?"

"Dean." Robbie whispered leaning into him. "Hey, did you think about it."

"Robbie, I'm not the primary." Dean replied. "I can't give you an understanding."

"Whoa! Hold up!" Frank yelled out. "Two hours and twenty-seven minutes post annulment and my brother is asking for an understanding. Oh way to respect my grief."

Henry was offended. "Robbie gets an understanding. Oh that isn't nice Dean. I have the understanding."

Robbie smiled arrogantly. "That was with Frank. Frank's no more. Dean's the man."

"I'm not the man." Dean defended. "El's merely living at the house. Nothing is happening . . . yet."

"Oh my God!" Frank blasted. "Two hours and twenty . . ."

"Frank." Dean snapped. "Stop with the divorce time announcements."

Joe whistled loudly. "Stop with everything. Can we get on with this goddamn meeting or what?"

The door banged against the file cabinet as it was blasted open. "All right." Ellen barged in. "Who made my dog into a man again." When she saw all fingers pointing to Joe, she moved to his desk. "Joe! How could you do that? He was my pet."

"He was a man for crying out loud." Joe gave an apologetic shift

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of his eyes to Forrest who seemed to be enjoying the pandemonium.

"He was my . . ." Ellen stopped, smiled, tucked her hair behind her ear and extended her hand down to Forrest with a complete change of demeanor. "Hello. I'm Ellen, you must be Forrest."

Amidst the moans she erupted from Ellen's fake pleasantries, Joe slammed his hand on the desk. "Ellen. Out."

Grasping Ellen's hand with both of his, Forrest stood and smiled widely. "Ah, El-loon. And Josef sud you were nut chumming."

Ellen gasped. "Joe? How could you say that. I'm charming."

Joe rubbed his temples. "Ellen leave. This is a meeting."

"Can't I stay Joe, please, I'll be good, you owe me." Ellen pleaded. "You made Mike a man again. And Forrest like me, see." She held up her hand still clasped by Forrest.

Forrest grinned. "Such a sput fire. And you muck me laugh."

Ellen giggled. "See, Joe. See?"

"All right." Joe snapped. "Sit down and don't say anything. Christ." He tried to control his blood pressure he felt raise. "Now, to begin." Calmly he sunk into his chair. "Jason, anything new on the time machine."

Jason's eyes lit up. "Nothing's changed, Henry and I are drawing blanks."

"Keep trying." Joe encouraged then saw Forrest's hand raise. "Yes, Forrest."

"Woot is de purpose of your use of de time machine?" Forrest asked.

"As a matter of fact Forrest . . ." Joe ran his hand down his own face. "One of the reasons for this meeting, to save Beginnings. We have reason to believe, that another plague will be released on us by the society."

"De so-sigh-et-tee. Oui." Forrest shook his head. "Day are de ones dat half done dis to our world. I knew of dear plan. I knew of it well. When were day released?"

"This summer." Joe answered.

"And you let dem go?"

"We didn't want them here. There was some trouble and we just didn't want them here."

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Forrest swallowed. "Day are now out dear, somewhere?"

"Yes. There could be more, we don't know. They are building an army."

"From woot I know. An army is an understatement." Forrest closed his eyes and shook his head. "But Josef, you con not stoop the plague. It is mooch too big."

"We know this." Joe explained. "We want to stop *them*. We were hoping that you may have known something. Anything. What we in Beginnings may have that they want so bad."

"I huff information. Oui." Forrest lifted the briefcase and laid it on Joe's desk. "I do note know how mooch dis con help you." Forrest lifted papers from the briefcase. "It wuss not long after de conference started. I wuss asked to join dem in a private meeting. It wuss dear, I found out dear plun." He searched through the stack of papers he handed a sheet to Dean. "Don, you might know woot dis is. Maybe, you con share?"

Dean read over the paper. "It seems as if they had three plagues? Was any of this Forrest, ever presented at the conference?"

"No." Forrest shook his head. "For de societies only. At de conference, day spoke of mun kind, and how day con stop extinction from hung-gear, from happening. De nuts you hold are from behind de scenes."

Dean questioned more. "So this was the plan? To actually cause an extinction?"

"No." Forrest explained. "Day needed so mooch off de population left to much dear plun work. But, some thing went wrong. Maybe, de plague day chose wuss de wrong one."

Joe rummaged through the papers. "There is so much here Forrest. How did you learn of all this?"

"I listen to dem speck. I take it all in. I let dem trust me. And den, I needed my proof. So, I snick onto a Dock-tear Thomas Hanson's room. And I tuck his nuts. Dat Josef, is his nuts you hold in your hand."

Joe expected as much from Frank and Robbie, but not from Henry too. Their snickering irked him. "Children please."

Frank snorted to end his laughing. "Sorry." He took a breath. "Forrest, we didn't know this Hanson guy. Did you know Joanna Holmes."

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She was the head honcho here.”

Forrest shook his head. “Oui, Frunk. She is cold. It shoo-dears ta muck me dink, dat she is ut dear somewhere.”

Frank scratched his head with a slight snicker. “What?”

Forrest tried again. “It shoo-dears ta muck de dink dat she is ut dear somewhere.”

A raise in the corner of Frank’s mouth appeared. “Again.”

Joe, annoyed, smacked Frank with the papers. “It shudders to make him think that she’s still out there somewhere!”

“Oh.” Frank nodded as he rocked in his chair. “Don’t worry about it. She’s dead. Dean killed her.”

“I did not!” Dean yelled.

“Yes you did. You dissolved her.” Frank saw Dean’s mouth open. “Shut up. You did too.” Frank pointed. “Quiet.”

With a face of frustration, Dean breathed slowly through his nostrils and faced Joe. “I can’t take him.”

“Join the club.” Joe sifted through the paper. “This was all the evidence you were taking to meet that man?”

“Oui.” Forrest answered. “But I dink he set me up.”

“I think so.” Joe read through the documentation, documents that contained the cryogenics process, the virus, the release date and cities of the virus. But no mention of other labs in the United States. Just as Joe was about to give up, his hand slowed in the turning of the next page. There written on the top of a page with information regarding infection of livestock, was a date. In bright red lettering, August 29<sup>th</sup>. “Forrest, what is this date you have circled.”

“Ah!” Forrest looked. “Dat Josef, is de date, day were to start working in the Garfield project. Moving dear stuff in. Supplies and sooch.”

“All of their supplies for the lab? And so forth?” Joe asked.

“Oui. And I um sure. I wuss hopping de authorities would be able to stoop dem on dat day. But . . .” Forrest lifted his hands. “I wuss de one who wuss stooped.”

Joe crinkled the paper with excitement. “Yeah, but in this history Forrest, we got you. And it may be post-plague, but you *are* the one who

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helps to stop them. As soon as Henry gets our Regressionator running, we are going back and hopefully find out what the hell is so important about this piece of farmland. Because, Gentlemen . . .” Grinning, Joe showed the paper, the red lettering to them all. “We have our date.”

THE ANSWERS

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

January 17

The east division tunnel. The finger of the Beginnings tunnel system that extends eastward from the main tunnels that run underneath center town. The only finger of the tunnel system that could be used as an escape hatch for the people of Beginnings if needed.

There were three ways to get into the east division tunnel. One, from the main tunnel under center town. Two, from out side. And three, from the small southeast tunnel which ran under the quantum lab and mobile. Its entrance, a mere quarter mile from the quantum lab. And *that* was the entrance that Frank and Henry used to get to the eastern division tunnel.

Actually . . . Frank used. Henry just happened to be there.

Examining the power supply that ran under the quantum lab was what Henry was doing when Frank told him ‘let’s take a walk.’ How far he had to walk surprised Henry. Where he was going surprised him more. Leaving Beginnings. Robbie was there checking the motion detectors and he called for Frank. So Frank made his way there, Henry at his side.

“Frank.” Henry shivered. “It is really cold and damp under here.”

“Quit whining Henry. You act like such a woman.”

“Why did you ask me to come Frank?”

“To spend time with you.” Frank said. “I trust you Henry. Have I told you how much I like that you’re my friend. You’re my friend.”

“Yes Frank, I know. You tell me everyday. It’s some sort of sick guilt trip you keep putting on me.”

“Guilt trip over what?” Frank asked with fake naivety. “Henry? Did you realize that it has been four weeks . . .”

“Frank! I know this. And will you knock off keeping track of time.”

“I just want you to know the mourning process is still fresh in Ellen’s . . .”

“Frank!” Henry shuddered in annoyance. “Stop. Please. It’s not a

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real understanding I'm having with Ellen."

"Dean never ended it."

Henry stopped walking. "Dean doesn't have an official relationship with El. Ask her. So he can't un-understand me or re-understand me, understand?"

"Yeah." Frank smiled. "I do. Thanks."

Henry grunted and moved a little faster.

"Wait!" Only the sound of Robbie's voice was heard as Frank and Henry approached the end of the tunnel. "Just stop! You'll screw it all up."

Frank peered to the opening and the heavy brush that covered it. He knew Robbie was beyond it, that's where his voice came from. "Robbie?"

At the left of the brush, it parted and Robbie slid in, back against the tunnel. "We may have trouble."

Frank looked at Henry, then his brother. "What's wrong?"

"Follow me, but take the route I walk. I don't want it to get messed up."

Frank and Henry, backs against the tunnel wall, slid through the edge of the brush with Robbie to outside of Beginnings.

"Over here." Robbie held a long stick and took them further to the right. "Here." He indicated past a large bush to a semi-muddy clearing. "Look."

"Shit." Frank peered out, then moved in closer. "Foot prints."

"Yep." Robbie pointed with the stick. "From what I could tell, five sets. They go off to the north. They had gathered here." He showed how the footsteps muddled together. "Now, here's the odd part. Four of them." Robbie indicated the four. "Check out the prints. Smooth, not too deep. Men of average size built."

Frank nodded. "Survivors. The shoes are worn. Really worn."

"Exactly. But . . ." Robbie drew a circle in the mud around two other footprints. "These two. These two monstrous prints, belong to the same person. He's big too. Look how deep. And . . . what else do you notice?"

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“The treading is not worn. Newer shoes.” Frank squatted. “Beginnings shoes?”

Robbie looked up. “Appears that way. Seems someone in Beginnings has a group of pals outside.”

Frank immediately looked to Henry. “Moses.”

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The big whiff that Johnny took brought a grin to his face. “Smell that Dr. Dean? Smells like a neighbors Barbeque. I remember that smell well.”

Dean shook his head with a chuckle as he glance at his notes in his pace around the mobile lab. “Don’t let Jason hear you say that. All right, before I go. What do we have? Anything?”

“Nope.” Johnny clicked away. “Nothing.”

“Which batch was that?”

“Number seventeen.” John spun his stool to watch Dean pace. “You wanna try the next batch of anti-serum?”

Dean lifted his wrist to check the time. “How long did we work on that batch?”

“Only two hours.”

“I have that test. Maybe if you . . .”

There was a soft bang, then a dragging noise, almost like metal being scratched. It came from outside.

“What the hell?” Dean peered out the window. “Maybe Jason is letting out his frustration a . . .” Dean let out a jumping shriek when he turned back to the window and saw the mean face of Moses staring back at him. “Shit.” Dean grabbed his chest.

Moses raised his fist and pounded on the glass. “I need to speak with you.” He pointed to Dean.

Dean thought about ignoring him, then changed his mind. Perhaps it would add the touch of humor his day needed. “What?” Dean opened the door. “We are busy.”

Moses raised his lip. “The Lord has sent you a message for this

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work you do on the death air!”

“Well tell Him to leave it on my desk. I’m too busy right now.” He started to close the door and Moses held out his hand stopping him.

“You do not take me serious Doctor. It is against God’s will that you work on this death. And God says you shall fall before him. You the anti-Christ, and your disciples. Starting with the weakest one first. You all shall fall!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean closed the door, locked it and turned around facing a expressionless Johnny.

“What do you suppose he means by that?” Johnny asked. “Is he just rambling?”

“I don’t know. I have to head down to that test.” Dean started to walk to the door. “And I haven’t a clue what he meant by . . .” He stopped in his leaving when Ellen walked in. “Shit.”

“What?” Ellen looked shocked. “What did I do? I did the dishes this morning. What?”

Dean’s mouth moved a little. “The weakest one first.”

Johnny immediately looked up and his eyes met Dean’s.

Ellen let out a pity moan. “Did Lester die?” She saw the puzzled looks she good.”Lester the little rabbit. You said the weakest one first.”

“Um . . .” Dean stammered some in his words. “Yeah. And I have to go. Johnny . . .” When he knew Ellen was looking away, Dean mouthed the words, ‘watch her’ before he left.

The lab door closed at the same time Ellen opened the door to the special lab. “Hey.” She said then walked back out. “Is Dean stressed? Lester’s not dead.”

“Really?” Johnny mustered up a look of fake surprise. “Maybe he confused them.” He started to return to his work. “He wants us to work on . . .” He peered up. “El? Speaking of dead rabbits? Have you talked to Jason yet?”

Saying nothing, Ellen made a quick escape back into the special lab.

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The sizzle, the puff of smoke, the rattle and bang we wound up by a finale ‘goddamn it’ of disgust by Jason.

“No luck?” Joe asked, stepping into the quantum lab knowing full well it was stupid question.

“No luck.” Jason shook his head. “The computer runs now, it accepts the program, but I feel like I’m back at square seven hundred and forty-three.”

“You mean square one.”

“No.” Jason shook his head. “If I was back at square one, surely I won’t even have the three computers linked up. I’m correct at which step in my process I have reverted back to.” Jason scratched his hand then walked across the room with a broom.

Joe watched. “How uh, many today?”

“Only six.” After sweeping up the still smoldering black heap into a dust pan, Jason lifted it and carried the remains to a special trash can dumping them in. “I liked that rabbit too.”

“So what now?” Joe asked. “Should we postpone these time trip tests?”

“No, no.” Jason shook his head with certainty. “I’ll get it.”

“Good.”

“Just one problem though.”

“What’s that?” Joe question.

“We need this to work now. If not yesterday, right?” Jason looked humbled. “Put it this way. Originally from step seven hundred and forty-three until the quantum Regressionator actually worked, it took cheating from the future along with three years.”

“That could be a problem.” Joe exhaled.

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Washington, DC

It was pathetic, and George could honestly say it made him sick.

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His gut turned as he stood next to Dr. Walker peering through a long glass window. He wished it were sound proof, that may have helped.

There was supposed to be ten, but George only counted eight. They were supposed to be infants, but instead, they were monstrosities of scientifically manifested nature. Still covered in the slimy residue of their mother's womb, they moaned and whimpered a saddened hungry cry. Fresh blood was splattered about the near globs of malformed flesh, the human body turned inside out. Partial limbs protruded from some of the infants, if they even had any. Their eyes bulged from their sockets, no lids to allow them to blink a protection from the elements. Helplessly they squirmed, mouths pressed against the floor gnawing in a hungry search for food.

"We thought it went smoothly." Dr. Walker explained. "Ultra sound did not show this. We followed the specifications for prenatal care of the mother. Rotation, hydro emergence therapy. So the mothers are fine now, they'll be ready for re-implantation in two months."

George swallowed. "When were they born?"

"We did the caesarean sections early last night."

"And you haven't cleaned them up? Feed them?"

"We thought they would have died. We placed them in here last night. They barely moved or breathed. I . . ." Dr. Walker shook his head. "Didn't expect this."

"Then how did they live this long? You haven't fed them."

"They're . . . they're feeding off each other."

A grunt of nausea made George turn from the window. "This is not what was produced in Beginnings. I've seen their baby. The genetic altering works., Their baby Marcus is what is intended to protect, and withstand the elements. Not . . . not this." George couldn't even look in the window again.

"They have the old world produced embryos. We need those to copy the gene sequence, if not the embryos we definitely the original gene splicing program."

"What about the one from Colorado?" George asked

Dr. Walker pointed backwards into the pen. "This is the sequence from Colorado. The original and working sequence is in

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Beginnings.”

George huffed out. “A long with everything else.” He started to walk away.

“Sir, what should I do with them.”

George paused and shook his head. “Get rid of them. Just . . . get rid of them.” Wanting to be subjected no more, George kept leaving. The embryos, genetic sequence, time machine and other items were part of the things Beginnings had that the society didn’t just want, they needed. George would have never thought one small community could hold so much in the palm of their hand over the huge and still growing Society’s head. They were a growing pain. George was just so grateful that at least he didn’t have the pesky defectors to deal with anymore.

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### Bowman, North Dakota

It was reminiscent of Elliott’s childhood. The way his father would stand out on the porch continuously calling his name loudly to get him to come home. But it wasn’t reminiscent in a good way. Those memories were being relived by the Captain. Only the Captain stood on the town hall rooftop, six blocks away with a megaphone.

“Elliott!” The Captain shouted through the megaphone. “Elliott Ryder. Sgt. Elliott Ryder we have a meeting. Elliott!”

Elliott winced. “We must devise a new means of communication.” Horror befell Elliott and his mouth dropped open. “Oh, my God did I just talk like that. He’s brainwashing us all.”

Despite the annoying bellowing of his name in the distant, Elliott finished what he was taking so long to do. He dreaded it. Prior to no one partook, no one was allowed. All at the same time, the same day, with the same style. Everyone had three and more were being sought or made . . . uniforms. It was being implemented. The way they talked, walked, and dressed. It was the first full official day of the new order.

Choking, Elliott placed his two fingers in the tightly buttoned

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high collar shirt. He twisted his neck and cringed at the buttons that weren't center. Grey in color the uniform was, definitely something from the civil war. From the shirt to the pants along with the belt and boots. The only added touches were the sword Elliott would wear in battle, and the fingerless gloves that matched the bandana. Elliott, the Captain and ten other men wore red. The rest, gold. Elliott recalled wearing the bandana to keep his head warm, he never meant to be a trend setter.

He was ready, uncomfortable and prepared to leave his house. Walking fast toward town, hunching in a hide, Elliott could feel the stares upon him for being dressed as he was. A part of him was certain that it was a big practical joke the Captain was playing and no one would be wearing their uniforms for another week.

Turning the bend that led to town, Ellen's stride slowed down. His eyes widened as eight horse trotted passed him. A mesmerized look happened upon his face and then something else. The moment he saw every single man dressed as he was, the second he received his first salute, a sense of unity fell upon Elliott, and the rest of the way to the town hall, Elliott walked tall.

"It's about time." The Captain shut the meeting room door behind Elliott. "My God, Elliott do you look . . . dashing." The Captain grinned.

Elliott grumbled a 'hmm.'

"What about me? Look I have bars." The Captain pointed to his own lapel.

"I'd have bars too." Elliott said when he sat down, "But I'm only a sergeant."

"Highest ranking sergeant though." The Captain indicated. "You'll get there to the lieutenant spot."

"And what will that take?" Elliott asked.

"Certainly better polishing of these buttons, I can tell you." The Captain smiled. "Did you see Dawson." He looked around the group of men, "Did you all see Dawson. That man shines. Anyhow . . ." The Captain leaned

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back. "We started the meeting without you, Elliot, you took too long. I'll fill you in later. Classes start in an hour. Corporal Lewis, you were saying about food."

"Yes," Danny Lewis sat up some. "Dehydration is going very well. We are utilizing everything we can. Rations should be good. However I am stockpiling for our scouts, so when spring comes and we send them out to look for society bases, there will be no reason to touch community rations."

"Good. Are we doing well enough to seek out a few more to join us." The Captain asked.

"Yes." Lewis answered. "I even estimate with the greenhouse we should be in good shape."

"Excellent." The Captain tapped his pencil. "I want to be an open invitation if we can. Food, warmth, protection. Anything on our medical end."

Elliott raised his hand. "Blue, you know the elderly gentleman, He was a corpsman in the navy. He is doing good brushing up on his skills. He needs stocked though."

The Captain nodded. "We'll do that when we send out winter scouts. I know we discussed not doing that, but I just want to be sure no society activity is moving closer than it should. Sgt. Owens, how is the scout training coming?"

"Very well," Sgt. Owens answered. "I've done numerous trips into the field, they need more training but are doing good. And from what I can tell, our indoor training sessions are going good as well. And, sir, I wanted to mention. The extra homes were completed some time ago. Still no go on the women moving into them."

"Grace has stated she, like us, wants the women to have unity." The Captain said. "So if they want to live all together as the Waltons let them. Let's just be grateful, their maintenance and pampering is minimal with the exception of us having to clear the streets for their safety when they want to take a walk." He held up his hand to stop any complaints. "Gentlemen, when I fibbed to them of the unsafe conditions, it was only so we could work in peace. Never did I expect it to backfire. Let's move on. Elliott." The Captain

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pointed to him. “How are all those training classes you are handling. And I haven’t seen you as often up at the stables for riding lessons. We picked up nine more horses.”

“I’ll get there.” Elliott said. “As far as my classes, they’re fine. Not too much to handle. Keeps me busy and . . . I have a complaint about our little order we have going.” Elliott careened off course. “Can I voice it?”

“Absolutely.” The Captain responded. “Keep in mind. I’m prepared. Just tell me, are you going to shatter me with your words. Proceed to rip my heart out with one of those Elliott monologues.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “I’m never living that down. No, this is minor. Today is our first official day, and I don’t like our name. It’s like, stupid.”

Holding back his sarcastic tone, the Captain couldn’t hold back his half smile. “It’s *like* stupid. Elliott. Is this the proper form of speaking coming from our main communications instructor.”

“Captain.”

“No try again. Come on, we’re all doing it.”

After a grunt, Elliott exhaled. “Captain, pertaining to our name, I am not quite sure that I am comfortable with it.”

“A ha!” The Captain laughed. “Excellent. Ok, what’s wrong with it?”

“It sucks.”

“Sucks?”

“Stop it. Yeah, it sucks.” Elliott stated. “You have us wearing his uniforms, speaking like something from *Gone with the Wind*, and we call ourselves the freedom fighters.” He shook his head.

“What do you suggest?” The Captain asked.

“What are our plans. We want to defend this area, circle out, eliminate all society threats. You yourself Captain said that the society is building on the east first. What are we doing, building and protecting the west. So why not have that be our name. We want to be the USA, so while we strive for that. Let’s call our selves what we are. The UWA.”

The Captain had to snicker. “I like the initials Elliott, But The United Western America.”

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“No.” Elliott stated calmly amongst the chuckling at the table.  
“The United Western Alliance. Because that . . . is what we are.”

The room went quiet. The Captain jokingly prepared to have his heart ripped out by Elliott but he wasn’t prepared to have his heart stopped. He liked the name suggestion. He really liked it.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

The sealed room of solitaire was so dark for so long, that the dim light the crept in with the opening door, burned Jess Boyens’ eyes. On the single metal bed, hands folded, Jess didn’t move. He merely raised his eyes to Sgt. Doyle.

The double click of the combat boots against the concrete floor brought Sgt. Doyle in. “I have a proposition for you. You want out of the society. I will let you out . . . sort of.”

Jess turned away.

“I know this solitaire is not for you. And I know your skills qualify you for more than the farming area. Wouldn’t you want a job within the society that utilizes those skills. Takes you away from it all.”

“What kind of job?” Jess asked his voice cracking from dry throat.

“There is a community that needs secretly infiltrated. They have a lot that the society needs. We need someone in there as a back up. You’ll live there, work there, be a part of there.”

“A spy.” jess nodded.

“Of sorts. We may or may not call upon you. But before you go in, you’ll have to be trained. You’ll have a lot to learn especially how to use and play these people.”

“And if I don’t take this job?” Jess asked.

“Cyborg enhancement lever 23. Full frontal lobotomy replacement.”

Jess sighed out heavily. “Or death.”

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“No. You’re a body. No death for you.” Sgt. Doyle replied. “You have one more day to think about it.” Sgt. Doyle moved to the door.

“What if . . . what if I agree. How do you know I just won’t turn on you?” Jess asked. “Are you going to implant me, what?”

“Don’t need to.” Sgt. Doyle answered. “You still have two brothers working within the society. Do you know where they are?” Sgt. Doyle smiled. “We do.”

Jess eyes closed at the same time the door did and solitaire, once agin went black.

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Beginnings, Montana

It was exhilarating, a moment in a sunny, not-too-cold January day, for Frank, Robbie, and Greg. Joe standing with his stop watch outside of the quantum lab, yelling ‘go’ was the start of it. Speeding the quarter of a mile low and in a hunching position, the three of them hit the tunnels. Climbing down without a sound. Prepared. Rifles, loaded belts and pre-arranged hand signals.

They moved with swiftness and silence, Backs against the walls of the tunnels for the four and one third mile hike to the cryo-lab. Hesitating, stopping, placing their backs in the crevice of the wall twenty-feet from the lab. Catching their breath, they waited.

Frank assessed his brother and Greg, Assessed them visually for strength and fatigue. He saw all signals clear. Holding up his hand, he whispered. “Now.” The three of them responded, placing on gas masks, lifting a small can from their belts, joining in a line formation across the tunnel and tossing the cans outward at the same time.

“Clink.” Frank spoke. “Robbie, sound effect.”

Robbie began making a hissing sound with his mouth.

Frank watched his watch. “Ready and . . .”

Greg tried to stop him. “Frank it’s not . . .”

Frank grinned. “Now!” Charging forward, rifles held outward

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they stormed in such perfect synch, their footsteps sounded as one. "In here!" Frank motioned his head to the cryo-lab door, kicking it open and seeing Dean, and about eight others. "Uh-oh, Trouble gentlemen. Shoot to kill."

With a popping and firing sound, Frank, Robbie and Greg unloaded on Dean and the others. Bombarding them with red pellet paint. "Time." Frank called out. "Check for info."

"Stop!" Dean, totally disgusted and holding out his red, damp shirt, shouted. "I said stop!"

Frank slammed his hand down and took off his mask. "You are dead! You can not speak!"

"You're an idiot Frank!" Dean grabbed the radio. "Joe, pause the timing. Frank is messing around again."

Frank gave a clueless, hidden snickered look to Robbie and Greg, then to Dean. "What?"

"You know what!" Dean scolded. "You aren't supposed to shoot to kill. If you charge in you can't shoot the scientists. Rippling effect asshole! And if the gas failed to work you were supposed to retreat. You're only supposed to use your weapons in case of emergency."

"I know that." Frank said. "We were having fun."

"Fun? Fun?" Dean stormed to him. "Look at my lab Frank. You three will clean this up. How many times in the past week that we've been practicing this drill have you did this to me? Huh?" Dean shook his head and stormed to the door. "I'm tired of being a guinea pig and tired of having to wash red paint off my clothes. When you're going to do this right, let me know."

"Sorry Dean." Frank nudged Robbie.

Robbie cleared his throat. "Yeah, sorry Dean."

Motioning his head to Robbie, Frank led the way into the tunnel as Dean marched off. "Hey Dean?"

"What?" He spun around to face him, only to be greeted with two more blasts of red pain. Stinging him in the chest. Grunting loudly he turned back around and kept moving despite the loud laughter.

Frank tossed his weapon behind his shoulder. "Successful"

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mission or not?”

Robbie thought about it. “Let’s say it was successful.”

“Excellent.” Frank adjusted his headset. “Dad, start timing again. We got what we want, we’re heading up.”

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Ellen listened to Henry’s voice over the radio, she chuckled as she responded. “Hourly radio check complete.” She re-hooked it to her belt.

Joe heard this as he looked down to his stopwatch then back up. He pulled on his ear thinking he was hearing things. Hearing a reconfirming response from Henry to Ellen, he turned around. “What in Christ’s name are you two doing?” He yelled at Henry and Ellen as they stood facing each other outside of the quantum lab just about four feet from him.

Ellen looked at Joe as if he was getting senile. “Joe . . .” She tsked. “We’re doing our hourly radio check. We do that. Henry likes to check on me and Dean while we’re way out here alone. To make sure we’re safe and all right.”

Joe nodded. “Henry, excellent idea.”

Henry grinned. “Thanks Joe.”

“But not when you’re standing right next to each other!” Joe scolded. “It’s unnecessary, it’s a waste and most of all it’s annoying .If I hear one more word out of either of you, I swear to God I’m getting a cloth an gagging your mouths shut. Now stand there and be quiet. No wait, don’t stand there. Ellen go away.” Joe saw Robbie, Frank and Greg running. “Henry take your position.” Joe ran to the door of the quantum lab. The door that was posing as the fake archway to the time machine. He tried to get passed Ellen who played around, going left when he did and right when he did. “Ellen.” Joe picked her up, moved her aside and ran into the lab. “Jason they’re coming.”

Jason stood by the open door, holding it and staring at the second hand of his watch. “Henry count the numbers out loud.”

Holding up the pendant, he waited until Frank and them approached. He pressed the buttons. “Zero, one, zero, nine.”

Jason called out. "Ready and . . . illuminated."

Henry walked through first, Robbie was behind him followed by Frank, then . . . Slam. Jason shut the door.

"Times." Jason said. "If four of you must go, you have to be faster. I know you're all big guys, you have to move faster. We can't chance *this* . . ." He opened the lab door to a pissed off Greg. "Chance one of you being left behind."

Joe threw his hands in the air. "You heard the man. Let's do this again." Laughing at the four man crew whining, Joe took great pleasure in shooing them back out that quarter a mile and making them do it again. Though there was some fun in it, the mission was serious. And like everything else it had to be perfect and the *timing* . . . just right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Beginnings, Montana

The loud shrill screams of Alexandra were bone chilling and nearly drowned out Ellen's call for help.

"Dean!" Ellen cried out from the bathroom floor, hands in the tub, "Dean!"

"What!" Dean flew panicked into the bathroom.

Ellen stood up at the same time Alexandra stopped screaming. She handed Dean the shampoo. "You wash her hair, She says I don't do it right."

"You don't." Dean took the shampoo and knelt down to the tub.

Alexandra wiped her tears. "Thank you, Daddy."

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Just get it done, Dean. We don't have time for games. As soon as Frank . . ." Ellen nodded when she heard the doorbell. "Speak of the devil."

"To be polite." Dean mumbled.

Ellen shook her head. "I'll get it." Leaving the bathroom happily, Ellen walked over Billy and Joey who played in the upstairs hall and trotted down the steps. Frank was walking in. "Hey."

"I'm here." Frank carried a box and set it on the sofa table.

"What's that?" Ellen peeked at the box.

"Knowing you two, you'll be up at that lab all night. You have to eat. I had left overs from me and Robbie's dinner."

"Ah, thanks Frank." Ellen smiled. "And we might be. So thanks for coming here to watch them."

"Not a problem." Frank unzipped his coat. "Robbie, Henry and my Dad are coming later to play cards. So . . ." Frank opened the closet and was immediately pummeled buy a pillow, blanket and sheet.

"Sorry." Ellen snickered and bent down to the items. "Neither Dean or myself are tall enough to put it deep enough on the shelf."

“Here I’ll do it.” Frank grabbed them.

“Not too deep or I’ll never get it down tonight.”

Frank smiled. “Why are you needing a pillow and blanket down here . . .” His smile widened. “El? Are you sleeping on the couch?”

“Yes.” Ellen snatched the pillow from him shoved it in the closet and shut the door. “This week. Last week was Dean’s turn.”

“Oh yeah, trouble in paradise.”

“There’s no trouble, Frank.” Ellen smacked him in the gut. “There’s just no paradise either.” She saw his gloating look. “Stop that. We aren’t married anymore. And . . . I’ll have you know. I decided to play the field.” Ellen folded her arms. “Be single. Enjoy the carefree life.”

“Dean shot you down.”

“No!” Ellen snapped. “It’s just . . . it’s not fair to him. I told him I was breaking all connections to him and I went back with you. Three days later, you dump me. I just want to make sure I’m not going to play any head games. I kind of like the arrangement. There’s no pressure of any relationships with anyone.”

“Glad you like it. Cause I miss it.” Frank flashed a quick sad smile. “But . . . no pressure has its perks.” he let out a breath. “Where are the kids?”

Ellen pointed ‘up’.

“I’ll be back.” Frank took the steps two at a time in a loud charge.

Hearing Frank cause the chain reaction of noise that included Billy and Joey fighting, Alexandra screaming and Dean yelling, Ellen made her way to the goodie box. She wanted to see what all Frank packed. Even though she said otherwise, Ellen knew it was going to be a long night at the lab, especially with the small, but nevertheless progress, they had made earlier.

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“Minimal. But still progress made.” Steward informed George.

George rubbed his tired eyes. “Doesn’t matter, Stew. If we don’t make progress any progress they make is moot.”

“I spoke to Burke . . .”

“Burke’s an imbecile.”

“Be that as it may.” Steward continued. “Our biggest hold up is the antiserum. We have to create a viable antiserum to inoculate, just incase this thing ends up spreading. Now, we have the recipe but . . . did you ever make Chinese pot stickers?”

“What?” So confused George looked up to him. “What in the world does that have to do with anything.”

“It’s an analogy. If you ever made a recipe out of a cook book, a difficult recipe, it always helps to have tried it or at least see a picture to know whether or not you are doing it right. If we had a small taste of the original antiserum. We could successfully copy it.”

“Yeah, well how are we going to get that?” George asked. “Beginnings has it. We take it, then the fact that we have an inside source is blown.”

“Not . . . entirely true.” Steward held up a finger. “If we do this right, not only can we secure a sample that isn’t noticed at first, but we can create enough mayhem, that it will set them back while giving us progress.”

“What are you suggesting.”

“Move up the plan to set them back. It’s been in the works do it now. Our person says tonight is good. Things are ready enough, and we have a group close enough to get the sample for us by dawn.”

“It’s a back up plan.”

“Make it a main plan.” Steward moved the phone to George. “Give the order. I know it will set us a valuable person but . . .”

George smiled. “In the long run . . . Beginnings will pay.” George began to dial.

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“Dean?” Ellen tapped him lightly over the shoulder as he examined a near motionless rabbit. “I’m getting hungry.”

Not letting her see him, Dean rolled his eyes. “Then eat Ellen. But first hand me my clipboard.” He held out his hand. “What’s happening on agent fourteen.”

“Same thing. Slows the virus, but then the virus prevails. Can you eat with me?” Ellen handed him the clipboard. “I don’t want to eat by myself.” She persisted. “If I wanted to eat by myself, I would have eaten two hours ago. Can you eat with me? Dean? Huh? Dean?”

“Ellen!”

Ellen jumped back. “Don’t snap at me.”

“Sorry, it’s just that I’m busy.”

“And I’m not?”

“No not really.” Dean made a notation in the chart, as he did he saw her standing with her arms folded. “All right. I’ll eat with you. Let me just finish taking notes on this subject.”

“Rabbit, Dean.” Ellen corrected. “And are you noting his remission time.”

“Yep. Two days, that was it. That’s all he was in remission.”

“That’s because he’s a direct exposed victim. Contact victims ones have a remission of three days. Agents fourteen and fifteen give a six day remission. Hey, you should give him a dose now Dean, just to see if he goes back into remission.”

“Ellen, I’m impressed.” Dean looked at her with a smile. “I really didn’t thing you paid that much attention to this end of our work.”

“How can I not? I have to touch them. I am the bunny babe?” She giggled. “Can we eat now.”

“Yes we can eat now. Let’s wash up.”

Grinning and perky Ellen took off her coat in the special lab and hesitated briefly waiting for Dean to join her at the sink. They scrubbed and exited into the other lab.

Dean peered over Ellen's shoulder at the counter. Watching her remove dinner from the box. "You think you brought enough?" Dean asked sarcastically. "We don't have any extra plates. Unless we left some at the other mobile."

"Why don't you check. If not, we can share." She reached in the crate. "I'll get the little pull table and chairs and we can sit by the window."

"Sounds good. I'll be right back. Oh . . ." He stopped with a snap to his finger. "Remind me to pull that Jenny Matoose sample. I have a theory on it." Leaving the mobile lab, Dean walked quickly over to the other mobile. He flicked on lights as he made his way to the kitchen at the other end. Opening the cupboards he felt like a nursery rhyme when he saw that they were bare. Giving it his best shot, he checked the drawers. A fork rolled as he opened it. Excited over the eating utensil, he close the drawer. As he did, he heard what sounded like a crack or dull thump. He looked out the little kitchen window, parting the blinds. Not seeing anything, Dean shrugged, and shut off the same lights he turned on as he went back to Ellen in the other lab.

"Forks." Dean held it up as he entered the lab mobile. He saw how Ellen had set everything up in front of the window. "That's nice." He smiled and sat across from her. "El, you don't have to share your food."

"Dean please, there's enough of it."

"Thanks." Dean sat down and prepared to eat. "El?" His eyes shifted to a folded piece of paper. "What's this?" He lifted it.

"Oh." Ellen wiped her mouth. "I found it on the floor by the door. I think someone dropped it."

"Who El? You and I are the only ones here." A small sheet of paper folded in half. Dean looked at the words written on the front. "It's a bible reference. *Deuteronomy 22:24*."

"You know all that stuff. What is it?" Ellen ate a bite of her food.

"I'm not that good that I know it off my head. I know that Deuteronomy deals with waiting to go to the promised land and God's word. I wonder who . . ." Dean's thumb flipped open the paper and he read the words inside. "Shit. Who would have . . ."

The slam! It made Ellen shriek, and Dean jump nearly from his chair. From the window they sat before a loud bang was heard. They looked. They saw. They jumped back in horror as they watched a face slam into the window and slide down. The cheek sticking some, the head of the man leaving a long bloody smear as he dropped to the ground.

“Dean oh my God, was that Bill?”

“Yeah, our guard. Shit!” Dean stepped back and as he did it started. Banging, continuous loud banging on the side of the mobile, crashing against the aluminum.

“Dean.” Ellen’s voice shook. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” He raced to the cabinet a foot away, opened it, bent down and grabbed the revolver. He checked it for ammunition and pulled back the hammer. “We have to get out of here.” The banging grew louder.

“Which way?” Ellen covered her ears to the close bangs.

“The other mobile. Shit the door.” Racing to lock the door to the lab, Dean reached out, Ellen behind him. His hand barely extended when the lab door flew open, slamming loudly as it did and Reverend Thomas--Moses, stood in the doorway. His long gorilla style arms extended in a lunging manner, his hair was wet and stuck to his face. His gleaming eyes pierced at them as he charged forth.

“El, run!” Dean shouted, extending the gun and firing over Ellen’s scream. The bullet seared into Moses’ left shoulder, but it didn’t stop the strong giant man. He leaped forth grabbing the gun from Dean and clutching it his hand. Swinging forward and down, he struck Dean in the side of the head, sending him spinning and immediately to the floor.

“Dean!” Ellen raced to him.

Slowly in a daze, Dean lifted to his feet. Blood flowed from his temple.

“No!” Ellen screamed out when she saw Moses extend his gun. Without hesitating, she leaped on his back, grabbing his arm in a struggle with a man three times her size. So big was he, that all it took was one good Moses shrug and Ellen lost her grip, sending her to the floor.

In an aim on a barely standing Dean, Moses fired. Dean jolted

sharply to his left, grabbed for the counter and fell helpless to the floor.

Another cry out from Ellen instinctively sent her to a fallen Dean, But Moses charged toward her. “No!” Quickly, she ran for the door that would bring her to the other mobile. Trying to think as she made her escape, she turned the lab lock on the door as she flung it open in hopes that Moses would follow her. He did.

The three foot corridor was not long enough. She made it to the other side waiting that split second for Moses to step into the corridor, and the lab door shutting behind him. In that instance, panicked filled, Ellen slammed the door to the other mobile. And against Moses’ desperate turning of the knob, she locked it. *Trapped! Trapped*, she thought. Backing up, breathing heavily, she raced for the other door. The crashing and loud bang of Moses breaking in went through her as if it were a jolt of electricity. Screaming, Ellen grabbed the front doorknob of the mobile, pulling, pulling and trying to unlock the door that was stuck.

She could hear him, she could smell him. She could feel him so near. Just as the door became free, Moses reached for her and Ellen flung the door open, taking Moses by surprise, and hitting him sharply in the hand. Knowing from his grunt she injured him, Ellen sped out screaming for the jeep. But as she closed in, she remembered, the keys weren’t there. They were in the mobile lab, with Dean and with . . . a radio. Knowing where she was safe, she headed full speed to the mobile lab. Maybe beat Moses, lock herself in the lab and pulled Dean with her to the special lab. That lab was bullet proof and shatter proof glass. She’d be safe with Dean until help arrived. Just as she reached for the door, just as she felt her safety net growing nearer, her hair was clutched abruptly and air was all that Ellen felt beneath her dangling feet. Letting out one more scream, a hand covered her mouth. And any control that Ellen had, any chance for help that she hoped for was gone. She was trapped within the arms of a man bigger and stronger than she. There was no escape.

^^^

Henry would be the first to admit it was jealousy that made him

leave the Slagel poker game at Dean's house. He used worry as an excuse to spy on Dean and Ellen who hadn't responded to a single one of his check in calls to them. And Henry had to wonder if maybe it wasn't jealousy, or worry, but some sort of intuition. The vision of what his headlights caught as he pulled near the mobile said it all. Reflecting first against the window, showing a long thick smudge of some sort, the lights then illuminated the outline of a body which lay just below that window. "No." Henry grabbed the flashlight from the seat and jumped from the jeep. He charged forth to the body, skidding down to a kneel as he reached him. A man on his side, bigger too--Bill. Rolling him over and sliding his hand to feel for a pulse, Henry knew. The brown hair of Bill sopping wet from the blood that poured from the open wound on the side of his skull told him it all. Grabbing Bill's shotgun, Henry stood up, pumped the chamber and headed to the mobile. His insides pulled and tugged and his stomach dropped when he saw the lab door open. Running in, it got worse. Blood was everywhere and Dean lay still in a small pool of it, center room. "Dean." Henry flew to him. Reaching for him. Touching him, Henry heard a soft moan. Knowing he was still alive he had someone else he had to find. "Ellen!" He cried out. "El!" Knowing she wasn't in the lab he charged toward the other mobile, hoping against hope she barricaded herself in there. The mobile door was locked. As soon as he opened it he knew his hopes were in vain. The other mobile's door was broke down. "El!" He called her name, if she were hiding maybe she'd know she was safe. "El!" He called out louder, turning on the lights, holding the shotgun and flashlight, and seeing a trail of blood as he ran through. Running through the livingroom and back outside, Henry stood in the cold dead silent grass. "Ellen!" He called out as loud and long as he could--nothing. Knowing Dean needed help, and so did Ellen somewhere, Henry though failing at keeping his cool ran back to the mobile lab.

Once inside he bent down to Dean and grabbed his radio, preparing to call for help. And then he saw it. It caught his eye laying on the floor. The neatly printed bible reference on the folded sheet of paper. Opening it, Henry's heart sunk even further when he read the message inside. *'You must take both of them to the gates of the town and stone them to death'* Fear struck Henry, fear like he had never known. Knowing it was a bible passage,

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and knowing who it had to be, Henry also realized where he had taken Ellen. With a trembling hand he depressed the radio's button. "Frank! Frank! I'm at the mobile. Bill is dead. Dean is shot bad and Ellen . . . Ellen is gone, Frank. Moses got her. He left a note. I'm going. I think he took her out the tunnels." Henry took a deep emotional breath as he wiped his head with the back of his hand. "I'm going after her." Hooking the radio to his belt he stood up. "Help is coming Dean, I have to get Ellen." Picking up his flashlight, Henry charged out. He stopped at Bill's body to grab an extra ammo clip and without hesitation he raced for the jeep.

The chairs at the diningroom table all fell over as the three Slagel men jumped to their feet when Henry's call came over Frank's hand held radio.

Frank flew toward the door, his heart racing. "Josh!" He yelled up the steps. "Watch your sister and brothers, there's been an emergency." He grabbed for his coat and pulled his revolver from his shoulder harness.

Joe, holding his own radio, charged at him. "Frank, hold up."

"Dad, I can't." Frank's eyes shifted as Robbie now stood with him. "I . . . we have to go find her."

"I know this." Joe held his hands up. "But we can't do it half ass. I'll grab Godrichson and we'll head up to the mobile for Dean. You and Robbie take ten minutes to get some gear together. While Godrichson is driving, I'll dispatch your men to ammo. Arm them. We'll send out five groups to scout all night. They couldn't have gotten that far, it hasn't been that long, they're on foot. Then after you get everyone suited up, I want you and Robbie to take the bikes, and head out to where Henry is going. He's alone. And if whoever this Moses is, has her. Henry may be heading in the right direction. He may need help."

Frank and Robbie agreed, and with frightful enthusiasm they raced to put Joe's plan in motion.

Henry shut off the jeep and stumbled in confusion. He felt he

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had lost all sense of direction, all sense of thought. Securing his shotgun, he grabbed the flashlight, the emergency pack and a blanket from the back of the jeep. He was right above the entrance to the tunnels. His inner feelings told him that was where they went, the blood by the ladder confirmed it.

Loaded up, but not too heavy, Henry climbed down and turned on his flashlight. He ran, without getting tired the whole four miles to the tunnels end only slowing enough to see another one of Beginnings guards dead. Slipping through the brush, Henry paused to think. The footsteps Robbie had found in the morning. Remembering Robbie saying that they headed north, That's the direction Henry decided to take--north.

With Ellen so strong on his mind, Henry trudged forth, praying the whole way that the blood that led him there was not hers. Henry did not walk. Though dark and dense and the terrain rough, he ran. He ran without stopping or losing his breath. Determination kept him going. Calling out gave him hope. Ellen was out there somewhere and Henry had to find her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

January 18

Beginnings, Montana

It was so damp, thick and cold, it burned against the skin of Ellen's fingers as if it were hot. That was what awakened her. On her stomach, she lay confused. Opening her eyes and shivering from the cold, she peered her focus--so blurred to her hand above her head. A right hand, fingers buried into the mud. Moaning so softly, she lifted her head slowly, taking in the fact that she wasn't in Beginnings anymore. The brown color of the winter spun around her in a fuzzy focus while the leaves crinkled beneath her knees as she weakly raised herself to a kneel.

So cold, so weak, Ellen tried to stand up, stumbling back down to the ground with each futile attempt. She felt so in a fog as she made yet another try at standing. Taking a deep breath, she coughed and she found herself in a stand. Immediately with her first step, everything spun again and Ellen's knees buckled, sending her back down. Grasping the ground in frustration with herself, Ellen took a moment to get her head together, readying herself to try it again. She wanted to go home.

"Henry calm down!" Frank bit his lip as he pulled the radio from his mouth. "He's losing it Robbie. Losing it."

"Let me try Frank." Robbie held out his hand for the radio. "You're upset too. And you yelling isn't helping." He pressed in the button. "Henry. Henry?"

"What?" Henry sounded so sad on the other end.

"Henry listen to me. We're on our way over to you. Just hold tight. Don't wander off too far. We'll join you to look for her. And Henry, stay focused." Robbie handed the radio back to Frank who had his head down as he straddled his motorcycle. "Frank?"

Frank gazed his eyes up taking the radio. "What if we don't find

her Robbie.”

“We will.” Robbie started his bike again. “We will.”

Henry’s feet kicked up leaves as he stammered to a stop in frustration. Three short breaths came from him as his head dropped forward. Taking one more long breath, he lifted his head high, crying out long and with his heart in one more desperation attempted. “ELLEN!” Hearing the echo of nothing, Henry legs grew weak and he lowered himself to the ground in near defeat.

Henry? Ellen’s head lifted from her stare at the ground. Did she just hear him? Or was it her imagination. “Oh God.” Giving it all she had, her chest feeling heavy, her body weak, Ellen brought herself to a stand calling out in hope and for help. “Henry!”

Henry’s head sprang up and he jumped to his feet. The rush he felt drove from his ears to his heart. “El!” Emotionally he smiled when he heard his name being called in response. “El! I coming!” Grabbing his radio he began to run to the voice. “Frank., I heard her. She’s calling me. She’s near.” With excitement he kept going.

Ellen’s body swayed as she walked. “Henry!” The ground felt as if it were slanted, so hard for her balance, so difficult to move and see. Listening in relief to Henry calling back, his voice soon was lost as another overshadowed his. One she recognized. But couldn’t see the man behind the strong voice.

“You have sinned against God!” Moses called out. “And according to the law of Moses your punishment is death! By stone!”

With one more step, Ellen heard it coming, it made it’s way through the trees, catching the air and landing hard just before her foot. She looked down at the large stone and fear, at that moment, struck her. And

then . . . so did a stone. Hitting her hard in the back, Ellen fell forward, covering her head and picking herself back up. Another one sailed down, crashing into her hand, then her arm. The wooded area began to turn around her, spinning, and spinning and she didn't know which way to turn.

Relief wasn't the emotion Henry felt when he saw Ellen, horrified was. Seeing Ellen desperately try to run from the objects that sailed through the air at her, and around her. "NO!" Henry called out from his gut, racing forth to her through the hail of hardened earth.

Reaching her, Henry picked her up and tried to run from the semi-clearing with her. Not far into his run, he heard Moses call out.

"Halt the stones!"

Silence, dead silence, as Henry stopped running, looking around, not knowing what to do when he saw Moses walking to him. Then not just Moses but soon a small army. Ten or twelve men, all holding striking objects in their hands, walked with haste to Henry and Ellen.

Henry set Ellen down, stepping before her. He raised his rifle at the wall of men who charged them with growing speed. Pumping the chamber he fired, down went one man. Henry fired again, and another went down. He wasn't fast enough to take them all down before they reached them with their blunt weapons. Before Henry knew it, he and Ellen were surrounded closely, the men and Moses held the clubs high.

Then it happened. Like rain during a drought, a waited on relief. Starting out slowly and building--the sound of motorcycle engines. Henry, like everyone else, looked to where the came from. Over the small grade, three feet in the air sailed Frank and Robbie on their bikes. He picked up Ellen into his arms knowing an escape would be imminent. Just as he lifted her, he heard the loud snarl of Moses and saw through the corner of his eye--seemingly in slow motion--Moses swinging down his large heavy object toward them. And then . . . he saw Frank.

Leaping from the moving bike, Frank hurled his body at Moses, crashing him to the ground in a roll at the same time his motorcycle did.

A single gunshot from Robbie as he rode and Robbie's call was Henry's sign. "Get her out!"

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Raging forward, Henry, carrying Ellen, took her off into the nearby brush, He set her down and positioned his weapon. Stepping out, but not too far from her, Henry proceeded to help out Robbie in taking out the ten remaining men who ran, scattered about, like chickens in a coop.

The gunfire went unnoticed to Frank who fought his own war. He had the advantage against Moses, Frank had anger, hurt and the frustration of his all night search behind every single blow he delivered to Moses. "I killed you once you fuck." Frank grabbed Moses by the hair, careening him face forward to meet his knee that raised with twice the force. Moses' eyes rolled behind his head and he fell backwards to the ground. Placing his heavy boot upon Moses' chest, Frank pulled out his revolver, clicking back the hammer and extending it downward to Moses' face.

"Frank stop!" Robbie called out. No more gun fire was happening. There was quiet and twelve dead men. "Just stop."

"What the fuck!" Frank looked at him, securing Moses with the weight behind his leg.

"There may be more men. Before you kill him. We should find out."

"He's not going to tell us Robbie!" Frank yelled keeping his eyes on Moses.

"Let me try." Robbie pleaded. "Let me try. But wait . . ."

Frank tossed his hands up, still securing Moses, watching Robbie run over and speak to Henry and Ellen. "He's conversing."

"O.K." Robbie trotted back. "Henry's taking her home. Now . . ." Robbie clapped his hands together. "Let's try this."

"Can I put my gun away."

"Um . . . yeah sure." Robbie answered and looked down at Moses. "Hey Reverend Thomas." He knelt down to Moses' level. "Do you happen to have anymore men running around out here that we should know about?"

First he grunted, then Moses answered. "Burn in hell."

"Thanks." Robbie stood up. "I guess we'll have to try something else." He took a few steps toward the legs of Moses. "Make sure he doesn't"

move Frank.” Robbie reached his hand to his own thigh and the strap there. He pulled out his hunting knife, gripping it firmly and point down. “Moses, I need some information. You will help. See . . . we *need* . . .” With a power grunt and all his strength Robbie drove the hunting knife directly and center into Moses’ kneecap. He smiled at the shrill scream of pain that immediately happened when the knife cracked its way through. “. . . to know if you have any more men.” Holding the knife, Robbie leaned to Moses’ face. “Huh? I can’t hear you.” Moses didn’t answer he only clenched his jaws. “Not helping?” Robbie gripped the knife. “Do you have . . .” He twisted the knife, another scream. “Any more men . . .” Another turn of the knife. “Running around . . .” Though tough, he made another turn. “Out here?” On his final word, with every thing he had, like a stake into the ground, Robbie rammed the hunting knife through.

He let out a long scream of pain, his face and neck so red.
“Yes!”

“Thanks!” Robbie smiled then grabbed the knife strapped to Frank’s leg. Gripping the same as he did with the other, he held it above Moses’ knee. “Now, where are they?”

“No.”

“Where!” Robbie nailed it, like a twin, identically in the same spot on his other knee. “Where?!”

“No!”

“Where!” Robbie yelled louder as he turned the knife.

He cried loudly in pain. “We have a camp . . .” Moses screamed, it gurgled deeply as it came out. “Four miles north of here.”

Another grin laced Robbie’s face as he stood up. “Four miles out.”

In a whisper, as if it mattered to Moses, Frank leaned toward his brother. “You think he’s being honest?”

Robbie shrugged. “Might as well check it out. But, we shouldn’t kill him in case he’s lying. Not yet. So, what should we do with him.”

After a moment’s thought, Frank nudged the one leg of Moses, saw it didn’t move, then nodded to Robbie. “He’s pretty secure. Let’s go check out that camp.”

That sounded good to Robbie, and Moses really wasn't going anywhere, so if the camp wasn't there and they needed more information, they knew where to find him.

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"Robbie!" Frank yelled over the helicopter noise as they flew outward to where Moses had directed them. "I think he lied." Frank held tight to the machine gun, staring out the open side door as his footing braced him.

"No way!" Robbie yelled back. "Check out at one o'clock."

Laughing loudly, Frank readied the machine gun as he saw below the camp. The men scattered about as they ran from their homes. Homes that consisted of old trailers and tents, a huge bon fire--probably their heat--was Robbie's guiding signal. "You ready Robbie?"

"I'm getting you there!" Bringing the bird down some Robbie positioned it for Frank.

With a wide grin, the rumbling of shots began, sending the thirty or so men below scurrying about as Frank aimed on purpose to the ground around them. Dirt sailed upwards as he chased them back into the camp with his bullets, being careful not to take out too many.

Robbie pulled the helicopter back turning away from the camp and circling back in. Then with a depress of a button, two small missel launched from the helicopter. They whistled as they flew, sailing to their target below.

Turning the helicopter just enough, but not too far that they couldn't see, Frank and Robbie watched as the once campsite below them, set in a large cleared area, shook from the delivered explosives and erupted into one huge roaring fireball below.

With the helicopter filled with brotherly cheers, Robbie and Frank headed back to Beginnings not more than a five minute flight away.

Like a spring, Ellen bounced up, but not without a moan of pain. The spinning room slowly came into focus, but she smelled it long before she saw it and she knew she was safe within the clinic.

Gently, Jason Godrichson laid a hand on her shoulder. "Just relax."

"Dean?" Ellen looked around. "IS Dean all right?"

Jason nodded. "Dean will be fine. The stomach would will keep him down for a while, but the head injury seems fine."

"Head injury? Jason, can he see?"

Jason snickered. "Of course, Ellen, where in the world did that come from."

Still feeling rattled, Ellen shook her head. "What about Frank, Robbie, Henry?"

"Fine." Jason answered. "I need to speak to you, but I feel it may not be my place. So . . ." Jason looked behind him, Joe walked in. "I called your father."

Ellen's eyes shifted. "What did I do?"

Joe smiled and closed the examining room door. "How are you sweetheart? Jason, how is she?"

"Aside from what we need to discuss. She's fine." Jason answered.

"Good." Joe walked over to Ellen, kissed her on the cheek and grabbed her hand. "Now, my question right now is why? Why are you hiding it. What's wrong?" Joe asked and saw Ellen's confusion. "Jason, could you?"

"Sure." Jason stepped forward. "Let's just say Ellen, it's fortunate for you I did standard blood tests before I did any x-rays."

Ellen's head sunk deep into the pillow.

Joe intervened. "Jason suggests, you're a couple months along. Is there a reason you didn't let this out. Is it because you want to work on the virus."

"No." Ellen slowly shook her head. "It's because I don't know who the father is."

“Christ.” Joe covered his eyes. “Ellen there really shouldn’t be a question considering you finally reunited with my son a month ago. You’re further along than that.”

“In this time frame.” Ellen said. “Remember Joe *I* went back with Henry to save Dean. This body, in that time frame slept with Dean on November 1st, but in my grief, I slept with Frank not a week later, both still falling in my fertile period.”

“May I?” Jason interjected. “She has a problem.”

Joe grunted. “Thank you Einstein.”

“No, Joe. She’s correct.” Jason said. “It doesn’t matter who she did or didn’t sleep with in *this* time frame. Whoever impregnated her in *that* time frame is still the father.”

“Joe.” Ellen looked to him. “So what do I do. We can’t have a repeat of Joey.”

“And . . . and we won’t.” Joe assured. “We’ll handle this. When Frank get’s back, we’ll . . . we’ll handle.” Plopping down to the chair next to Ellen’s bedside, Joe exhaled. “Oh, Boy.”

^^^

Positioned and quiet, that was how Joe had Frank, Dean and Ellen.

Frank next to Dean’s bed, Dean sitting up and Ellen facing them like they were her jury.

Joe paced around. “Dean, I apologize for doing this when you are still recovering, but it’s at the same time or not at all. O.K.” he saw Dean hadn’t a clue what he meant. “You’ll understand after I say this. Before we get into the reason for this gathering. I want to explain something so emotions don’t get out of hand.” Joe cringed when he saw Frank’s hand raise. “Yes, Frank.”

“O.K., maybe it’s because I’ve recently become literary and all, but . . . you’re not making sense.”

“Speaking of that.” Dean adjusted in the bed. “I gave you more time. What’s going on with the Frank novel?”

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“Dean, please.” Frank closed his eyes. “I’m getting there. And soon, your little ass will be saying, ‘Frank, you literary guy, you.’”

Joe just rolled his eyes. “Can we just move on with this. Thank you. Let’s see how I can start. Once upon a time . . .”

“Dad. If you’re sharing your creative work, could you not? I don’t want it to mess up my writing night tonight.”

“Frank.” Joe winced. “I’m not being creative. Just try to follow me.”

“Where?”

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “Listen. Once upon a time, there was a time that you two don’t remember. It was the time frame when Dean was dead.” Joe spoke slow. “Now, Ellen remembers that time frame. And given that it was about two months ago, we’ve deducted that the ‘Dean is dead’ time frame is when Ellen . . . is when Ellen conceived the baby she’s carrying,”

Ellen sunk into her chair.

“Oh, yeah.” Frank clenched his fist. “I’m good with this time frame shit. You El, were pregnant already when you brought Dean back.”

Ellen nodded.

“And!” Frank held up a finger. “In that time did you sleep with me? I mean, Dean was dead, so did you?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded.

“But.” Joe interrupted. “Before you claim victory here, Frank. Ellen, she also slept with Dean in that time frame.”

“Ellen slept with Dean in the Dean is dead time frame?” Frank said.

“Yes.” Joe responded.

“Oh, my God.” Frank gasped. “She slept with Dean when he was dead?”

“No!” Joe yelled. “Before he died. Right before he died.”

“Oh.” Frank said relief. “El? You cheated on me?”

“He died Frank so it didn’t count.” Ellen defended.

Frank nodded. “Still. No argument the kid is mine.”

Dean, who was a bit out of it, snapped his attention to Frank.

“How do you figure that?”

“You were dead.” Frank told him.

“Not when I deposited my sperm.” Dean snapped. “And the odds are in my favor that the kid is mine. You’ve only fathered one in six years.”

“No way. Two. Are you forgetting about the one El lost?” Frank asked.

“No, that’s the one I counted.” Dean said.

“Yeah.” Frank came back. “So two. Brian as well.”

“Three!” Joe yelled out. “Joey, remember.”

“Yeah.” Frank snapped. “That’s right. See, three I’m winning. So it’s mine. Doesn’t matter. This time frame, that time frame.” He shrugged. “That stupid Beginnings relationship law went into effect, signed by council last year. Whoever is the primary, or in our case, the husband.” Frank pointed to his own chest. “They are the father. Period. So you’re out. Green eyes and blonde hair like Brian. Like Brian the kid is mine.” Frank looked proud of himself.

Cringing and fearing--though a slim possibility--that Frank could figure out his last statement, Joe decided to change the subject. “O.K. There will be no arguments. None. When this child is born then it will be determined whose it is. Until then, it’s a Slagel by default of name.” Joe clapped once to finalize the discussion. “And speaking of Slagel’s. Good job today Frank. And you didn’t tell me. Which one of you finished off Moses?”

“Well we . . . I . . .” Frank’s eyes widened in revelation. “Shit!” Jumping from his chair, Frank flew from the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

George's fingers were an immediate substitution for a comb at the moment. Running them through his tossed grey hair to push it down from his slumber on the sofa. "And?" He asked Steward.

"They'll make another attempt to reach the back gate." Steward replied.

"What happened to them the first time. Our contact said they were there, our troop wasn't."

"They had to retreat. They reported on route they saw a very big Beginnings soldier shoot a big red haired man who was nailed to the ground through his kneecaps."

"Frank." George shook his head. "But they are returning to the gate tonight?"

"Yes." Steward said. "So I'm taking it our contact got what we need."

"And more."

"Will they know it's missing."

George shrugged. "Hard to tell. A lot of damage was done at the mobile lab. They could think it was just destroyed. But, even if they deduct it was taken by us, which I doubt, they're going to look at Rev. Thomas. And by doing so, they'll look at a deadman."

"You don't think they'll suspect someone else on the inside?" Steward asked.

"Nope." George said with certainty. "After the Rev. Thomas fiasco, I highly doubt that they'll even suspect another bad seed running around Beginnings. If they do, our contact said it was a pretty clean job. No evidence to point to other than Rev. Thomas. And even if there is minor evidence, who in Beginnings is going to look that close to find it?"

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

If little Brian's face were food, he would have been gone for the amount of times Robbie's lips pressed against him. He held Brian tightly, the little full face of the baby close to his own, smiling and brushing his nose against Brian's. "Uncle Robbie has to go now." He kissed the baby again. "Jenny, are you sure you're all right with all these kids. I can take them."

"No." Jenny waved her hand. "John is going to be in and out of the house all night. I can use the company." She ran her hand down Brian's head. "Besides Robbie, you look really exhausted."

"To be honest with you. I am." Robbie hugged Brian and handed him to Jenny. "Thanks for letting me stop by."

"No problem." She cradled the baby. "But I can tell, this one is your favorite."

Robbie grabbed his coat and slipped it on, he adjusted the collar as he moved to the front door. As his hand reached for it, it opened and John walked in. "John."

"Robbie." At first John's stares were cold. "Stopping by to see the kids?"

"Yeah." Robbie waved to Jenny. "Thanks again."

John stopped him. "Oh Robbie, I just wanted to say, good job today. Though Ellen and us haven't seen eye to eye, really it was a shame what happened. We were both very worried, could you pass that on to her?"

Robbie nodded. "Sure . . . I'll uh, pass it on."

John extended his hand to Robbie. "Good job again, and tell her she is was in our prayers."

"I will." Robbie gripped John's hand and shook it, looking down as he did. Before releasing it, he turned it over. "What uh, what happened to your fingers." Robbie motioned his head and referred to the three scratches across the tops of his index and middle finger.

"Oh that?" John pulled his hand away. "Check this odd thing out. I was working on that generator room door again and my hand got caught again. I pulled it out. Third time that's happened."

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Robbie pointed, then zipped his jacket. “Ought to tell you something John.” It was difficult for Robbie to be pleasant, but he acted the part well. “I’ll give Ellen your best.” He moved to the open door, took one more look back at John, letting his eyes examine the scratches once again, and then he left.

Robbie wanted to stop by and hang with Ellen. But seeing that he had to pass his and his father’s home anyhow on the way to Dean’s, Robbie figured he might as well grab something to eat.

Mistake. He knew going home was a mistake when he walked in the door. The first thought hitting him *‘God, why don’t I have my own place?’* when he saw his father, Forrest and Jason sitting at the table having dinner. “Hey.” He shut the door as he walked in.

Joe lowered his napkin. “Wanna eat with us? Forrest brought dinner over.”

Following the aroma to the table, Robbie peered to the brownish, gravy looking mixture on the table. “Cooked huh Forrest? What is it?”

Forrest swallowed his food first. “I dot I wooed muck a famous dish of mun.”

“Really?” Robbie went into the kitchen and grabbed a small plate and fork. He came back in. “It smells interesting, what is it?” He dished some for himself bringing it close to his nose and sniffing it.

“Chic-coon bulls.” Forrest smiled.

Robbie looked down at Joe. “What is this called?”

“He made chicken balls.”

Robbie lifted his fork. “Chicken balls? Wasn’t it a little difficult getting them?” Letting out a grunt as Joe back handed him in his gut, Robbie tried them. “Taste like chicken.”

“It is chic-coon. I mush it up und muck unto bulls.”

“Oh.” Robbie made a face as he mashed the food around in his mouth. “Hmm, interesting.” He set the plate on the table. “See ya guys.” He moved to the door.

“Hey.” Joe called him. “Where you going? We’re heading down to the social hall after dinner. Did you wanna come?”

“Nah, I’m going to head over and see Ellen then got to bed.”

“Why did you come home first then?” Joe asked.

“To eat.”

Jason indicated to the amount of food. “Then eat Robbie.”

“Uh . . .” Robbie smiled. “Nah.” He shook his head. “I think I’ll just raid El’s fridge. See ya.” Making a quick escape from the three men and their chicken balls, Robbie stepped outside pulling the door closed behind him. Before he started to walk, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke from his mouth long and slow. Raising his shoulders to adjust his jacket, he began to head to Ellen’s. He walked at a good pace, fast but not too fast, taking in the briskness of the air. Smelling the aroma of winter and the scent that filled the air just before it snowed.

Robbie tossed his still burning cigarette when he got to Dean’s house and knocked once. He heard Ellen yell ‘come in’. Sticking his head in first to make sure, he called out. “El?”

Ellen tilted back her head from the couch with a smile. “Come in. Look who’s here.” She pointed to Denny and Josh who stood before her. “Just in time.”

“Just in time for what?” Robbie unzipped his coat. “Can I visit for a while?”

“Please.” She patted the cushion next to her. “Sit and watch this.”

Tossing his coat on the chair, Robbie pushed up his sleeves as he sat down next to Ellen. “Sit and watch what? Are they singing for you?”

“No.” Ellen answered. “They stopped by because Andrea sent me brownies. Brownies mind you and the boys were just about to perform for me.”

Denny nodded with excitement. “Yeah Robbie, we learned to speak French. And good too. Forrest taught us. We’re gonna speak french for Ellen. Tell us El. Tell us something to say.”

“O.K. let’s see.” Ellen felt Robbie get up. “Where are you going, Robbie?”

“I’m starved.” Robbie pointed to the kitchen. “I’m raiding your fridge.”

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Ellen waved him off then re-faced the boys. "Sorry. All right, let's see. Something simple. Tell me your names."

Denny stood up straight. "Ma numb es don-nee."

Josh smiled "Good." He cleared his throat. "En ma numb es Joe-Shh."

Ellen opened her mouth to speak, but didn't when she heard the high pitch laughing coming from Robbie in the kitchen. Trying to stay serious she smiled at the boys. "Good job. Sounds like you speak it fluently."

Denny nodded. "Whatever that means. Forrest didn't even teach us, we learned it from him."

Josh added to his sentiment. "And we learned it like this." He snapped his finger. "Go on Denny, tell her why we are here. And tell her in french."

"Way comb here ta bring El-loon brown-nays." Denny said proudly. "See? Anyway we should go, my mom said get right home."

"Yeah." Josh bent down and kissed Ellen on the cheek. "God-nut El-loon."

Denny nudged Josh playfully as they headed to the door. "Man, you do that so much better than me. You have to teach me."

Robbie waited until he knew it was safe, and then he came from the kitchen. A smile on his face, a bowl in his hand. "How did you not laugh at them El?"

"Years of living with your brother was good practice." She waited for Robbie to sit. "What did you find?"

Robbie showed her. "Some white stuff and vegetables."

"Rice, Robbie." Ellen touched the bowl. "Oh that's cold. Heat it up."

"Nah, I'm fine." He shoveled some in his mouth.

"So what do I owe this visit. You look tired." She touched his face.

"I am, but I wanted to talk to you. Do you feel like talking? Seriously talking?"

"Sure." Ellen faced him, bringing her one leg up to the sofa. She rested her elbow on the back of the couch and propped her head on her

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hand. "Shoot."

"First off." Robbie kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks for rebuilding the population. I heard I'm going to be an uncle again. Of course, my biological father bet is on Dean."

"Henry thinks it's Frank." Ellen said. "Of course, I think he's just saying that because Frank told him he can experience this pregnancy since Henry may never get that."

Robbie chuckled. "Awfully big of my brother sharing a woman whose no longer his wife. Speaking of my brother, isn't he staying here tonight?"

"Yes, but he's down stairs in the basement with Henry. They're hooking up that one microchip to an old computer." Ellen laid her finger over Robbie's lips. "Before you ask. Frank knows nothing about microchips. But he thinks since he is writing a novel he acquired instant knowledge to things he hasn't a clue on. So . . ." She tapped his knee. "The reason for the visit."

"Aside to check on you?" Setting down his bowl of food, Robbie faced Ellen. "I need to talk to you El." He laid his hand on hers. "A lot of things aren't sitting well with me. So, I need you to tell me everything you remember about . . . last night."

^^^

Forrest seemed so angry as he sat next to Jason at the bar in the social hall. He slammed his drink down with a bang, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No. Tell him Josef. Tell Jay-soon dat he is wrung."

Joe, who poised himself behind the bar facing them like a bartender, just raised his hands. "I'm just the third party here Forrest, I can't say either way."

Jason shook his head. "I'm telling you Forrest. It is the computer."

"No, no, no. It is note. I dink dat you should look at it from my punt of view. I believe it is a sun. Lot me try my idea."

“I tried it Forrest, I really did.”

“Boot Jay-soon, dat is you. You are note me. Woot do you dink I study all my life? I knew Woot I am tucking a-butt.”

“Aren’t you just being the arrogant little scientist.” Jason argued. “You want to try, you go on and try. It’s not the power supply, it’s the computer and if you think that by coming up with a new power supply is the answer. By all means do it.” Jason finished his drink. “Right Joe? But I bet you anything, you are wrong.”

“Oh you want ta butt me huh? All-rut I well butt you. I butt you any ding.”

“Deal.” Jason extended his hand. “You start tomorrow working on it and we’ll come up with a bet. Joe’s our witness.”

Joe poured himself a drink. “I’m your witness.”

“And I well win. Coos Jay-soon.” Forrest crossed his arms. “I well show you. I well fax de machine with a new power sue-ply. You watch.”

Joe watched Jason snicker in a taunting manner agitating even more the irritated little scientist. But Joe didn’t mind too much. Anything, anything that could move the project along, was better than what they were doing. Anything that would get the time machine back up and running properly was just fine with Joe.

^^^

Frank heard the laughter, as he reached, arms full for his front door. A duffle bag was over his shoulder, a box in his arms. He smiled when he stepped inside, an odd smile, the aroma of alcohol blasting him. He had a houseful. When he walked out not twenty minutes earlier, only Robbie and Henry were there. But his not only did his father decide to visit, he brought with him the two eccentric scientist. “What’s going on?” Frank kicked the door closed with his foot.

Surrounded by company, Ellen looked up from the couch. “Joe was tired of mediating a fight at the hall, so he brought it here. Now it’s a party.”

Joe, who was seated next to Ellen, moved over a spot. “Come

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on, join us Frank. Talk with us.”

Frank nodded. “Yeah, I will. Let me take this upstairs.”

“Frank?” Ellen asked with curiosity. “What do you have?”

“Oh, it’s your things. I thought I’d start bringing them over from Dean’s since you’re back home for good. I’ll be right down.” Belongings in arm, Frank trotted up the stairs.

Silence hit the livingroom, and Ellen felt all eyes were upon her. And they were. She looked at the staircase then back to her company. “Excuse me.”

“Frank?” Ellen spoke softly walking into the bedroom.

“Hey El.” Frank stood before an open closet. “I really thought you had more clothes than this. I grabbed . . .”

“Frank stop.” Ellen walked to the bed grabbing a shirt of hers from his hand. “I’m not staying here with you for good. Just until Dean gets out of the clinic.”

“El, I know you’re confused on whose baby this is. I know it. But we were married when it was conceived. Dean signed that stupid petition too. Laws were established to stop any of this. Under that new paternity law, it’s my baby. I like that.”

Ellen nodded. “Frank. I don’t want to view this baby as anyone’s but yours. I believe with all of my heart this baby isn’t Dean’s.”

Frank smiled. “See? So you have to stay here. We have a baby coming and we . . .”

“And we are no longer married.”

“That can be changed.”

“No Frank.” Ellen stopped him from doing anymore. She spoke with reason. “We had the chance to change that. We tried. We failed. You broke up the marriage to me for a reason. It has to be stuck too. I wouldn’t have broke up, Frank. I wouldn’t have. But it’s done. Now just because I’m having a baby doesn’t mean you can change your mind. It isn’t right.”

“It isn’t right that were not together on this El.”

“Married together Frank. We can do this together. You can be there though the pregnancy. You can hear the heartbeat, make sure I eat

right. Touch and feel the baby kick. Be there when he's born. After he's born you will be a father. But . . . we won't be doing this as a married couple. We will do it in the way we planned. As friends."

Frank closed his eyes, sitting on the bed. "I don't understand why you can't still live with me. All right, I said I'd stick to my guns. I will. I'll let you go. But . . . it's my kid El. Can't you live with me as a friend. You live with Dean as a friend. Or is that not true?"

"It's very platonic right now between me and Dean. But in all fairness of the situation, I won't stay with Dean either. After he's on his feet. I'm getting housing issued."

"Are you taking all the kids?"

"I'm not uprooting them, no. I'll see them like I do now."

Frank laughed. "El, council won't issue you a house for yourself. Unless you have a roommate . . ." All expression dropped from Frank's face. "Who?"

"It's strictly as friends. I'm moving in with . . . Robbie. We spoke to Joe . . ."

"Enough." Frank immediately stood up. "Please I don't . . ." Through his breath he spoke in a whisper. "My brother." Frank covered his face with his hand then slid it off his face with a change of attitude. "You know what? I . . . I'm . . . You're right. We are supposed to go back to being friends. We can't do that El if we live together. We'd end up fighting. There would be stress, and it can't be good for the baby. You know, maybe, maybe staying with, with Robbie is a good idea."

"Frank listen to me." Ellen grabbed his hand. "We have to do this."

"We can do this." Frank embraced Ellen. "I'll be by you too, through this whole thing. I want to." Taking a controlling breath, Frank closed his eyes and pulled away. He kissed Ellen softly. "I'll uh, finish putting your things away . . . not for good. For wrinkle purposes." Kissing her cheek then touching it, Frank walked back to the closet.

There was a lot of laughter at the house. The kids ran around, everyone talked and Frank, Frank stood off to the back alone. He had found

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a bottle of moonshine, and he poured himself a glass. Sipping it Frank took in the night. Laughing when he thought he should, never knowing what he was laughing or smiling about because his mind was elsewhere. Elsewhere on Ellen.

A lot of reality hit Frank that night. Listening to stories he hadn't heard in years. Stories about Robbie's teenage infatuation with Ellen. One Frank was certain grew into an adult infatuation. All stories stemming from the new housing situation that would entail. What a chord that struck. A painful chord.

As the evening wore on, along with the numbing effects of the alcohol he consumed, a truth hit Frank. He knew he had his reasons to end his marriage with Ellen. But did he take the steps too fast, and in too center of his hurt over Joey? Frank wasn't lonely. He'd never be lonely. He had his children and he did have a strong friendship with Ellen, one he knew would never fade. But what he didn't have, *was* Ellen. Staring at her he realized that he didn't just set her free, he set her to be with someone else.

Frank finished his drink and poured another. And it was easier with that drink in his hand to face the fact that Ellen may have been in his house, but she wasn't in his home. A part of him felt it would have been easier knowing Ellen would be living with Dean. He had become accustomed, in a sense to the Dean and Ellen relationship. But Ellen living with Robbie was different. Even though it would be strictly friends, Robbie and Ellen had an underlying bond that was deeper since time was rippled. Robbie himself, was different. Unlike any other man in Ellen's life, Robbie had no expectations. That was exactly what Ellen needed. And with that hard core fear running in his mind, Frank downed another drink.

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Robbie's ears hurt so badly from the frigid wind that whipped against them as he rode his motorcycle with speed out to the mobile lab. The single spotlight outside the quantum lab gave some light to the very dark area. An area almost spooky. Pulling on his leather gloves, Robbie shut off the bike and grabbed a flashlight. He reached for the keys Ellen had given him

that he placed in his jacket pocket. And walking in a long outward circle, he made his way to the lab door and unlocked it.

He flicked on the lights to the mess that laid untouched. A scene of the night before stared back at him. Remembering Ellen's mentioning of a note, Robbie walked to the turned over table by the window. "A note. What note?" Robbie looked around the floor and he saw it, the small note. He bent down, picked it up and read it. The words that Ellen told him. The words that foretold of her stoning.

In the lab, with the exception of the total disarray of equipment, the scene fit Ellen's story. The blood by the door where Dean shot Moses. The pool of blood on the floor where Dean had laid. Red tainted finger tip smears on the counter where Dean had gripped before falling.

Robbie followed the trail of blood and the details of Ellen's story. They led him into the other mobile, He turned on the lights as he walked in. The trail consisting of blood droplets and bloody footprints led to the livingroom. Ellen claimed to have struggled with the door before hitting Moses with it. The blood by the door and the splattering of it onto the coffee table confirmed that.

I thought if I made it to the lab," He heard Ellen explaining. "I could lock him out and pull Dean into the special lab until help arrived. But just as I got to the door. He grabbed me by my hair. And he held me there. And . . . I, I don't remember what happened next. I guess I passed out.'

Looking at the collection on the floor, then looking outside, Robbie's mind began to spin in confusion and he raced back to his bike. He grabbed the knapsack he had strapped there, in a dart through the cold, he brought it into the lab and opened it up. Ellen's dirty clothes from the night before. Evidence he just wanted to piece all together. Robbie didn't know why at first, but as he stared at her clothes. He did.

It was obvious that Dean shot Moses and that Moses chased Ellen. A constant trail, steady, showed signs of an oozing man. But Ellen's insistence that Moses caught her just before she stepped inside the mobile lab, brought the most important and puzzling question to Robbie's mind as he stared down at Ellen's dirty clothes. If Moses was the one who grabbed her and lifted her then why wasn't there any blood, anywhere on Ellen's

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clothes?

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

January 26

Bowman, North Dakota

A mere speck Elliott was as he walked through the barren blizzard tainted streets. He looked more like a lone survivor making his way through a nuclear winter than second in command on a mission to find the Captain in a growing small town.

The school building that used to house grades kindergarten through eight sat on the road about a half mile out of town. He could see the steam generated from the horses mouths, as it seeped out of the recently erected metal barn next to the school. Even though the howling wind he could hear the animals, and it made Elliott cringe.

He stomped the snow from his boots and flicked the flakes from his head when he walked inside. It was eerie, the lit school, classroom doors closed, the mumbling of voices seeping through.

Elliot could have thought it a bit strange that classes were being held, but he found it an uniquely intelligent approach diverting something he had seen a lot of through the years . . . cabin fever. Winter was a time when the world shut down. Activity diminished. People hibernated. And in Bowman, scouting parties were pulled in because of the weather. The same men who could have been just sitting around, eating ration, trying to bide their time while going crazy, were not only learning physical skills indoors, but intellectual ones as well. Of course Elliott argued that the ‘etiquette class’ that he himself taught, should have been obsolete.

He made his way down the corridors listening to the escaping sounds of the instructors teaching classes such as, algebra, American history, and Latin. And then he reached the last room, the largest one, the class the Captain taught.

Elliott had to chuckle. The Captain posted the suggestion of the class as a joke. But when the men found out--via Elliott--that the Captain himself would be teaching the class, everyone thought it was a brilliant idea

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for a winter diversion and signed up. The Captain was stuck.

Elliott hated to interrupt. It was amusing listening to the Captain conduct his Shakespearean literature class. Reading the works with pose and eloquence, when not the night before he was trying to bribe Elliott to teach the class. A class on the works of a man the Captain described as being, *'an eccentric little cross dresser who was probably on a crack equivalent when he wrote Hamlet.'*

It was time to be a savior, after hearing one more Shakespearean line, Elliott knocked and stepped inside.

The Captain smiled. "Sgt. Ryder, are you joining us? We need a Juliet."

Withholding any sarcasm, Elliott shook his head. "Hating to disturb you sir, but I need not pull you away momentarily. There seems to be a problem that needs your attention at the House of Women."

It was a huge scale of debate for the Captain. Shakespeare or Grace. Choosing the lesser of the evils, he set down his book, appointed a classroom substitute and walked out into the hall with Elliott.

"What's going on?" The Captain asked.

Elliott raised his eyebrows. "They have another request. They would like it now."

"Now? Right now? Two feet of snow in the ground and they have a request." The Captain tried to remain calm. "I know, I know. I started this. Shut up." Pulling his bandana from the back of his pants, The Captain placed it on as he walked down the hall. "But, I'll tell you Elliott." He spoke as he moved. "They can't do it. I don't believe there's an item they can name that we haven't, over the past month, thought ahead on. All of us men, placing our heads together, came up with one heck of a obscure women's supply list. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes. And we've kept up very well with it." Elliott opened the main doors for the Captain. "And I plan to keep it that way." The Captain spoke as he walked toward the barn, ignoring the pelting snow. "We as gentlemen, aim to please. And beastly spoiled women or not, as gentlemen . . ." The Captain winked. "We are prepared for anything they ask for.."

Elliott knew it was bad by the expression on the Captains face

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when he emerged from the House of Women. “Well?” He asked the Captain.

After a heavy, very heavy breathed, the Captain nodded once. “It’s a war game to them Elliott. And I will not be defeated. I will not.” Eyes ahead on his awaiting horse, the Captain handed Elliott s very small slip of paper and stepped off the porch.

Elliott, lost watched the Captain mount the animal and he peeked at the request. Immediately he looked back up to see the Captain trotting away. “Chai tea?”

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It was a small private room located on the third floor of the medical facility. George stepped from it pulling the door closed as he moved into the hall. “He’s thin.”

“That was the month in solitaire.” Sgt. Doyle stated. “We plan on working on that.”

“Are you sure we can trust his choice?” George asked as they began to walk at a slow conversing pace.

“Absolutely.” Sgt. Doyle assured. “It’s not the society he wants to turn his back on, it’s what he was doing. He fully understands that we have to harness the women for the best interest of the future. He just doesn’t want to be a part of that anymore. Also . . . the two brothers help.”

“The insurance. You’ve located them?” George asked.

“Yes. One is outside of Norfolk the other up near Minnesota. Actually, Allan Boyens is part of the special teams that were placed near Beginnings. I sent word to both Boyens brothers to correspond via inner Society mail to Jess. Their CO’s are making them aware of Jess’ depressed nature.” Sgt. Doyle spoke snide. “The letters will work to our advantage. Allowing Jess to see the realism that his brothers are alive and out there. Also, with winter, and survival sweeps basically geared toward the underground societies, I’ll have more time on my hand to personally oversee his behavioral manipulation and training. I’d like to have him prepped to go

with or before the virus.”

“A back up of sorts?” George liked that idea. “Of course, we have to get the antiserum and things ready first. We can’t have inside people not immune to what we’re hitting Beginnings with. But then again at the rate we’re going. We may not have to worry about any virus. Inside infiltration may have to be our answer.” At that moment George saw Steward step from the elevator.

Steward smiled when he saw George. “Just who I was looking for.” He made his way to George and Sgt. Doyle. “Just heard from Dr. Burke and his team.”

George grumbled. “Trust me when I tell you I dread that.”

“Well, you may not.” Steward said upbeat. “Burke and his team have been reviewing what we got from Beginnings. He said they have a few more tests to confirm then he personally is coming in to see you.”

“Did he saw why?” George questioned.

“Not specifically but . . .” Steward gave a pleased raise to his eyebrows. “He did say, he believes he brings the good news you’ll want to hear.”

With a subtle clench of his fist and a quiet ‘yes’ in an assumption of what that news was, George gave a little skip of excitement and started walking again. His day was getting better.

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### Beginnings, Montana

The ground crunched as Frank walked beyond the back gate. The temperature dropping so low the night before, any snow that remained out there was hard, slippery and sometimes, fun. He canvassed the area for footprints. Not that he expected to find any, never in the history of Beginnings had anyone wandered near in the dead of winter. The terrain and snow made it impossible. That thought also gave Beginnings their safety net against the SUTs, knowing fully that even they, would have to hold up somewhere until mother nature lessened her fury.

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Carrying his clipboard, a small map of the area attached. A hand drawn map with lines through it, was divided up into sections, each section was scratched off if it was clear. All of them so far on that morning were. Making his way in, zig zagging through each section, Frank stepped into S-8. It laid just adjacent to the road that was barely seen through the snow. Cautiously looking only at the ground, keeping his ears open and radio on. But his senses were in full alert, perhaps that's why Frank knew it the moment it happened. A crack, a whistle and then . . . an arrow. Frank let out a painful grunt as it connected with him. It pierced his flesh on his upper thigh, burning, aching and feeling as if it had hit bone. Blood seeped out around the dark metal head of it. "Fuck." He spoke low then looked down at the arrow again, the second time speaking louder. "Fuck!" He broke off the arrow just below the head. His eyes shifted to the clipboard, and he snarled, slamming his bloody hand against the paper, shouting his frustrations and pain from his gut. "FUCK!" His one word echoed through the trees, repeating itself over and over. Frank stopped to listen to his own voice as it faded in a special effect through the wilderness. Taking a minute to amuse himself at that, he returned to being pissed off and headed to his bike.

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Henry wearing a coat? Joe had to close his eyes and look again. That tall lanky body, clad in a dark brown leather jacket couldn't be Henry. If it wasn't for the longish hair, Joe would have thought it someone else sealing the doorway to storage building five. "Henry? What are you doing?"

Borderline agitated, Henry moved about his arms, bringing them back up to the archway he worked on. "Hey Joe, seal is coming off. I didn't expect it to last this long, guess we're lucky. So what's up?"

"I'm looking for Robbie. I checked the mechanical schedule he's not on it. Where is he?"

"At the mobile."

"Still?" Joe shook his head. "Why? Don't you need him in mechanics?"

"Sure." Henry worked as he talked. "But, since I'm not at the

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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quantum lab anymore--which by the way no one gets in there since Jason and Forrest started their project--I have more time for mechanics. He says he's doing something up there. He explained. I agreed."

"It was pretty messy. He's probably still putting it back together and helping to clean."

"He's not cleaning it." Henry stated.

"He's not? What is Christ's name is he doing?" He watched Henry look at him then turn away. "Henry?"

"Ask your son."

"I'm asking you. He's been up there for days. What is he doing?"

"You should ask your son."

"Fine." Joe huffed. "Be that way." He hopped back in his jeep to where he would find the answer to that question, obviously he wasn't getting it from Henry.

Joe pulled up to the area where the mobile lab and quantum lab where set. He parked on the road's end just beside the quantum lab. Joe chuckled as he stepped from the jeep and saw the big sign on the quantum lab door, the one that read 'Do not disturb'. Shaking his head in amusement at the sounds of arguing and banging that came from the quantum lab, Joe headed straight to the mobile.

The lab door was locked, he jiggled the handle then knocked. "Robbie."

A click-click and the door opened, Robbie peeked out first then opened the door wider. "Hey Dad, come on in. But walk between the lines please so you don't mess anything up."

"Walk between the . . ." Joe stepped in carefully. Everything looked worse than when he was there a week earlier. "You and Ellen are supposed to be cleaning this place."

"We are, sort of. El's handling the contagious stuff. And working on it. I'm doing the rest."

"Robert, what is going on? This place isn't clean. It looks . . ." Joe peered around. "It looks like a major investigation. Samples Robbie." He picked up an envelope and peeked inside. "Is this a hair?"

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Robbie took it from him and set it in a box. "One of sixty I found."

"Sixty? What for? Why are you collecting evidence so to speak? And why wasn't I notified of this?"

"First, we really never had an investigation in Beginnings so I figured it was security. Frank heads that, I told him I wanted to look further into it, he gave his O.K., and second Dad, second . . . I feel that there is more than meets the eye with this Reverend Thomas gone bad thing. We know he's been communicating with men outside. What happens if there are more *in* Beginnings. I know for a fact that there was someone else here besides Reverend Thomas that night." Robbie motioned with his hand. "This way . . . walk between my lines." He pointed as he explained. "First he broke the door, Dean shot him. Reverend Thomas then struck Dean, shot him and went after Ellen. Here's where it gets interesting. Dad, all over this place there's blood. A trail. The man bled bad."

Joe looked around at the blood on the lab floor carefully taped off. "I see that."

"And . . . it goes all the way through the other trailer confirming Ellen's story. But Ellen said from the living trailer, he chased her outside and grabbed her. That's where I had my biggest problem. . I was beginning to think that she may have remembered wrong. Because there was a larger amount of blood right by the livingroom door over there."

"As if he stood still. So what made you change your mind of thinking," Joe asked.

"I went over the area outside, no trail of blood. And there isn't any at the lab door where Ellen says he grabbed her. No sense because . . ." Robbie led his father across the lab. Between the lines please. Here." From a box he lifted Ellen's clothes. "Look at these. For a man who was bleeding. For a man who grabbed her and took her out of Beginnings. What is missing?"

Joe examined the articles. "Blood. There is no blood."

"Right. Meaning, she didn't fly out of Beginnings and she certainly didn't go on her own. Someone else grabbed her and took her out. Someone right here in Beginnings."

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“O.K. .Robbie I will congratulate you on your keen insight, however, you’re missing one very important piece of this story. The motions were dismantled. The guard down below was shot. He could have had a man come up.”

“Oh.” Robbie shrugged. “O.K., I’ll give you that. But can’t I double check to make sure. I just want to be sure another party isn’t walking around in our home.”

Joe thought about it running his hand down his face as he breathed heavily. “I’ll allow it, but collect what you have to collect fast. We need this lab. And I’ll let you do this investigation on one condition. It isn’t a John Matoose lynching mob . . .”

“But Dad, I wouldn’t . . .”

“Don’t ‘but Dad’ me. I know you. Keep it fair Robbie, and keep it open minded.”

“All right, I’ll keep it fair.” He placed some things in his box. “And I’ll clear out what I have collected . . .”

“Robbie!” Frank’s voice va-voomed into the small lab as he flung open the door and slammed it.

Cringing first, Robbie turned to him. “Between the lines please.”

“Oh.” Frank jumped into the lines and started yelling again. “Robbie, Look!” He undid his pants and dropped them right there. “Look at my thigh! Seventeen stitches! Seventeen! Would you like to know why? I’ll tell you why.” He tossed from his clenched hand the arrow head and it landed on the counter. “That’s why! I’m checking out the back gate area, like I always do. I’m carrying my map. I look at my map as I go into S-8. I see it’s a clean area. Wrong! As soon as I step there wham! A Robbie trap. And do you want to know why I got hit with a Robbie trap? It’s not marked on the fuckin map!” Frank threw his clipboard. “Some one isn’t thinking right Robbie! Who could that be?!”

Robbie leaned into the counter, not looking at Frank. “Me?”

“Yes you!” Frank pointing. “You aren’t thinking! What’s wrong with this picture Robbie?!”

Closing his eyes briefly, Robbie looked at Frank. “Aside from the fact that you aren’t real intimidating yelling at me with your pants down?”

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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He saw Frank wasn't amused. "All right, all right. I forgot to mark it down, that's what is wrong."

Frank made a buzzing sound. "Wrong. No."

At the same time, a little shocked, Joe and Robbie responded. "No?"

"No!" Frank shook his head. "Look at where I was hit. In the leg Robbie. Your aim is way too off. You can't kill shit at that level. If you did it right. I'd be dead. Am I dead. No."

Joe, smacking himself lightly in this face, ran his hand over his mouth. "I'm out of here. And Frank? Pull your pants up."

Frank lifted up his trousers and fastened them. "All right, now that I'm calm, how's thing going Robbie, with this investigation?"

Robbie smiled with a nod. "Good. Very Good. Getting lots of stuff."

Joe intervened. "I think he's made a very good case. But it's a waste. The other person isn't in here. But he can still check it out."

Frank looked back at Robbie. "Did you go check the tunnels?"

"Why?" Robbie asked.

"A start. It was pretty muddy that night. If they live here, they had to come back in that way. We were all on bikes, so there has to be at least one set coming in."

"Excellent Frank. I'll do that. Thanks." Robbie grinned.

Frank pointed to his temple before he walked out. "One of us has to have the brains in the family. Especially since Dad is getting so old."

Joe gave Frank a shove toward the door. "Get out of here." He looked back to Robbie. "Clean up in here Robbie. This place has to be fully usable. Clean up."

"Got it." Robbie bounced from heel to toe, he peaked out the window waiting for Frank and his dad to drive away. When he saw they were gone, Robbie glanced around the lab. "Clean up in here . . ." He grabbed his coat. "Later. First . . . the tunnels."

Robbie followed his brother's suggestion and a good one it was. Still it yielded only more questions in his mind. More questions that would

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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have to be answered. As Frank pegged, there was a set of footprints coming into the tunnels. One set, smudged some, but still clear. Robbie knew as soon as he brought that to his father's attention, Joe would say investigation over. But to Robbie it wasn't. And that one set of tracks did far from make him believe it was a survivor from outside. If it was someone from Beginnings, there still would be a single set. The set of tracks when they returned from taking Ellen out. As he squatted down in the mouth of the tunnels, his finger tracing the outline of the foot, the smeared but distinctive treading, Robbie wondered even more. If it *was* a survivor like Joe thought, then what was the survivor doing wearing such good shoes?

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The dream. The vivid dream Dean was beginning to have every time he closed his eyes and slept. Was it his guilt over being unable to do anything. What could he do? Though his logical side told him to not dwell on it, his human side could not help but to find blame within himself for letting it get so far.

*"El, run to the other mobile!" Dean instinctively felt his forefinger depress the trigger of the revolver as he stared into Moses' eyes. He saw it hit him, he didn't expect for him to reach outward and steal the gun from him. He felt it so abruptly being pulled from his hand it stung. Before he could step back, before he could move, he saw the large arm swing down and felt the striking blow to the side of his head. A headache like he had never felt and the room went immediately out of focus. The window, to Ellen, to the counter and the floor was his spinning view. So weak, he lifted himself up. He couldn't see, everything was blurry and the figures were dark. 'Where was Ellen?' Dean squinted to try to see her and he saw the figures before him shuffle about. That was all he saw and he heard the gunfire. One shot and Ellen screamed. It burned him and sent him back into the counter and onto the floor. He could feel his blood seep from him. He could hear the banging and crashing and Dean couldn't move. His eyes closed.*

*"Oh God help me! NO!"*

*His eyes opened to Ellen's scream, so close. Too close. He opened his eyes some as he lay on the floor trying to see, trying to move. "El?" He tried to speak but the words wouldn't come out. If they did she wouldn't have heard him through her screams.*

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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*Shifting his head just a little, he saw her dangling legs in the door way. So helpless he felt as he knew she was grabbed. His blurry focus moved up and he saw Ellen's head drop, the arm clutching her around the waist and tossing her over his shoulder. As he spun to carry her out Dean saw his blurred vision of Moses turn into someone else . . . John Matoose?*

"Dean?" He felt the poke on his shoulder. "Dean!" Another poke.

Dean's eyes popped open. "El." He rubbed them.

"Are you all right?" Ellen asked then kissed him on the cheek.

"I was just having a weird dream." He lifted himself up to sit in the bed.

"How are you feeling? I hear you are getting out tomorrow."

"Yep. My blood count is finally up." Dean straightened the covers. "Now you can bring the work home to review. It won't be long before I'm back up there with you. How is that going?"

"You don't want to know."

"Confirmed?" Dean asked.

"Yep. And you're the one who tells Joe. And . . . he should be here shortly. So let's deal with a little good news shall we?"

"Lay it on me."

"You got it." She lifted a stack of folders and dropped them on the bed to his legs. "Working around Robbie, is tough. But, I'm doing what I can. From what I was able to scrounge up from what remained intact. I was able to remix some of our agents including ten through sixteen our highest effectiveness ration group."

"Good and these are the results?" Dean asked of the folders.

"Yep. Take a look. Not too bad." Ellen stated, waiting and watching Dean fumble for his glasses. "I upped ingredient ten in serum A-14. And . . . I got a response. Not a big on mind you, but more so than we have been getting." She flipped open the folder. "I definitely saw signs that the virus struggled. Forty-five minutes it laid dormant."

"Any shrinkage in size."

"Some shriveling. But . . . as soon as it started moving again, it gained its strength. I do think we're on to something, but I don't think we should toss all our eggs in the basket on A-14. Maybe just one isn't what we

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need but possibly a combination of two serums.” She raised her eyebrow. “Look.” She opened a folder for him.

Dean grabbed the folder, immediately the words grew blurry, he rubbed his eyes, tried to read again, but everything went grey. He handed Ellen the folder.

“Something wrong?” She asked.

“My eyes are just tired I guess.”

“Not that important, that it can’t wait.” She set it aside. “Bad news time? Like you asked, a few night ago, I did contact exposure on some rabbits. Well, the two underweight ones and the baby one . . . died last night.”

“They died? Already? From our virus?”

“In an essence.” Ellen gathered up the folders. “An angle we haven’t taken. I think, now this is me, not a scientist talking, I think our symptoms killed them. We’ve only been using healthy meaning . . . a strong person if they can wage the war, can beat the virus possibly with the weaker anti-serum. But a young person, a child, may not even make it long enough to let the anti-serum work. We’re talking what? Fevers of a hundred and six. A hundred and eight in children. That’s what the future notes showed.”

“Plus the dehydration.” Dean clenched his fist. “Let’s go with that El. Good thinking. Can you give another batch of rabbits our virus. Weaker ones.”

“We don’t have anymore weaker rabbits. I’ll ask Robbie to look for some, he’s good at that. If not, give me a day, I’ll starve a few and make them weak.”

Just as Dean shook his head with a chuckle at Ellen’s suggestion, he saw Joe walk in.

“What’s this I hear about bad news.” Joe said. “Now I’m not expecting progress mind you. Of course our entire scientific community is out of whack. Mobile lab in disarray, the quantum lab sieged by two eccentric betting mad man.” Joe smiled. “What’s up?”

Dean hesitated only momentarily. “We have reason to believe that the society may have been working with Rev. Thomas on our lab hit.”

Joe immediately looked to Ellen. “You do? Why?”

Ellen answered. “We were there when things went down.”

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Portions of the lab, samples and such were crushed. Some of which were in the special lab. None of the attack went down there.”

Joe nodded. “But you both know it was well established that Rev. Thomas was against this virus work.”

Ellen agreed. “Yes, but a lot of slide work was destroyed. Granted it was nothing we don’t have scanned into the computers. But where our concern lies is. The broken vials of agents. I’m not able to find all the missing bottoms. Which makes me thinks some of our antiserums are missing.”

“Ellen.” Joe shook his head. “Broken glass bits. Come on that’s not concrete.”

“But this is.” Dean interjected with seriousness. “The lock on our specimen freezer was crushed. It was, shall we say, sealed closed. Robbie finally broke into it for us. We had in there isolated virus samples. Four from each strain. Joe . . .” Dean took a breath. “A vial of each strain is missing.”

Joe kept this eyes on Dean. All sarcasm, scoffing was gone. “So what you’re saying is, if by some chance, last week the society didn’t have the virus they’re supposed to hit us with . . . they do now?”

“Yes.” Dean said solemnly.

With a slow breath that echoed through his nostrils, Joe placed his hands in his pockets. He nodded his head, opened his mouth, raised a finger to speak but said nothing. Merely releasing a soft chuckle of ‘it figures’, Joe shook his head, turned and walked out. It wasn’t a time to be amused, but the time machine produced such a comedy of errors, Joe couldn’t help but laugh . . .all the way out.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Beginnings, Montana

Slamming of hands. Raised voices. It was an argument over the point to ‘connect the dots’ that sent Frank into a heated frenzy with the tiny Dean prodigy Billy. But even though the hour of bedtime was the ending point, Frank felt strongly that he won the debate. He stared at the picture for a moment and laid it back on the diningroom table.

“You really should argue with him. He’s only six.” Ellen said as she walked by him. “Wanna sit with me until Henry gets here.”

“I’d love to. We haven’t talked all day.” Frank followed her into the livingroom. “Henry’s not really going to try that contraption on you, is he?”

“Test it, yes.” Ellen sat down. “He thinks he can make the baby hear us.” She saw Frank roll his eyes. “No, Frank. He’s doing it for you too. You got him so excited about this. He’s acting like a new parent.”

“I just wanted him to take the midnight cravings and afternoon snack duty. That’s all.” Frank joined her on the couch. “But him getting all neurotic makes me relive that. It’s kind of fun. It’s a feeling you lose after the first baby. And him running around has given some of that back to me. I hear Dean’s not real happy about it.”

“Dean and Henry aren’t the best of friends. Of course, Dean’s reaction is that you two are forgetting it’s *his* baby and . . . change of subject. How’s the leg?”

“Sore but fine. Fuckin’ Robbie and his investigation.”

Ellen snickered. “He’s driving me nuts up at the lab too. Walk between the lines and such. But he does look really cute when he’s all serious. I watch him through the glass. He’s cute.”

“Swell.” Frank faced her. “Guess what I was thinking about today?” He smiled. “

“Another change of subject. Wow, Frank, you’re Mr. Conversationalist tonight.”

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"I am." Frank said proudly. "Valentines Day. I looked at the date and thought, hey, we don't have Valentines day in Beginnings. And I started thinking about the first one we had. Remember?"

Ellen nodded in remembrance. "You gave me that card you bought for someone else but chickened out of giving to her."

"I bought that card for you El. I needed a reason. I was so crazy about you back then. Did you know that?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, I did."

"Nothing's changed. You still drive me nuts." Frank spoke softly. "Only now it's worse."

"What do you mean?"

"I know what it's like to have you and now I know what it's like not too." Frank moved closer to her. "I miss being with you." He slid his hand to her face. "I'm still so crazy about you." Slowly he parted his lips bringing them down to her.

"Frank." Ellen moved her head back with a slight giggle. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to kiss you." Frank moved closer.

"Why?"

"I just felt like kissing you. But . . . I won't." Frank moved back. "I'll be nice. Even though I don't want to be nice." He smiled. "Now, getting back to our talk. How's . . ." His head jolted to a knock at the door. "I guess that would be Henry." Titling his head backwards, Frank yelled at the door. "Come in."

Henry stepped in, "Ready to go? We'll stop and see Dean, then head to my house for the fetal communicator." Henry said proudly. "How's the leg Frank?"

"Sore. But usable." Frank stood up. "I'll get your coat El."

Ellen looked surprised. "Are we done talking? I thought we were in the middle of . . ."

"No." Frank handed her the jacket. "We'll talk later. Henry not too late."

"Oh, no Frank." Henry shook his head. "She's expecting. She needs her rest. Dean first, then my house. Besides I have to work on that

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chip. I've been ignoring it lately."

Ellen slipped on her coat. "I shouldn't be long, Frank. Unless, Henry can we do it here?"

"Sure." Henry shrugged. "I don't see why not. Want us to come back, Frank?"

"No." Frank shook his head as he walked them to the door. "I'm probably going to head up to bed. After I work on my novel." He stared unnoticed at Ellen as she walked by him. He subtly cleared his throat "Um . . . have fun. And Henry, no speaking Chinese to my kid through that communicator. I want him to understand me when he's born."

"I'm Japanese, Frank. Let's go El." Henry lifted a waving hand, then took Ellen by the arm to lead her out.

Frank quietly stood there with a smile, and watched them leave.

Moving bubbly along, they made it to the edge of the row of houses before Ellen abruptly stopped. "Oh shit." Ellen said. "I forgot the picture Billy made for Dean. I have to run back and get it, if he wakes up and sees it there he'll have a fit. Wait right here. I'll be right back." Flashing a quick smile and holding up one finger to him, Ellen turned around and ran back the four house length to Frank's. Without knocking she opened the door running in. She remembered it was still on the diningroom table and she hurried in there. Fearing Frank may think she was an intruder, she called out. "Frank, I forgot the picture that . . ." Her words slowed as she hit the diningroom and saw Frank in the kitchen. He turned almost surprised to see her. On the counter sat a bottle of whiskey, and he lowered an empty glass from his lips. "What . . ." Ellen neared him with a curious smile. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" Frank grabbed her hand that held the picture. "Good thing you came back for this, Billy would have fit if he woke up and saw it still here."

"Frank? Why are you drinking? You have the kids."

"Oh." Frank held up the empty glass. "Just a small one. My leg is really killing me."

"You should have said something. I would have gotten you

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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something for the pain.”

“Nah.” Frank waved his hand at her. “I’m fine. You’d better go.”

“Yeah.” She reached up and ran her hand down his face. “Are you all right? Really?”

“Yep, just sore. That’s it.”

“O.K.” Apprehensively and feeling like she shouldn’t leave Ellen began to back up. “Frank are you . . .”

“El, I’m fine. Go.” He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. “Go.” He winked and nodded his head.

“If you need me for anything, you know where I’m at. Radio for me. I mean it.” Clutching her picture Ellen moved to the diningroom. She started to leave but stopped and peeked her head back in. “No more drinking. Booze will only make that feel worse.” She pointed to his leg.

“No more drinking.” Frank held up his hand forcing a smile. “I’m going to bed.”

“Night Frank.” Ellen walked away.

The sound of the front door shutting was a lever to him. A pull lever that released his tension. Hearing that, he let out the breath he held and lost the smile from his face. Lowering his head, Frank rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb, then dragged his hand slowly across his nose, down his goatee and around to the back of his neck where he clutched the tension that formed there. Knowing it was time to call it a night, Frank faced the counter grabbing the cap to his whiskey bottle and readying to recap it. Pausing in his actions, Frank thought of Ellen. He closed his eyes and immediately thought of his embarrassing attempt at making a ‘move’ on her. Then Frank--figuring he was just going to bed anyway--hesitated before recapping the bottle and he poured himself another drink.

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Bowman, North Dakota

“Dead. The world is dead, Elliott.” Without his inform shirt, the

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Captain sat, legs propped up, facing the window. A bottle of whiskey was perched between his legs, and reaching down, with the use of his forefinger and thumb he flicked the ash from his cigarette into the ashtray. "Dead. Every winter I wonder if when spring comes, will anyone be left." He brought the bottle to his mouth and then showed Elliott.

With a chuckle Elliott shook his head. His glass was still partially full. "Why do you drink and smoke so much?"

"Why do you bitch like a wife."

"Again." Ellen cleared his throat. "Why do you drink and smoke so much?"

"It's a family thing." The Captain took another sip. "We all drank and smoke. Sometimes, Elliott, I am convinced that alcohol and nicotine were nutritional requirements for my family. Blame my father. Besides it's one of my few enjoyments. Sex certainly isn't an option. Sex . . ." The Captain shook his head. "Do you remember it at all?"

"The act. Yes. The feelings. No." Elliott shook his head. "Sometimes I think there is something wrong with me. I don't think about it much anymore. When I do, it doesn't drive me nuts. I just feel kind of numb about it."

"Funny." The Captain lowered his legs and sat up. "I think we've conditioned ourselves well. When we realized that women were no longer an option, we were strong enough to put that in our mind set. Plus, it's not like the old world, No television, magazines . . ." He looked at Elliott. "Internet."

"No, no. Don't go there." Elliott laughed. "You were as bad with that as I was."

With a chuckle, the Captain took another drink. "Now look at the women that remain of the world. So few. So very few. What did Steward Lange's log book estimate? Less than ten percent of the surviving population are female. They must be taken care of. Now don't get me wrong, I don't agree with making mommy zombies. But . . . The society has a point."

Elliott nodded. "Instead of allowing the women to get used up, die, they are using them to ensure there will be a tomorrow. The reasoning is good, the method is vulgar."

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“And speaking of vulgar.” The Captain reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small slip of paper. He snickered at Elliott’s grumble. “Yes, the reason for my alcoholism tonight. How, Elliott, how do we tell these men they must face such a battle.”

“And it isn’t even a situation that you and I, as leaders, can step in for.”

“Nor would we want.” The Captain sighed. “There must be some sort of reward for the bravery they have to show.”

“Credit toward promotion. A day off of training, or work.”

“And we must present the reward as incitive for them to strive forth, take hold of the challenge and return to their homes, normal.” The Captain let out a heavy breath and stared at the paper. “It will tough tomorrow, but it has to be done. I have vowed to meet every request they gave. But how Elliott?” The Captain looked at him. “How do I tell these, innocent, eight young men that tomorrow, they are to service our women.”

“Carefully, very carefully.” Elliott reached for the bottle, tipped off his drink and handed it back to the Captain. “However, you must, the whole entire time that you had out this task, keep gratefulness in you heart . . .” Elliott lifted his glass to the Captain. “That we weren’t picked.”

With a grin, and a ‘cheers’ The Captain clinked his bottle to Elliott’s glass and they toasted *their* good fortune.

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Quantico Marine Headquarters

As leader of a growing and large society, there were things that George liked to be. Punctual, ready, neat in appearance and never awakened from a deep sleep. Especially for a low level scientist who was nearly ten hours late.

“Oh.” George chuckled as he came down the stair. “This better be so worth the loss of sleep. It’s three in the morning.”

Dr. Burke, hurried and looked at his watch. “My goodness, it *is* three in the morning. No wonder the soldier looked at me weird when I

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asked for a lift. I'll come back." He darted for the door.

"Hold it!" George yelled out. "I'm up. I'm mad. Tell me what you need to tell me, then get the hell out of my house."

"I have good news."

"It better be."

"I examined the evidence that was given to me. Specimens, samples and such. The stuff from Beginnings."

"I know that." George said perturbed.

"Well, I have good news." Burke stood his lanky body tall. "The antiserum was in the things given to me. I'll be able to match it up, perfect it, then begin testing it. After everything matches up, and as you requested, after test show our using it will be safe, I should have the virus and inoculations prepared by early summer. Beating your January deadline by months."

"Excellent. That is good news. And I want anyone, anyone even remotely near the virus to be inoculated. Because an inoculation against it is all we have, correct?"

"Correct. However there is more good news. Better news."

"Better." George smiled. "What?"

"Beginnings has cured the virus."

"What!" It was like a dance George did. A twitching of his body in frustration to hold back the scream. "That is not good news."

"Yes it is. They cured it but they don't know."

George cringed again. "But they will!"

"No, they won't." Burke said.

"How . . . how in God's name can they have a cure to the virus, and never know?"

"Because their cure only works on the host strain of the virus. Once it mutates, the cure will not work. That is why they aren't getting any success. Nor will they on the path they are taking. And . . . From the data copied and samples I have, Beginnings not only doesn't have a sample of the host, they haven't a clue of its existence."

Calm. Immediately calm hit George and his body swung in a stare to Burke. His attention was grabbed.

Burke continued. "If you want to win a silent war with

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Beginnings, view it as a game of chess. Think a head in your strategy. You both want the king. But if you keep their focus on the ‘big’ picture, or the current cure they are working on, they’ll never see the pawn slip right in there. In other words, avoid using the host virus, hit them with the mutated strain and . . .”

George smiled at the man who wasn’t so dumb after all. “Check mate.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

February 5

Beginnings, Montana

The continuous bang-bang-bang of the baby bottle against the high chair tray, mixed intermittently with giggles was the backdrop noise for the morning mayhem. A wet rag in hand, Dean wiped ferociously Joey's face to remove what seemed like year old jam from his cheek.

"Joey hold still." Dean instructed then lifted his eye to see Brian being creative about making the noise. Nipple of the bottle in his mouth, Brian thrashed his head. "Quit that." Reaching up, Dean pulled the bottle from his mouth with a suctioning 'pop'. Upon the horrendous scream that entailed from the baby, Dean replaced the bottle. "El."

"Here." Ellen came into the diningroom and smiled at her family at the table. "Billy you don't match." She moved to the kitchen. "We'd better move. God, I'm not fitting into any of my pants."

"El, this is stupid." Dean stood up. "This is my first day back, first day without pain and I have to do this?"

"Yes." Ellen emerged from the kitchen with coffee. "It's important and will take a moment. Besides, he waited. It's your bet., Do you have it."

"Yes." Dean said with no enthusiasm. "And watch your caffeine intake." He walked to her and took the coffee cup.

"Right." Ellen took it back. "Ales." Ellen saw her daughter wiggling in the chair. "Go to the bathroom."

"I don't have to." Alexandra ate her toast. "It's my tarantism again."

Ellen giggled. "She's cute."

"No she's not." Dean tried to gather items from the table. "And you aren't eating. Why? You have to eat."

"No time. Later." Ellen sipped from her cup. "Alex, Billy, Joey, coats. Now."

“Eat, El.” Dean said moving out of the way for his twins.

“No. I’m fine. Joey.” Ellen raised her voice some. “Now. Move it. Go.” she watched him sloppily and like a tank hurry from his seat. “And watch out for the . . . Dean, the high chair.

As if he had done it before, Dean extended his entire body to the right and grabbed a hold of the high chair mid tip. His balance was lost, but he caught himself before careening knee first to the floor. A little hunched down, Dean let out a breath and he gazed up to Brian, only to be greeted by the hollowing ‘clunk’ of the empty bottle to his head. “Thanks.” He smiled at the giggling baby.

“Ba.” Brian pointed to the floor and to his bottle.

“Ba.” Dean repeated, and reached down. With a piercing pain that shot through his temple the entire focus before him went black and Dean buckled and fell to the floor.

“Dean?” Ellen rushed over. “What is it? Are you all right?”

He blinked. Long and many times, grasping the return of his focus with each opening of his eyes.

“Dean?” Ellen helped him to his feet.

“I’m fine. I . . .” He handed the bottle to Brian. “Lost my balance. I’m fine. We should get going.”

Ellen stared at him for a moment. Taking in the lost look on his face. “If you’re not feeling up to work.”

“I’m fine.” Dean shooed her away. “Go get them ready. I’ll get Brian,” Turning away from Ellen, Dean rubbed his eyes and took a second to try to figure out what had happened.

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“Help yourself to refreshments. Coffee’s fresh.” Frank instructed as he hosted a small group in the library that included, Joe, Andrea, Jenny, Robbie and Henry. “As soon as they get here.”

Joe, walking with Robbie, grabbed a cup of coffee. “This better be good.”

Frank winked. “You’ll be amazed. Have a seat.” He noticed

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Ellen and Dean walk in. “Oh, just in time. Do you have it?”

Dean handed Frank a box. “Here. Now where do you want us?”

“Get some coffee.” Frank said pleasantly. “Have a seat at one of the tables. “Henry!” Frank yelled causing Dean to cringe. “Hook, El, up!” He saw the glance Dean gave him. “Dean! I meant to the fuckin fetal communicator, pervert. I want my baby to hear.”

“My baby..” Dean walked off.

Ellen planted a kiss to Frank’s cheek. “I’m proud of you. And nervous.”

So was Frank. But it was time to prove not only to Dean, but to the community, that he was indeed what he had been preaching. The literary guy.

Frank held a stack of papers. “This . . . This is a big day.” He said, with everyone seated behind the library tables. “And you’re here Jenny because I need you to give the OK to have our young read this. You’re the teacher. I think you’ll be impressed.”

Dean leaned into Ellen. “What did I tell you. A children’s book.”

With a loud ‘shh’ Jenny gave a teacher’s scold to Dean. “Go on, Frank, we need new materials.”

Frank ignored his father’s moans, his brother’s giggles, and focused more on the attentiveness of Ellen and Henry. “Henry are you sure my baby can hear me?”

“My baby.” Dean corrected.

“Frank’s baby.” Henry insisted. “And yes, he can hear. Speak clearly Frank.”

“Always.” Frank cleared his throat. “My novel . . . it’s a kid action thriller book. Called, *Frank’s Day Out*.” He gave a scoffing face to Robbie who laughed. “I’m dedicating this story to little man Dean, for bringing out the literary guy in me.”

Despite the applause and ‘ahs’ Dean rolled his eyes.

Frank began to read. He read slow and dramatic like a teacher reading a child’s book to her class. “*My Day out. I woke up. I was cold. I got dressed. I got warm. It was time to get a SUT.*” Frank looked at Jenny. “See, I’m

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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keeping simple words, building the suspense.” He nodded and continued. “*I went out. I saw Dean. Dean said, ‘Hi, Frank. ‘Hi, Dean.’ I said. ‘Frank you are cool,’ Dean said. ‘Thanks’ I said. ‘But I have to go. It is time to get a SUT.’ And off I went. Dean was in awe.*” Frank lowered the pages. “Jenny, do you think the word ‘awe’ is too big?”

Robbie snorted a laugh and stopped when his father nudged him.

“Um.” Jenny shook her head. “No. A new word is always good to teach. Broaden the vocabulary.”

Frank moved on. “*I went to my office. I got my gear. I went to my desk. I gasped. Greg did not do his reports again. It is OK. No time to get mad. Just time to get a SUT.*” Frank stopped. “OK, now see here is where I show the importance of controlling your . . .”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Read the goddamn story!”

“All right.” Frank yelled back. “This is the good part anyhow.” He gave a twitch to his head. “*I went to the back gate. SUTs lurk there. I stopped. I heard a shot. A bullet flies by my head. ‘Fuck!’ I said . . .*” A crash rattle, bang, splash and scream caused Frank to stop reading. “What?”

Joe looked sharply at Ellen. “Why are you screaming?”

Ellen held her stomach. “Henry ripped the suction things from me.”

“He shouldn’t hear that, Joe.” Henry defended.

“Frank.” Joe slapped his hand on the table. “You can’t say ‘fuck’ in a kids book.”

“Why?” Frank asked. “It’s a word.”

Joe winced at the laughter. “Robert. Knock it off. Frank, you can’t say fuck. It’s too strong.”

“Shit then?”

“No!” Joe yelled.

“Joe, If I may?” Jenny raised her hand and stood up. She walked to Frank. “I think the story concept is good. The children need to know about this. And . . . with some editing, this will be a fine addition to our school’s collection.”

Amongst the moans, Frank grinned with a clenched fist. “Oh,

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yeah. I'm an author. And you little man Dean are typing . . ." Frank stopped talking. The chair where Dean sat was empty. "Where did he go." Frank waved his hand. "Jealous."

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Work. That was the main focus on Dean's mind. Getting back to work. The mobile lab was back in order, samples needed reviewed again. That had to see how much progress they lost on through the attack on the lab. At the very least it would help him forget all that was happening with his body. He wanted to believe it was stress, but he knew better.

From the stack that needed to go to the mobile lab, Dean flipped open the first folder. He adjusted his glasses and began to read. Taking the pencil he had in his tee shirt pocket he began to lower it to make a notation. As the tip of the lead touched down, a burning throb hit Dean's left eye. An instant headache which spread like a fire across the bridge of his nose to the other eye. Immediately his words went out of focus and the pencil dropped for his hand. Lifting his glasses up with his hand he rubbed his eyes fiercely wishing he could rub away the pain.

"Dean?" Ellen called his name softly.

Dean sprang up. "El." He nervously tried to continue what he was doing.

"You left the reading. The scold is going to use . . ." She slowed down when her eyes caught glimpse of his hand shaking. She laid her hand over his. "What's wrong."

Helpless, Dean peered up to her. His eyes were bloodshot from the recent quick episode of pain. "El." His voice cracked through his breathlessness. "Remember how we planned to . . . to do test. Glucose, diabetes. Precaution. Look ahead. Because we didn't know . . . we didn't know when or how it would happen. Now, El. Now, too soon. It's happening . . ." Dean raged with confused emotions. "It's happening too soon.."

"What's happening? You're scaring me. You're not making any sense."

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“Yeah, I am. It’s not an illness..” Dean’s shaking hand lifted the hair slightly from his left temple. “It was the knock on the head. And I’m scared El . . .” he swallowed his fear. “My blindness of the future . . . It’s starting to happen now.”

Ellen’s heart sunk, no words could come from her, only her arms that reached out and embraced Dean.

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### Bowman, North Dakota

Rolled oats. Mother’s oats. Oatmeal. Whatever name society had given them, the Captain still didn’t like them as food. But they were plentiful and filling enough to sustain him until evening meal.

‘The Mess’ as thy called it, or mess hall was where he sat and finished his breakfast. Usually an early riser, the Captain pulled a late night watch, making him the last to enter for breakfast. The mess hall worked well with the rationing of food, but the last to enter the mess was faced with one of two situations. There was either no food left, or their tardiness was reprimanded with the task of finishing everything off.

Mid fourth bowl of oatmeal, the Captain had enough. It was about the same time he discovered the note from Elliott in Steward Lange’s log book. A mere scribble of a response to the Captain request to ‘read the following pages’. Elliott’s note of, *I haven’t a clue what I’m looking for. Misspelled words?* Made the Captain rise up from his chair, inform the kitchen crew that during his gluttony he forgot that Sgt Ryder requested the left over oatmeal, then the Captain with a point to be made, searched out Elliott.

Elliott was the only one in grey, he was in charge. The twenty men who line up cross wore the signature blue uniforms. Two feet spread between them, Elliott paced behind them. In the gymnasium they face forward, arms at sides.

“Prepare.” Elliott ordered out.

At the same time, all twenty men with their left foot, pivoted

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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their right shoulder in forward while reaching across their waist with their right arm.

“Stay in synch.” Elliott kept his voice authoritative, yet calm.  
“Draw.”

The ‘whoosh’ of the twenty swords sounded as one.

“Attack.”

A unison cheer of the single word ‘rah’ accompanied the projection of the sword and the swift glide forward of the men toward the bails of hay.

“Retract . . .” Elliott paced. “Attack.”

The men took two steps back, then a fast charge forward with an even louder cheer.

“Retract . . . pull back in formation to . . .” Elliott shifted his eyes, then snapped straight with a salute. “Attention!”

As if they had practiced it-and they did--the twenty men in synch, turned to face the back of the gymnasium, and snapped to attention when the Captain walked in.

The Captain gave a sharp salute. “At ease.” He looked to Elliott as he moved his hands behind his back. “Sgt. Ryder, is it possible for you to find a replacement for this exercise. I need to speak to you in private.”

“Yes, sir.” Turning from the Captain, Elliott faced his men.  
“Townsend, take over please.”

The Captain gave Elliott a nod of gratitude, then pivoted in a stern stride, walking ahead of Elliott and leading him into the hall.

Almost at an antsy formal stance the Captain waited in the hall for Elliott. When the gym door banged, it was like a lever to the Captain. His body dropped the tension, and in dramatics he lifted Steward Lange’s log book and whacked Elliott on the head with it. “Misspelled words. What is wrong with you?”

“What?” Elliott laughed.

“Come here.” Tugging his sleeve, the Captain pulled Elliott into a room. “Didn’t you read what I asked you to?”

“Yes. But what am I looking for?” Elliott asked. “You seem to think some big revelation was going to hit me.”

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“Yes. Yes. It should have.”

“No, no. It shouldn’t.” Elliott shook his head. “If you didn’t pick it up after months of living with the log book how am I supposed to find it after one reading?”

“True. O.K.” The Captain opened up the log book. “Here Steward Lange mentions that the president returned but failed to secure the Garfield Project. How could Hadly fail to get something unless . . .”

Elliott’s eyes lifted. “Someone else has it.”

“Exactly!” The Captain smiled. “If he failed to get something off of someone else. Then that someone else is? Is what, Elliott?”

“A pretty strong enemy of the society.”

“We are not alone.”

“True but . . .” Elliott held up a finger. “Are they going to end up being our enemy as well.”

The Captain moaned. “You had to dampen it, didn’t you. Now getting back to my enthusiastic thoughts. We need to find out about this Garfield Project. What it is, where it is. I’m thinking it’s a weapon of sorts.”

Elliott nodded. “I have to agree.”

“Good. We also now have to find out about these people that have this invention. If they are friend, when we are strong enough to approach them, we help them in their cause. If they are an enemy, when we are strong enough to face them . . .we borrow this Garfield project, barring it’s not to big for us to carry out.”

“I would think this project is small.” Elliott said. “It would have to be in order to be hidden. We get it. We bring it here. We have an ace in our hand.”

“Not that we would use this secret weapon. But . . . it could be a powerful tool.

“I like what you’re thinking. But how are we going to not only find this enemy of the society, but this Garfield Project as well.”

“Investigate.” The Captain said with certainty. “If we can learn a little more about the society maybe we can learn about this project they want. The enemy of the society will fall in place.”

“Short of going east again to infiltrate Quantico. And short of

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waiting until spring until we start scouting out society camps, what can we do? We're at a loss over here in the west."

"Not completely." The Captain flipped a few pages I the log book. "Lange mentions early on about the President's stay in a former site in Colorado. If it's a former society site, cleaned out or not, there may be clues left behind. Maybe about the project, maybe about other things we don't know."

"Colorado really isn't that far."

"Nope." The Captain smiled. But it's not as close as the nearest major bookstore. Check out this . . ." The Captain began to read. *"So eerie like. When I first read, 'Man's last Stand' I laughed at the sci-fi picture painted of surviving the plague ridden world. How true his book ended up being . . ."* The Captain showed Elliott the page. "How true? Elliott, if want to find out about the Garfield project and secrets of the Caceres Society, why not read a surviving book written by the name Sake . . ." His finger pointed to the name.

"Forrest Caceres." Elliott smiled.

"Let's go." Snatching the log book from Elliott's view, the Captain began a quick movement down the hall. "Elliott?"

"Where are we going?"

"I just told you. Barnes and Noble." With a smile and tuck of the log book under his arm, The Captain picked up his pace.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

"Jess Anthony Boyens." Jess stated staring out.

"Your age?" Sgt. Doyle asked.

"Thirty-seven years old as of two days ago, sir." Jess kept his eyes forward.

"What is the creed of the Caceres Society Soldier."

"To be called upon to protect and serve in any military actions. To enforce the right of the new world. To defend against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

“Define domestic enemies.” Sgt. Doyle walked to behind Jess’ chair.

“Upon the soil of the former United States of America, an enemy is defined as any one person or group of persons challenging the way of the society, sir.”

“Do you consider yourself an enemy?” Sgt. Doyle questioned.

“No sir.”

“Your actions can be defined as one of an enemy.” Sgt. Doyle stated.

“I understand. But my action were purely out of weakness of the moment and from undo physical exhaustion I had been experiencing from three weeks straight of un relieved duty.”

“How can you be trusted with the position? How do we know you will fulfill.”

Jess fidgeted some in his chair. “I believe in the rule of the society. The enforcing of it, sir. I believe in what the society eventually wants to accomplish . . . I . . .” Jess peered down quickly then back up. “I value the life of my family . . . sir.” His last word went cold.

“Do you know what your particular call of duty is?”

“To infiltrate such an enemy. Live amongst them. Be trusted, and when call upon by the society . . . betray even at the cost of my identity and position with in the society, sir. Even . . . at the cost of my life.”

Sgt. Doyle nodded. “Are you prepared to do this undertaking?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your training will be long. You will barely see the sun between this training and your normal soldier routine. IS that understood?” Sgt. Doyle asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Before you undertake this, you will not only know what the society expects from you, you will learn the Garfield Project and its key residents, inside and out. You will know who to befriend and how. You will know the Garfield project, the land. There will not be a square inch you are not familiar with. You will be tested of this knowledge. Is that understood.” Receiving an agreeing nod, Sgt. Doyle walked across the room and turned on

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a television monitor wheeling it to in front of Jess. He handed Jess a remote control. "Your first lesson. Meet what will be your new home. The Garfield Project, A.K.A., Beginnings Montana." He stepped away.

Once Sgt. Doyle was from the room, Jess pointed the remote control and turned on the monitor. Another press of the button began to rolling of a tape. The white static of the screen adjusted and no sooner did the picture turn into an areal view of a very green Beginnings, Jess' finger hit pause. The picture freeze framed and he stood up. Almost in awe he stepped closer to the screen. It had been so long since Jess had seen a place so lush and alive. Right then and there, as Jess' fingers reached to touch the image, he knew he made the right decision.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Beginnings, Montana

It had reached a point's end. Joe had to see for himself. Feeling like the idiot for giving his O.K. he headed to the quantum lab to do something he should have done earlier. He stepped from the jeep, closing his jacket to block out the wind that whipped around and even though it was dark out, he saw it. What Dean had told him about earlier. The giant hole that was like a trench on the right side of the quantum lab. What was it? Most importantly he had to find out why the two men Beginnings hadn't seen in two weeks were digging holes in the middle of the night like grave diggers.

Reaching out, Joe tried for the door knob--locked. "Christ." He knocked on the door.

"We do not want to be dust-airbed!" Forrest yelled out.

"Like I care. I have to see if you two are all right."

"We are all-rut."

"Yeah, well let me hear from Jason." Joe knocked. "Jason are you alive in there."

The door opened and Forrest popped his head out. His hair was tossed and he sported a facial growth that could be a beard but spread about his face too much. "Woot?"

"Begging your pardon, Forrest, but as leader, and to make sure you didn't kill our Jason, I need to see him."

Suddenly, as if pulled away abruptly, Forrest disappeared from the door and Jason looking so similar to Forrest poked his head out. "I'm alive Joe and we're close. We are really close."

"To what China? What in Christ's name is that huge hole out there. If you're trying to get to the power supply, you go from under the lab in the tunnels."

Jason closed his mouth and nodded. "Yes I know, but Forrest didn't believe me, he said I was full of shit. He dug the hole last night for eight hours Joe before he listened to me. He thought I was trying to win the

bet.”

Again Forrest yelled from the background. “Boot you did do a-zear dings to me. Do note deny it, Jay-soon. Ha!”

Joe, getting even more perturbed by having to stand in the cold, became persistent. “Is everything all right in there. No one has seen you. Just let me come in to make sure . . .”

“No!” Jason shook his head. “No. We uh . . . we’ll let you know when we’re done. It is vital no one bothers us. Thanks for your concern Joe. Night.” The door shut.

“Fine.” Joe faced the closed door. “Stay in there and smell, I don’t give a shit.” He stared back to his jeep. “As long as you fix that damn machine soon.”

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Denny was so perky as he bobbed his way through the nearly crowded social hall. His hair combed neatly and drastically to the side--courtesy of Andrea. His clothes fresh, crisp and clean the way she always made him look when he had a gig at the hall, as if he were going to Sunday services. He carried the papers with him as he approached Robbie, Paul, and James, his fellow members of The Starters. Hitting James first, he passed out the papers. “Hi Guys. I wrote up the set list for you. Just like you asked, Paul.” He handed Paul his sheet then one to Robbie. “Here Robbie.”

“Thanks Denny. And what did I tell you about the hair?” Robbie reached his hand out and messed his hair up.

“No!” Denny hit Robbie away and then tried to straighten it back up. “I get those girl curls and my mom is coming to see me tonight. Don’t.” He whined. “I’ll tell.”

Paul laughed as he took off his guitar he was tuning, the smile left him when he read over Denny’s list. “Den? What the hell does it say?”

Denny nodded. “Impressed huh? It’s in French. Don’t worry, I’ll fill you in.”

Robbie remained so in control of his laughter. “It’s like a puzzle, Paul. See . . . this one, it says El-loon’s sung.”

“How about this one.” Paul pointed. “De old guy sung. Or. . . De sung dat Josef huts.”

“This ought to be . . .” Robbie saw Frank walk into the social hall. “Let me talk to my brother for a second. I’ll be right back.” He set down his bass and stepped from the small stage area walking over to the bar where Frank was at. “Hey.” Robbie nudged him.

“What’s up? Why aren’t you guys playing?”

“In a minute. We’re doing the french rendition of our songs tonight, Frank. You’ll like it. Anyhow, I just wanted to tell you if you want to schedule that extra time-machine-run-through tomorrow, go ahead. I’m up for it.”

“I will. But . . . Dean’s still not well, who we going to get to play head scientist?”

“Um . . . how about Reverend Bob, we haven’t hit him in a while.”

“Good thinking. I’ll get him.” Frank grabbed a glass and a bottle pouring himself a drink. “I take it you’re finally taking a day off your investigation? Getting frustrated Robbie?”

“The shoe thing is finally over with. Man, did that send me through a loop. Pissed me off more. Here I was thinking I narrowed it down to a size ten shoe and do you know what?”

“Over half the men in Beginnings where a size ten boot.”

“Why is that Frank?” Robbie asked with annoyance. “Isn’t that odd?”

“No, not really. The last run I picked up a lot of size ten boots. So no matter what size they wear, ten and under, they wear a size ten. Unless their Beginnings made. Or Dean. Then you wear tiny Converse High tops.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? I wasted so much time on it.”

“Nah.” Frank snickered and took a drink. “You were having fun. What’s next?”

“Finger prints. I dusted and sampled the entire lab and other mobile.”

“And where are you getting the comparison finger prints from?”

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

Frank finished his drink and set down his glass.

Cautiously Robbie picked the glass up by the rim. "See ya Frank." He took it with him to the stage.

"Hey!" Shaking his head, Frank reached over the bar for another glass.

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Elbows on knees, hands folded, Dean stared at the coffee table. He was able to let down the front he had place don all night in front of the kids. He looked up when he felt the presence and smelled the coffee. "Hey." He smiled at Ellen.

"Did you want some?" She showed him the cup.

"Nah. I'm going to bed soon."

"Dean." Ellen set down her mug and laid her hands over his. "Please listen to me. Maybe this isn't it?"

"We're kidding ourselves if we think it isn't EL." Dean rubbed his eyes.

"But did you have anymore episodes today? No." Ellen said. "Maybe we're just over reacting. What did the CT scan say?"

"You know as well as I do the injury is still fresh."

"Exactly." She gave a firm squeeze to his hand. "Blood pressure rises. You get an episode. But in reality, Dean. If this *is* it, we have to face it. Your eyes are not what is going to beat the virus. Your mind is. I can be your eyes. You have to control that mind. All right?"

Dean nodded , pulled his hands back and slowly stood up. "I'm heading to be." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "I promise, we wont waste another day tomorrow." As he walked around the couch, there was a knock at the door. "Want me to get that?"

"No, you go up." Ellen stood and walked around the couch. She watched Dean ascend the stairs and then she opened the door. Frank stood there, leaning in the archway. "Frank."

"Hey." He lifted a bottle of Henry's wine. "I thought if you guys wanted company, you may want to celebrate my publishing deal."

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Ellen giggled. "Want to rub the bet into Dean?"

"Absolutely. Can I come in?"

"Absolutely." She opened the door wider. "I'll get some glasses. One small one for me shouldn't hurt."

Frank stepped into the livingroom. "Where's Dean?"

"He went to bed." Ellen headed to the kitchen.

"Too bad. I have his autographed copy of my novel." Frank pulled out rolled up pages from his back pocket. "I just need some one to do the art . . ." His words slowed down as he set the pages down on the sofa table and saw it. "Work. Oh, wow." He whispered in awe, lifting a sketch of Ellen. A profile of her, her hair a bit longer in the sketch.

"Good huh?" Ellen returned with the glasses. She took the bottle and poured the wine. "Forrest did that. He sent it to me this afternoon when Denny brought them food to the quantum lab. A nice surprise."

"It's beautiful." Frank took the wine she handed him. "Could I have this?"

"The sketch? I already told Dean . . . I told him he could . . ."

"Don't worry about it." Frank lifted the bottle. "Let's sit down." he took a long drink from his glass as he walked around the couch. He refreshed it from the bottle and sat.

Ellen fingers trailed in debate across the sketch. She looked at Frank who stared into his glass. "You know what? Forrest can make Dean another."

"El, it's O.K."

"No it's not." Ellen lifted the sketch. "I look much too young in this picture. Dean didn't know me when I looked this young. Don't forget to take this when you leave." She returned a smile when Frank gave her one. "Oh, I have a surprise for you." She hurried into the diningroom talking as she did. "I was getting things ready for my move with Robbie, which I haven't a clue when that will be, and I found this." She walked back into the livingroom. "I showed Alex this morning." She held a card in front of him. "The first Valentine's day Card you ever gave me."

Excited Frank grabbed it. "You still have it? Wow."

Ellen sat next to him. "I have everything you ever gave me."

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Letters, notes, cards.”

Frank laughed as he read the card. “My handwriting was better.” He opened the card then closed it, shaking his head. “This was nice seeing this. It means a lot.”

“No Frank. All the years we had means a lot to me. We had more years as friends than we did as anything else. I just want that in my life, and I think you need that too.”

Frank looked once more at the card then laid it down on the coffee table, as he brought his hand back he rested it on her leg. “Let me tell you something El. All those years we have behind us. No one can touch them, no one. Not Dean, not . . .” He stopped and stood up. “I’m sorry.”

“No Frank, that’s all right. Talk to me.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’d rather not ruin a pretty good night.” His back faced her as he looked about the livingroom. All her home decorations, pictures. Things that were once in his home.

“Frank.” She ran her hand up his back. She didn’t know what to do or say for him. She sensed so much how bad he really was feeling.

“How come you’re so happy without me?”

“No Frank, how can you say that?”

“You don’t miss any of it. Not the marriage, not the closeness.” Frank turned and faced her. “Not even this.” He grabbed her face pulling Ellen into him. Parting her lips with his, Frank moved his mouth across Ellen’s and he released his emotions into that kiss. He kissed her firm and deep, extending his fingers to the back of her head keeping her to him. As he pulled from the kiss he let his thumbs slowly brush against her cheeks then running down her still parted mouth, as he whispered close to her. “Or do you?”

“Frank . . .”

“Don’t answer that.” He released her completely, stepped back, stopped, stepped forward to her and kissed her quickly. “Downer moment over.” He spun from her, spotted his glass of wine and picked it up. “You have to give those to me once in a while.” He laid his finger over her lips and shook his head when he saw her about to talk. “Now . . . do you know what I would like? I’d like to see, if you’ll let me, all those letter and stuff you have.”

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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Could I?”

“I’ll be right back.” Smiling, Ellen raced over to the steps. “Have a seat Frank, we’ll be looking through the box for a while.”

Smiling back at Ellen the best he could, Frank slowly made his way back to the couch. And he sat there, head down, rolling the glass between his hands waiting for her return.

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“Robert.” Joe called out.

Robbie winced as he placed his bass away. “Why does he call me that?” He asked Paul as if Paul knew.

“Robert.” Joe called again.

Robbie looked down at his watch. “Hey Dad. It’s like late, why are you up?”

“I’ve been working.”

Though Robbie thought it was nice of his father to share the events of the day, he lacked enthusiasm over it. “Gee. Wow. Swell. Working on what?”

“What did you give me to work on?” Joe placed his hands on his hips.

“Oh shit.” Robbie, acting like it was a big secret, took hold of Joe’s arm and pulled him aside. “And?”

“And . . . I’ve gone through about eighty percent of those two hundred prints.”

“Very good Dad.” Robbie smiled. “How many were different. Five, six?”

“Thirty-two. There were thirty-two different forefingers.”

“No way. Thirty-two? You have to be wrong. Maybe some of those are middle fingers and some are pinkies. You made a mistake.”

“Robbie, I did this for how many years?” Joe scolded. “I don’t make mistakes on prints. Thirty-two so far.”

“Shit. Why in the world are there so many?”

“Um . . .” Joe grew sarcastic. “Maybe because the goddamn

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mobile was outside of Beginnings for so long? Maybe because it took ten men to settle it in one place. Start collecting your prints and I'll match them."

"I have one already." Robbie walked over to the stage and handed Joe a cloth covered glass. "Here's Frank's. Got it tonight. So you can eliminate him once you match his."

"Thanks." Joe held up the glass. "This will bring you down to thirty-one." He stared to leave but stopped. "Robbie?"

"Yeah." Robbie hesitated in his return to his bass.

"Was Frank drinking much when he was here?"

"I couldn't tell you. He left after a while to see Ellen, but I was busy. Sorry. Why?"

"No reason. It's just . . . does he seem to you to be drinking a bit more than usual?"

"Yeah, but Frank's just hit a rough spot. He'll get past it."

"I guess you're right. Night Robbie." Joe looked once more to the cloth covered glass, he clutched it with fatherly concern and walked from the social hall.

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## Bowman, North Dakota

Against the Captain's better judgement, he had to admit, he like Chai tea. It didn't hold the same soothing effects as alcohol, but it did warm the chest some, and knowing Elliott would stop by, it wouldn't get him yelled at.

He rubbed his tired eyes, sipped his mug of Chai tea and closed the book. Staring off, sitting in his chair, he heard the knock on the door. "Come in."

"Hey." Elliott covered in the dust of snow walked in. He took off his coat. "I have good news." He held up the log book and walked further into the livingroom. "Is that Chai tea?"

"Yes. Do you want some?"

"Right." Elliott snickered and sat down. "How was the Caceres

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novel.”

“Stupid. O.K., well, not stupid.” The Captain said. “It was a good novel, but I’m afraid Elliott, the society merely borrowed his name. I don’t think this Caceres has anything to do with it.”

“Why? What’s the novel about?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a pretty good vision of our post apocalyptic world. However the story is about survivors, and how they make this one community a starting point to rebuild the world. I thought at first that was it, but . . .” The Captain tossed up his hands. “A small community starting with fifty is hardly our society. Plus, the people in the story had no desire to do lobotomies or make mommy zombies. They wanted to live. That’s it.” He clapped once. “Nothing that could even give us a clue to the Garfield Project weapon. Now . . . what good news do you have?”

Dropping the log book, Elliott smiled. “I believe the Colorado site, even if it breeds nothing about the society, I’m pretty sure it can tell us about the Garfield project.”

“How do you know?”

“Seventeenth entry.” Elliot opened the log book. “Steward states, and this is straight from the book . . . *our inside person tells us, that after the successful rescue from the Colorado site, enough info was gained to go back.*” Elliott held up a finger and turned a page. “Three days later. Simply says, and there is pencil dots all around this meaning he sat in thought.” Elliott winked then read. “*Colorado versus The Garfield Project. Colorado is ill prepared. I wish they had communication so I could warn them of their pending attack. I hope they have moved out by now.*” Elliott closed the book. “Hostage situation must have entailed. Perhaps a few of their people for the weapon, only the enemy of the society, got their people and returned. I believe they used the weapon on the Colorado site.”

“So the site is gone?”

Elliott tilted his head. “Not really, entry, one week later . . . *The president informs me that a return trip to Colorado could be made. But he feels that nothing vital remains at the site.*”

“Nothin vital to the society, but could be very vital to us.” The Captain snapped his finger. “This is Beautiful, Elliott. We skimmed those early entries because they didn’t give us inside information to the society.”

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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They still don't, however . . . even just to go to Colorado to see what this Garfield weapon did, would give us a clue to what we're looking for."

"Plus, the society cleaned out, but they wouldn't clean up evidence of their enemy."

The Captain smiled. "The people with the Garfield project. We need to know about them."

"Now all we need is to find it."

"I have a good guess." The Captain sprang up and moved to a desk, he opened the drawer and flipped through several maps pull-in one out. "Colorado may be a big state . . ." He spread it on the coffee table. "But by the size of the site, knowing the government had something to do with it, and the security of the site . . .there's only one facility big enough that fits that description." his finger landed. "Mountain Springs Colorado."

Elliott grinned. "Three day trip, we could do that ourselves."

"And I trust no one's eyes but our own. *We* have to do this. So . . . just when the weather breaks, before winters end, while the world still slumbers we seize our safety frame . . ." The Captain rolled up the map. " . . .and we go."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

March 1

Beginnings, Montana

Joe could smell it through the slightly open window of his office. The smell of creeping spring as it made it's early approach into Beginnings. A short, painless winter was rearing its last hurrah and this pleased Joe. Spring usually pleased Joe, but its sooner-than-anticipated arrival not only brought the prospect of hard work that would begin in the fields, but the scarey thought that the battle against the SUT army could be approaching as fast as the new leaves on the trees.

The fact that they sat in a stale mate bothered Joe. He had an alternate plan. Preparing to send Robbie and a small crew out for military trucks and supplies that they would use for assassin squads to clear out and secure a circumference around Beginnings of any and all society soldiers. He had to come up with some sort of physical protection. The hopes of advancing through information learned in the time machine, faded as the second month of the stagnate Regressionator hit.

Sifting through the imminent work load, the refreshing breeze that came though the window changed. It carried instead of pre-spring, a light stench that made Joe twitch his head. And then . . . he knew why.

"Josef?" Forrest popped his head through the office door following a simple knock.

"Holy mother of God." Joe lifted his head. "I thought for sure you were dead." Joe watched Jason walk in also. "And you too." He leaned back in his chair.

"Ah." Forrest waved his finger about. "Boot we are note." He smiled. "May we sit?"

Feeling them approach along with smelling them, Joe held his hand up. "No. Stay by the door and Jason . . . open it will ya?"

"Sure thing Joe." Jason, who's hair had grown and beard now extended straggly past his chin, opened the door. "We're ready. Do you want

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to witness it?”

“You’re kidding?” Joe asked. “The machine is working?”

Fanning his hand, Jason shook his head. “We don’t know. It has taken us two months to channel the power supply. We did channel it, however, we are ready to test it to see if it actually will work and not sizzle our timer travelers.”

“I’ll be a son of a bitch.” Joe nodded. “So do you think you have it?” He watched Jason shake his head ‘no’ while Forrest nodded with certainty.

“Josef. We wooed luck you to come to de lab and witness de weaning off ma butt. And I wooed luck An-ray to be deer as well.”

Joe chuckled. “O.K., sure. We’ll come up. Um . . .” He looked at his watch. “Can you give us an hour or so?”

Jason nodded. “Sure, it’ll give us a chance to clean up some.”

Forrest disagreed. “No Jay-soon. We must use de time ta prepare foe de bug demon-stray-shun.”

“You’re right.” Jason pointed to Joe. “We’ll meet you up there, we have test subject to get.”

Shooing his hand at them and instructing them to keep the door open after they left, Joe felt a little better. Perhaps they did it. Though Jason didn’t believe that they had done it. A part of Joe did. He stood up from behind his desk, grabbing his paper work and began to head out also. He paused before he left to open his window all they way, hoping that mother nature would blow some of her fresh breath in while dissipating the old stench left by Forrest and Jason.

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Mountain Springs, Colorado

The steady clank was the only sound in the dead wilderness. Clank-clank-clank, as the front opening gate, knocked off the hinges, swung in the spring breeze.

The Captain’s hand reached for the blackened and burned out

circuit box of the gate. What looked like a charcoal thin stick protrude from it.

“Careful, there’s still power in the region.” Elliott warned.

The Captain nodded, then with his gloved hand, yanked the stick out. A simple, tiny spark emerged from the box. “An arrow.”

“Indian wanna-be’s?” Elliott asked.

“We really need to come up with a better name for them. No.” The Captain wiped the arrow head on his pants. “Metal. They don’t use military issued metal arrows. This came from a crossbow. It . . .” He paused and looked at the head. “Odd.”

“What is?” Elliott waited for a response. “Captain.”

The Captain blinked several times out of his thought. “Oh. Sadistic bastard who sailed this.” He handed the arrow to Elliott. “Etched his initials in the head.”

Elliott snickered and looked at the engraved ‘FS’. Taking the arrow, Elliott reached behind him and slipped it in the knapsack. He followed the Captain through the gate. Five bodies, decomposed, all slain with arrows, lay just inside the gate.

“A well thought out attack.” The Captain said. “See these tires tracks? My guess. A few they had to bring the Garfield Project in here, so they pulled a sneak hit, wiped out the place then drove in for whatever they needed.” He reached down for an arrow that protruded from the chest of one of the Society soldiers. He withdrew it with ease. Bits of dried blood formed a dust cloud. The Captain examining the arrow head. “Same type of arrow. No initials.”

Elliott laughed as he took that one as well. “Wasn’t the same sadistic bastard then.”

“No.” The Captain peered ahead to the tunnel opening. “Flashlights.” He said as they headed that way. Once at the entrance he flicked his on at the same time as Elliott and they began their decent down the tunnel. “How many floors?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Top floors or bottom.”

“Top.”

“I want top.” The Captain said.

“So do I. All the good stuff should be up top.”

“All right.” The Captain huffed. “Odd or even.”

“Odd.” Elliott paused in his walking when the Captain did. He clenched his fist shaking it downward with each word he spoke. “Once, twice, three, shake . . .” He whined. “You win.”

“Remember to gather anything you feel is important to this enemy, the Garfield project or the society. Examine every slip of paper. No matter how tiny.”

“I know. I know. I won’t . . .” Whoa!” Elliott halted when the Captain’s arm swung out like a father’s protective arm in a stopping car. “What?”

The Captain’s eyes widened as his flashlight shined upon a thick and texturized pink ooze that seemingly seeped downward toward a drain. Its path of origin was the small brownish dehydrated mounds, with recognizable bones and a society soldier uniform that laid on top of it.

With excitement, the Captain snapped his fingers several times and pointed. His words peeped his enthusiasm. “This is it! Elliott this is what the Garfield Project does. It disintegrated the human body.”

“It’s frightening.”

“It’s powerful. No wonder the society wants it so badly.” The beam of the Captain’s flashlight lifted. “Wait.” He jumped over the remains and trotted down. Against the wall was a silver small gas can. He lifted it. “This is how it was delivered.”

“There’s another.” Elliott pointed, then shifted his flashlight quickly. “And another.”

The Captain hurried to gather the three cans. He placed the in his own knapsack.

“Oh you’re just taken them as your find aren’t you?” Elliott joked a gripe. “Fine. Be that way. There’s the elevator.” He pointed and walked over to the steel doors. Two more body piles laid there.

The Captain pressed the still illuminated button. “Amazing there is still power. I’ll start on floor two. You start floor twenty-seven, when ever we meet up we meet up.”

“Sounds good.” Elliot could hear the humming of the arriving carriage.

“Bet me they slipped The Garfield Project it through the ventilation system. This place is too big to keep tossing gas cans.”

The doors to the elevator opened and Elliott looked at the Captain when they were greeted with more carnage. Those ones smeared across the floor of the elevator as if swept out of the way. “You may be right. After you?” Elliott held out his hand through the open door.

The Captain, with a smile stepped in side. He looked down to the smeared pile, shuddered a second, then chuckled. As Elliott stepped in with a cringe and the doors closed, the Captain began to hum elevator music.

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Beginnings, Montana

Dean and Ellen’s faces were lit up by the blue hue cast off from the light board they stood before. A line of brain scan shots were on the board.

“Nearest I can figure . . .” Dean indicated to one of the pictures. “This is the problem area.”

“I’m not seeing anything. Some clouding.” Ellen peered closer.

“Exactly. Which had we not previously known of my pending blindness, we would dismiss the clouding.” Dean said. “It’s not my eyes. It’s not the optic nerve. Its my brain. This area here.” Dean showed another picture. “Is healing, Which means, the more it heals, the more scar tissue that forms.”

Ellen finished the statement. “The more scar tissue, the harder it is for the brain to receive the message from the optic nerve.”

“If the brain doesn’t receive the message that I see . . . basically, I don’t see.” Dean shut off the board. “My guess a few months tops, Gradual, maybe some episodes, until it finally goes.”

“What about surgery to repair the scar tissue, remove it.”

Dean shook his head. “It was delicate surgery in the old world

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for experts. I'd rather have my mind, then my sight. It's real. It's basically inevitable. So we have to start training you. While, non-the-less, we fight this virus." He let out a breath. "Enough of me. Let's get you ready. Did you drink your water?"

"Yes." Ellen walked over to the table in the examining room, "I feel like doing that wiggle tarantism dance."

"Unfortunately I can't tell you to go to the bathroom. Why don't you lay down and we'll do this as soon as Frank and Henry get here."

Ellen laid down and began to undo her pants. She lifted her shirt. "I think we should do it before Pete and repeat arrive."

"Too late." Frank announced as he walked in. Henry followed right behind.

Dean covered Ellen to just below her stomach with a sheet. "Just in time." He moved to the other side of the table where the ultrasound machine was. "We can start this now." He squirted the gel substance on Ellen's stomach.

Henry walked to right beside Ellen's head. "I'm excited about this."

Minutely perturbed, Frank moved closer. "Henry you have to move I can't see. I want to see my baby first."

Dean looked up. "My baby."

"Fuck you Dean, my baby." Frank said.

"Our baby, Frank." Henry corrected. "You said it was our baby."

"Yeah, see. I'm being generous." Frank stated. "So move your body so I can see."

Dean stopped before he lowered the wand to Ellen's stomach. "I'll tell you what. Both of you pull up a chair . . . now please." He watched them scurry like it was a game and fight for a position to see the ultrasound machine. Henry stayed by Ellen's head. Frank pouting, sat at her legs. "Thank you. Now just to stop any arguments . . ." He turned the machine away from them and snickered at both of their 'Hey's!'. "I'll see the baby first and show you both when I'm done."

Robbie's 'hey, am I too late' was accompanied by his usual grin.

“Robbie.” Frank snapped. “What the fuck.”

“El, invited me. We’re roommates, you know. Hey, El.” He paused to kiss her on the cheek. “Did any of you guys realize we move in today.” He walked around the table. To the floor he plopped, crossing his legs and peering up to the ultrasound machine like a kid watching television. “Yeah, today’s the day I officially steal her from Dean.”

Henry shook his head. “He thinks he’s funny, Frank. He’s not. Go on Dean.”

Frank scooted his chair closer and placed both his hands on Ellen’s legs. His fingers moved some and hand glided slightly, maybe out of nervousness, maybe out of habit.

Dean moved the wand across Ellen’s stomach and Robbie’s ‘oh wow’ was the announcement that the baby was in view.

Frank flung his head back. “Why’s he get to see it first. It’s my baby.”

“My baby.” Dean stated and clicked the wand. “And the baby looks good. Measuring normal El. I’m still going to go with my first due date of August 18th. The baby looks great, the heart is great and the . . . hey!” He smiled. “It’s another boy.”

Happy and surprised, Frank stood up. “No Way.”

“Yep.” Dean nodded. “It’s a boy. Another boy El.”

Robbie sprang to his feet. “A boy. Cool.”

Though Henry was happier that the baby was fine, he *was* curious about the gender information. “Dean? How can you tell?” He felt Frank backhand him. “Ow Frank, what?”

“What do you mean how can he tell? Henry?” Frank motioned his head downward. “*It* shows.”

“What shows?” Henry asks.

Frank flung his head back. “And they call me stupid. *It* shows, the difference between boys and girls.”

“Oh.” It dawned on Henry. “How can you see it, isn’t the baby only like five inches big?”

Frank had the answer to that. “It’s a Slagel.”

Ellen started to laugh and wiggled. “No Frank, stop. I said I

have to go.”

Frank scoffed at her. “Anyway Henry, Dean saw the difference.”

“No way?” Henry looked at Dean. “Really, you can see it?”

“Yep.” Dean turned the ultrasound and made the arrow indicator on the screen point to the correct area. “Let me close in on it.”

Henry walked around with Frank, closer to the screen. They along with Robbie, peered over Dean’s shoulder.

“Can we hurry this please.” Ellen beckoned but was ignored. “I have to go.”

Henry shook his head looking at the monitor. “That’s a penis? That doesn’t look like a penis Dean. Are you sure?”

Robbie nodded. “Looks like a penis to me.”

“I’m not seeing it.” Henry turned again. “It looks like a blur or something. It certainly doesn’t look like a penis. I think it’s a girl.”

Frank nudged Henry. “Henry, it’s a penis. Dean can see these things through his doctor vision. It doesn’t look like one because it’s still forming--I guess.”

Henry watched Dean zoom out to bring the baby in full view. “It doesn’t even look like a baby to . . .” Henry paused when the call of his name from Joe over the radio was heard. He picked it up. “Yeah, Joe.”

“Henry.” Joe said. “Can I get you to meet me up at the quantum lab now? It’s important.”

“Sure, Joe. I’m on my way.” Hooking the radio on his belt, Henry stepped back. “I have to go. This . . . this was really nice.” He took a second to kiss Ellen on the cheek and pat Frank on the back. “This means so much to me, it really does. I don’t know how to thank you guys.”

Frank smiled a peaceful smile. “No thanks needed, Henry. In fact, I’ll get Dean to snap you off a picture to keep. How’s that?”

“That would be so great. Ultrasound. The pregnancy. The delivery. Frank . . . you’re the best friend a guy could have.” Looking emotionally choked up, Henry turned and left the room.

Robbie shook his head when Henry left. “Bet me he pukes during the birth.”

Dean gazed to his right meeting up with the dark eyes that

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peered so closely over his shoulder. “Frank. You really want me to snap off a picture for Henry?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “But you know what you should do, Dean. You should find something else inside of Ellen, take a picture of that and give to Henry. Bet me he never knows.”

Frank and Robbie’s sadistic brother laughter, along with Dean’s look of debate, made Ellen plop her head back deep into the pillow. She just wanted to go.

^^^

“Oh my God!” Henry exclaimed as the door to the quantum lab opened and he and Joe stepped inside. “Oh my God!”

“Henry pipe down.” Joe scolded. “And pull your shirt down, it’s not that bad in here.”

“It’s awful, Joe.” Henry had the collar of his shirt over his nose. “I think I’m going to throw up. You know my stomach. And you said they cleaned up in here.”

“So it smells.” Joe looked for Jason and Forrest. “Now where in the hell are they?”

“Probably running from this odor.” Henry’s eyes watered. “I hope they make this fast.”

Jason and Forrest emerged from the back room, they looked shaved and fresh.

Waving his hand in front of his nose, Jason walked closer. “My goodness does it smell bad in here. Hard to tell when we weren’t as clean.”

Forrest agreed, pinching his nose. “It is hud to believe dat we lived luck dis. An-ray?”

“Um yeah Forrest. Hurry up.” Henry paced antsy.

“Are you ruddy ta watch wooed you could note do?”

“Um . . . yeah sure.” Henry moved to a window and opened it. “I’ll just stand over here.”

Joe snickered at Henry and watched Jason prepare the computer. “So this is the big test Jason? This is to see if Forrest actually fixed the

machine.”

“No Joe.” Henry gagged as he argued from the window. “I fixed it. Forrest is working on a new power supply that works with it.”

Forrest held up one finger. “It is true. An-ray, dud fax the computer. Boot, with my new power supply it will run always. No mo chancing running out of power. Oui Jay-soon?”

“No.” Jason typed. “I don’t think the harnessing of power is going to make a difference. However if it does. We’re hooked up for whenever we do need the machine. And on that. Let’s settle this bet. First test of system. Hand me . . . Bunny fu-fu.” Jason spoke to Forrest.

Forrest laid the rabbit in place. “Are you ruddy to loose de butt Jay-soon?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jason typed. “Blow it out your ass Forrest.”

“Blew it ut my es? What es dis, some suck American humor.” Forrest nodded. “Do it.”

Jason placed the program. “We have really simplified this, working or not, even Josephine could run this now.” With the final stroke of the keyboard, Jason took a deep breath. The archway illuminated and the rabbit disappeared. Silence, not cheers at the moment filled the room for a few seconds and the doorway lit back up and the rabbit hopped out. Still skeptical, Jason walked to the rabbit, picking him up. A note hung around his neck. Laying the rabbit on the counter, Jason smacked away Forrest’s reaching hand and read the note. “It says two words and it’s from myself.” Jason looked around. “*It works.*”

Forrest began jumping his little body up and down. “I wean de butt. I wean de butt. Ha! Jay-soon, I wean de butt.”

Jason flipped Forrest off.

With an excited ‘yes!’ Joe also did a little jump. “We’re back on track. Jason can we do this trip we’ve been practicing for? I mean right away?”

“I don’t see why not.” Jason shrugged. “A few more tests to confirm our repairs and we can go tomorrow.”

Henry would have been ecstatic like Joe and them, but he gagged his last gag. “Uh this is great. I have to get out.”

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Joe snapped his finger stopping Henry before he left. “Head to my office tonight, I’m getting everyone together.”

With a nod and his shirt still over his nose, Henry made a dash for the door. “I’ll be there. But first . . .” He didn’t make it far outside before he lost everything he had consumed that day on the grassy area outside the lab.

^^^

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“I want you to name them.” George requested of Jess Boyens who sat straight, like a perfect soldier before him. “First and last names of those who are vital to befriend. Start at the top.”

“Joe Slagel. Leader of Beginnings Montana.”

“Tell me about Joe.”

“Fifty nine year old Caucasian male. Before the plague worked for the united States central Intelligence for twenty years. Prior to that he served twelve years, active duty officer, a Captain, in the United States Army. Eight years Military intelligence. Four sons, Frank, Robbie, Hal and James. All Military men. All Army, With the exception of James, he was Navy. Stationed in Norfolk at the time of the plague. Frank and Robbie survived the virus and reside in Beginnings.”

“Who are you forgetting? You named Joe’s children. You forgot one.”

Jess was confused. “He had a child that died at birth but . . .”

“Nope.” George shook his head. “Ellen.”

“She’s not his child.”

George laughed. “And Joe Slagel would kick your ass for saying that. She’s as much his kid as the others. Now, see. You got all cocky. Screwed up. View the information tape again.” Georg looked up to the single knock on his door. “I am not to be disturbed!” he shouted. Again, another

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knock. George slammed his hand on the desk. "I am not to be . . ." He huffed and stood when Steward walked in. "Stew, didn't you hear me, I am not to be disturbed."

Steward breathed heavily when he stepped inside. "Sorry. But we have problems. The Regressionator works again. Tomorrow is the trip."

George froze. Slowly he swiped his hand down his face and sighed heavily. "Get me our person . . . now."

Mountain Springs, Colorado

So much of nothing remained, Elliott had to wonder if the Captain was having as hard a time as he. Labs that had been cleaned out that even scrap paper failed to remain. All that seemed to be consistently found were the mounds of disintegrated flesh. A product, Elliott knew, of the obvious Garfield Project weapon.

It was also evident that the society had cleaned out more than their attacking enemy. The location of the remains seemed to be only in areas where furniture, lab equipment and such still lingered. Only paper evidence was gone from those areas. The enemy of the society, took only what they needed.

It was a hunch that sent Elliott from the sixteenth floor back outside. A hunch obtained through a search of a small office. Two body piles laid there, both wearing lab coats. A desk with the empty drawers open. He stopped mid search of that floor when he began to think. The society insisted through the log book, they left nothing vital. Yet, in a set up as big as the Colorado site, they couldn't have taken it all. Why take minuscule papers that would take up valuable space? Knowing they couldn't leave them, Elliott's mind came up with no other deduction, than the society destroyed them.

Elliott searched the area surrounding the site for nearly an hour before giving up. It was in his walk away that the flap of a birds wing, made him turn, and in the distance he spotted it. A blackened spot. He rushed to it, hunching through the brush to a small pit where the ground surrounding it was burned.

Elliott peered into the pit three feet deep. Burnt remains of

paper and other articles were in there. The rush of putting out the flames, or possibly a good rain stopped some things from being totally destroyed. And seeing that, Elliott jumped in.

His hand carefully rummaged through, the touch of his fingers turned so much into ash. The more he looked, the more useless it became. Anything partially whole had nothing pertinent on it. He saw the corner of what looked like a manilla folder, and that filled Elliott with some hope. Reaching to it, he pulled it from the pile of ashes only to see most of it was destroyed. A single paper floated out at him. The top and entire left half burned away. Still enough remained for Elliott to see it was a woman's handwriting, Notes of sorts. Sketchy information he would have to piece together by the words that were barely visible. Messages in part. One he would work on. Holding that find gently in his hand, Elliott turned to climb out of the pit and his boot clinked against it. He stopped. Leaving his foot stationary, he bent down and reached. It was metal, buried in debris, Elliott's fingers pulled it free.

A watch. Grey from being scorched, but not destroyed, Elliott wiped the watch on his leg to clear some of the soot. Holding it at eyes level, he turned the flexible band inside out and looked on the back of the watch. A name was engraved there. Elliott immediately looked to the paper he had just found. Just under the words 'sixteenth floor' the name, the only visible name on the paper was the same as on the watch. And with that Elliott headed back to the sixteenth floor. The person who owned the watch and the person on the notes had to be one in the same. The name 'Miguel' was just too unique for it not to be.

Two people. There had to have been at least two people that the society had that the enemy wanted back. Miguel was one of them, the other, Elliott figured a woman. Bit notes on that paper stated 'she' a few times. And the dates along with the word 'escaped' clearly at the bottom of the page coincided with the dates in Steward Lange's log book. Miguel and the woman were the object of the mentioned rescue operation. And since Lange implied the rescue operation was successful enough to give the society's enemy information. One of the two were saved. Since Miguel's watch was found

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burned, Elliott knew it had to be the woman. Though he didn't know her, Elliott felt a sense of relief that she had not become what he and the Captain witnessed of the women in the spoiling camp.

A broken down door, blood on the floor confirmed to Elliott the small room was the one that someone was freed from. Bits of what looked like rice cakes, and sunflower seeds sprawled about the floor. The beds were unmade, and one of the pillow cases had blood on it. Not a lot, but enough to tell Elliott someone was injured.

He checked the closet, the bathroom, the only dresser. Everything was gone. Not expecting to find anything in the night stand, Elliott tried. He heard the crinkling of paper the moment he started opening the drawer. Carefully, Elliott pulled it out slowly, and folded, from his hiding place, it fell out and to the floor. He could see the bloody finger prints on it, and Elliott bent down for it.

"There you are." The Captain came into the room. "Man, are you behind. What do you have?"

Elliott lifted the paper. "A letter of sorts." He started to unfold it.

"Save it for later. It's getting dark, we need to make distance while it's still light."

Still in a squat on the floor Elliott nodded. "I'm done with my search. I found a few things."

"I did too, nothing very valuable though." The Captain stepped back. "Ready?"

"Um, yeah. Let me give this room a once over again. I think this is the room that the society held the enemies people."

"Excellent. I'll look around once more on this floor to see if you missed anything." The Captain stepped out, then popped his head back in. "And Elliott, just take things you know are of some value. I know the type of pack rat you are."

With a snicker Elliott nodded. He wanted to read the letter, but like the Captain suggested, it really could wait. He placed it in his pocket and started to get up. No sooner did his knees straightened Elliott banged his head into the open drawer and dropped back down.

Rubbing his head while laughing at his own stupidity, Elliott's eyes froze. The light from the hall reflected off of it and the only reason it probably remained was because the blood from the center of the floor had flowed onto it, gluing it to the floor like an adhesive. It was an instant photograph under the bed. Blood had destroyed part of it, and on his hands and knees Elliott moved the bed some lifted the picture, and tore what he could salvage from the linoleum.

Elliott stared amazed. Was it her? The woman who was rescued. Careful when he stood, Elliott's focus stayed on the woman in the picture. Her long blonde hair fell forward, a man's hand laid on her shoulder. And even though she smiled, her eyes were sad as they stared at the camera. Elliott locked into them. The wording '*me and Henry*' was above a date that indicated the picture was less than a year old. It looked like a lab of sorts behind the woman. So natural she was, and to Elliott not only was she more beautiful, but she just looked so different than any woman he had encountered since the plague.

"Elliott!" The Captain's voice called from the hall. "I'm ready."

"I'm coming." Elliott responded. He imagined the ridicule he would receive from the Captain over his 'awe' of the picture. But he didn't want to leave it. Not knowing if it was considered an item of value or not, Elliott slipped the picture into his pocket. He'd make mention of the photo to the Captain later on. If the Captain showed an interest, Elliott would share it. If not, Elliott would save himself the harassment, and just keep that picture tucked away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Beginnings, Montana

Chuckling at himself and shaking his head, Frank set his empty glass on the coffee table. He ran his forefinger and thumb over the corner of his mouth and smiled again just before he brought his hands together in a single clap. "So . . ." Another short chuckle. "That is how it was our sophomore year in college." He looked at Ellen who looked amused then at Robbie. "Shall I move on to the summer before our junior year?"

Robbie shook his head. "See this is what I don't get." He held his hands out. "You went to college. Why were you never an officer?"

"I never finished college."

"Still, you were in the service for how many years? You obviously expressed interest in being an officer when you were younger."

"That was Hal." Frank corrected.

"No, you too. You were in the ROTC. Why didn't you go for officer?"

"I made Master Sargent."

"Yeah I know Frank, but you aren't answering my question." Robbie said with frustration.

"I'll answer that." Ellen said as she stood up. "Look at your brother Robbie. Is he officer material?" She slid her hand over Frank's shoulder as she walked to the steps. "I'll be right back."

Robbie watched her leave. "Where is she going?"

"She's pregnant." Frank reached for his glass. "The bathroom is her best friend when she is." He stared at the empty glass. "And where do you put that bottle?"

"I'm not telling." Robbie told him.

"Funny. Where is it?" Frank stood up.

"I told you, I'm not telling you." Robbie stood up also. "Why are you drinking so much lately Frank?"

“Excuse me?” Frank seemed stunned by that question, almost amused. “Where is this coming from?”

“Probably the same place the drinking is coming from. I’m not understanding it. You’re always drinking.”

“So what. I’ve been drinking more. Am I getting drunk?”

“No.” Robbie followed Frank as he searched for the hidden bottle. “But just because you don’t get drunk, doesn’t make it all right to drink more or more often.”

“Robbie knock it off.” Frank opened the cabinet in the kitchen above the refrigerator. “Found it.”

“That makes your third drink.”

“Oh you’re counting?” Frank shook his head and poured some moonshine in a glass.

“If you’re doing it because you feel bad about Ellen, you should sit down and . . .”

“Oh listen to you sounding like the poster boy for AA. Robbie, I drink when I socialize. I’m socializing now. Social drinking is a Slagel family trait.”

“Yeah but how is this really socializing, We’re hanging out bull shitting. I think . . .”

“Oh my God.” Frank laughed at him. “Knock it off.” He turned his head to the sound of Ellen’s voice calling out for him and Robbie. With that he finished the little bit of moonshine he poured himself and placed the glass in the sink. “I really ought to get going anyhow.” He walked into the livingroom, Robbie behind him. “Hey El? You wanna go home? I’ll walk you.”

Ellen paused before sitting on the couch. “Frank?” She giggled. “I am home. You came to see me and Robbie, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. O.K.” Frank walked to the door.

“You know what? Wait.” Ellen grabbed her cat and followed him. “I want to go to the lab and help Dean. Give me a lift?”

“Absolutely.” Frank opened the door for Ellen. “Night Robbie.”

Ellen waved as she followed Frank out. “Night.”

Robbie sat down as soon as the door closed. “Ah.” He gasped

out comfortable on his sofa. "My own place. All by myself. Finally." In the silence, he tapped his fingers on the arm of the sofa. After a few seconds he sprang up. "I'm going to the hall."

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Limon, Colorado

"*If, or when or how . . .*" Elliott read from the letter as he sat with the Captain by the fire. "*I just need you to know I am trying. Know that Miguel did everything he could to get me home. I only wish I could watch you grow up. If I am not . . .*" Elliot lowered the letter. "And that's as far as she wrote. She must have been injured, there are small bloody fingerprints on the letter."

"She obviously got rescued though. Good." The Captain chomped on an equivalent of beef jerky.

"Are you sure you don't want to see the picture?" Elliott asked then reached into his pocket.

"Nope." The Captain said adamantly.

"She's different than the women we have encountered." Elliott tried to show the picture.

"Nope. It's yours."

"Why?" Elliott tried to extend it. "She's very beautiful."

"Exactly." The Captain pointed his beef jerky at Elliott. "Years, Elliott. Years I have resolved myself to a woman-less life. You as well. You can't show me a picture of a beautiful woman, let alone one that is alive running about this country. I've trained myself to live without it, and suppress what I need. That picture will just toss it to hell, and I refuse to become like a dog in heat."

Elliott looked horrified. "Are you implying I'm acting like that."

"Whose staring at that damn picture for hours." The Captain reached for his duffle bag.

"I'm not staring at it with that in mind." Elliott said offended. "I'm just . . . I like the picture. There's something about her."

"She's a woman Elliott. And where the hell is my goddamn

bottle. Yes.” The Captain pulled out this whiskey. “Better. And . . .” He uncapped the bottle. “Were training for battle Elliott. You have to have that on your mind. I don’t want to have to keep tacking you down in your bathroom.”

“Oh, my God.” Elliott put the picture in his pocket again. “And this is coming from a man who is preaching respect.”

“Yes, and this is also coming from a man who knows you.” He showed Elliott the bottle then took a drink. “All right.” The Captain gasped in his after drink and recapped the bottle. “What did we get today? Let’s review again.”

Elliott, legs stretched out, pulled forth his notes. “Definite Society location. Finished off approximately five, six months ago.”

“Wiped out by the Garfield Project none the less.” The Captain pointed a pencil. “But, we found evidence, not only through Lange’s book, but notes they started packing up weeks before they were finally wiped out.”

“Cryogenics, fertilization, agriculture labs. All of these, starting points?” Elliott questioned.

“One of many.” The Captain said. “Then when they got started they moved East. And shall we stay rooted. Sort of like constructing a home. Wood from here, siding from there, all items come together to make a complete picture. But what did we know of the society that we didn’t when we went there?”

“Nothing.” Elliott replied.

“We may have to wait until we are strong enough and start raiding the society camps to get all the information pieced together like a puzzle.” The Captain said. “Hating to admit it, Elliott. We may have a direction, but today we received no more answers.”

“Not true.” Elliott corrected. “We received a very valuable answer. We confirmed that the society has an enemy. An enemy with a very powerful weapon that the society wants. The Garfield project. Whether this enemy is friend or foe of ours, there is definitely a war of sorts between *them* and the society. They are focused on each other. But Captain, here’s some food for thought. When we emerge with our freedom fight battle, we may very well dangerously become the new focus of both.”

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

“Well, then . . .” The Captain cleared his throat and grabbed his bottle. “Won’t they be surprised, not to mention a little embarrassed, when we the UWA . . .” He grinned arrogantly. “Kick both their asses.” He took a drink and showed Elliott the bottle.

With a shake of his head and a snicker, Elliott grabbed the bottle and obliged.

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Beginnings, Montana

Leaning against the bar, eyes raised, as Joe sipped his drink he gave a disgruntled look to ‘Sam’ the bartender. He lowered his lips the rim of the glass and grumbled. “Quit that.” He tried to sip again. “Quit that.” He shook his head and jolted. “I said . . .” he slammed down his drink, spun around, looked down and pointed to eighty-eight year old Josephine. “Quit that. Leave my butt alone. Go home, you’re drunk.”

No bigger than five feet tall, Josephine’s fragile hand ran up Joe’s button down shirt. “Joey. We can have fun.”

Joe removed her hand. “I don’t have fun. Go bother Jason. He just said to me this afternoon he likes you.”

“All right.” Josephine with a loud hiccup focally sought out Jason. When she spotted him playing darts with Forrest, she finished off her drink with a gulp, wiped the back of her hand, licked her lips and staggered in a slant his way.

Joe smiled and returned to his drink.

“Joe.” Henry tapped him on the shoulder. “I really need to talk to you.”

Joe turned to face him. “Sure Henry, what’s the . . .” He back up when he felt the wind of a running Jason.

“Help me, Joe.” Jason beckoned in his race to barrel out the door. In hot pursuit, Josephine flew out behind him keeping up well.

So disgusted Henry shook his head. “I hate when it’s that time

of the month for her.” Waiting for Joe to stop choking Henry continued. “About tomorrow and this time trip, Joe. I . . . I don’t want to go. I don’t.”

“Henry, you’re the logisticalizer. You have to go.”

“No, Joe. I don’t want to.” Henry said with an almost pleading look. “Don’t make me go. What if something goes wrong. What if everything changes. I can’t put myself through that. I can’t not with my baby coming and all.”

“Frank’s baby.”

A mummer from Greg having a drink, interjected. “Dean’s baby.”

“Who asked you.” Joe snapped. “Henry this is important.”

“So is this baby, Joe. It’s the closes thing I have to having my own. It means a lot.”

“Henry you ran around all day showing off a goddamn picture of Ellen’s left ovary.”

“Oh that wasn’t very nice. I didn’t know. And that was mean if Frank. See. See how he is. And you trust him to go back in time again. I can’t. I can’t. I’ll do anything. Don’t make me . . .”

“Henry.” Joe held up his hand. “All right. I’ll get Jason to fill in for you.”

Henry’s shoulder first dripped in relief with a sigh then he reached out and embraced Joe. “Thank you.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Joe gave a pat to Henry’s back and stepped form the embrace. “Relax, will ya.” Grabbing his own drink, Joe watched Henry reach across the bar for one. Through the corner of his eyes Joe looked at Henry. And at that moment Joe was grateful that Henry didn’t have a history of having psychic premonitions come true. Because if he did, with the way that Henry acted and looked, Joe would have ben really worried that the next day’s time trip headed for disaster.

^^^

The official eight by ten portrait of the first family sat on the corner of George's desk. He stared at in, his wife and daughter as he waited for news from Steward. The single knock made George's heart drop. "Come in."

After a slow open of the door, Steward walked in. "Breath in relief." He said. "IU just spoke to our Beginnings person. It's a go. They'll take care of it. They said it would be easy."

Hands first to his desk, George's head dropped. "Thank God." He shook his head as he lifted it. "It doesn't seem right, does it Stew."

"What sir?"

"That Beginnings has this time machine. The ability to go back in time. Yet they won't use it to change anything for the better. Now if I had that pow . . ." George's words slowed down. "Power." His last word dropped to a near whisper and his eyes shifted to the photograph. Snatching it up, George looked quickly at Steward. "Get me our person on the phone."

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Beginnings, Montana

"Dean?" Ellen tossed a pencil and rubbed her eyes. "It is getting really late. Can we stop."

"In a second." Dean clicked on the computer watching the screen and taking notes. "Besides it's only eleven . . ." He looked at his watch. "Shit, I'm sorry it's almost two in the morning."

"See." Ellen moved to behind him. "You said an hour. That was four hours ago."

"Again, I'm sorry. But this was important and it is the thirty-six hour test." Dean's hand tapped the counter with excitement. "Yes. Look El . . ." He tilted his head back and she was gone. "El?" He turned his stool around, Ellen was staring out the door. "What's wrong?"

"Did you hear that?" She pointed.

"What?" He stood up. "You aren't getting paranoid on me are you?"

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

“No, listen . . .” There was quiet and then a few soft bangs, followed by a power surge sound. “Is that them this late?”

“Yeah it is El.” Dean shut the door. “You know they’ll be testing the hell out of the Regressionator to make sure it works.”

“I thought they left.”

“Apparently not.” Dean walked to his computer. “Now come over and look at this before we leave. We have some virus resistance.”

“All right.” Ellen shrugged, took one more peek out the window and followed Dean over to the computer forgetting about the odd hour testing that Jason and Forrest seemed to be pulling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

March 2

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Silence over a cup of coffee, only George wished he could douse his java with whiskey. The importance of the pending Beginnings' time trip couldn't be dismissed. The notion of what they could discover going into that particular time frame was frightening to George. Especially since that one discovery could slow down his entire operation.

Hand hanging up the phone, George peered up to Steward as he walked in the office. "Well?"

"Checked and double checked." Steward said. "I could find a single record kept that indicates trouble on that day."

George breathed out heavily. "Stew if this works in their favor, *that* phone call to Beginnings could very well be the last phone call we make to Beginnings in a long time. In fact, it could be the last means of free communication we ever do."

^^^

Beginnings, Montana

"Ellen quit being nosey." Dean ordered as he sat working on paper work and became irritated as Ellen kept peeking out of the window.

"They won't let us over there. Do you think they've gone yet?"

"No, not yet. And if you're quiet you'll hear them. Now work."

"All right." She folded her arms with a stomp and walked over to him. "I had the weirdest dream last night. I dreamt about that night up here."

"You too?" Dean set down his paper work.

"Yeah, and You?" Ellen shook her head. "I have to blame it on Robbie. All this investigating. He must ask me ten times a week about

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

someone else being up here. Now that has gone and imbedded itself in my subconscious. Now when I dream about the night, there's someone else here, but I don't know who it is."

"That is really odd El." Dean spoke in a soft manner. "I had the same dream. He must be doing it to me, because I dreamt there was someone else here too. And we both know better. Only I know who it is in my dream and that's how I know it's a dream."

"Who Dean? Who is it that you see."

"Get this El." He faced her. "I see . . ." Like a spring action, Dean's hand immediately went to his temple and a painful, cringing look took over him.

"Dean?"

He flung off his glass, then pressed his fingers tightly to his eyes.

"Dean, are you all right?"

"Yeah." Still feeling the burning searing pain, Dean stood up from his stool, losing his balance when he opened his eyes and everything was a thick blur.

"Dean." Ellen grabbed his hand from his face. "Is it the headaches. This is not good, it isn't good at all. Something has to be . . ."

"No." Dean stopped her as she pulled him. "I'm fine. Really I am." He shook his head, the pain started to dull and his vision came back. "I'm fine."

"You're scaring me." She stepped into him, laying her hand on his face. "I'm worried."

"Don't be." Without warning he pulled her into him. "Don't be." Dean closed his eyes tightly as he held on to her, not wanting her to see the concern or worry he himself was having a hard time controlling.

^^^

Henry handed Jason the black leather pouch. "Now I want this back. Remember I am the keeper of these."

Jason took them. "And I am the key master." He spoke deeply and standing tall.

Joe walked up to each of them, checking for their weapons and gas cans. "Jason you have the pendant?"

"Right here Joe." Jason took his place, last behind Frank, Robbie and Greg. "Forrest, you know how to do this right."

Forrest shook his head in disgust as he stood at the time machine. "You muck me suck Jay-son. Da way you do note trust me." He waved his hand at him then selected the program and typed on the keyboard. "And . . . here way go!" A dramatic final strike and the doorway illuminated.

With arms folded Joe watched the four of them disappear and the archway become normal. "Three seconds. One . . two . . ." On three the archway lit back up, this time, bringing not only the bright flash of light but rapid gun fire instead. A bullet sailed through fast, so close, Joe heard it by his ear. "Hit the deck!"

Henry felt it as he dropped to the floor, seeing there a small section of his coal black hair. "Oh my God, my hair!" He lifted his head to see Jason darting in, Robbie next, running in backwards and then Frank. Frank did not come in alone. He flew in holding onto a man and landing inches in a struggle by Henry's head. Henry jumped up. Jumped up to be pulled back down by Joe when three more men in gas masks came in firing. "Shit!"

Total pandemonium spewed about the lab. Frank jumped to his feet, holding the man he was pummeling as a shield. Immediately as he stood up, the man he held felt the bullet as it aimed for Frank and went into him. Lifting the man's body, Frank tossed him into another, the force of the dead man's body sent the uniformed guard careening through an archway that was no longer illuminated.

Snatching the rifle from his assailant. Robbie swung it like a baseball bat at him, smashing him on the face and sending him to the ground. As he stepped for the third, he watched that man drop from a single shot, fired from Joe who aimed upwards from his floor position. Needing to finish off the man he nailed with the rifle, Robbie lifted him from the floor, braced his arm around his forehead and shoulder then simply and with ease, he snapped the man's neck.

Frank picked the dead body from a uniformed assailant who laid

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past the archway covered in another's blood. Furious and outraged, Frank grabbed him by the gas mask, ripping it off. "Breathe our air you fuck." Grasping the man by the back of the head, Frank careened him forward into the wall, not letting him drop, he repeated his actions with feeling of angry happiness.

Breathing heavily Frank spun to take in the now quiet room. Henry and Joe stood up looking in total shock standing among the four dead intruders. He looked at Jason who held on to his leg. A leg that bled. Then at Robbie who breathed heavy also, as he gripped his side where blood seeped through his finger tips. And then at himself, he was just then--after the lowering of the adrenaline moment--starting to feel the effects of the gunshot wound he received to his own shoulder. Feeling even angrier, Frank blindly reached down to the floor gripping one of the motionless bodies. With speed and all of his strength, he grunted as he headed to the door of the quantum lab.

"Dean?" Ellen sprang up. "I heard shots!"

"Shit!" He saw Ellen run to the door. "Ellen you can't go . . ." Slamming his hand down and worried he followed her out as she ran straight to the quantum lab. "Ellen wait."

"Something happened in there. They may need our . . ." She stopped talking and screamed when the quantum door opened and out flew a dead body landing at her and Dean's feet. "What . . ." Then out came another, and another, then finally as the door opened the last time, she saw Frank. "Oh my God." She noticed him bleeding. "Are you all right?"

"No El, I've been shot." Frank spun and went back in.

Dean reached to Ellen's arm. "I'll go get the emergency kit at the lab."

Ellen nodded and followed Frank into the quantum lab. "Dean's getting medical supplies." She stared at the silent faces. "What happened?" She moved to Frank looking at his shoulder, then to Robbie. "You're shot too. What happened? Henry, all you all right too?" She moved to him.

"Aside that I almost got shot in the head and my hair is uneven, I'm fine." He shifted his eyes to Joe.

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Joe was so silent as he stood from his lean against the table. "It could have been worse I take it." He looked at the saddened face. He saw Dean walk into the lab with a case.

Dean felt the air of tension as he reached to shut the door. He didn't know what to say, he walked to Ellen so they could start to asses the injuries.

Joe began to pace. The disappointment that filled the room was so strong he hated to say anything, but he had to. "I need to know what happened in there. But most importantly . . . I need to know what happened to Greg."

"We were set up." Frank said with a nasty tone.

"Impossible." Jason ridiculed.

"I'm telling you . . ." Frank calmed down. "We . . . had to have been set up." He closed his eyes reliving what happened before sharing it with his father.

"Keep low." Frank instructed when they stepped through the time machine on that ill fated time trip. "Jason . . . you stay low and by the door, hidden in this grass,. You can not be seen. Get it?" Frank got agreement then looked at Robbie and Greg. "We can do this gentleman, we have before. Our time may be slower because we have to be cautious, but we know this like the back of our hand. Now lets go down there, get what we need, and get back home."

"And then we headed down." Frank winced some in pain while Ellen bandaged him. "It went smooth. Just like the drills." Frank looked up to explain. "We hit the tunnel, tossed the gas cans and then . . ."

"Times." Frank called out when enough time was allotted for the gas to work.

Raising their weapons, the three stepped into the fog. As it cleared they did not see what they had expected. Standing facing them was a wall. Not a wall of stone, but a wall of defense. Ten soldiers lined across, also wearing gas masks held their weapons at them.

"Retreat!" Frank backed up in a hast with his brother and Greg as the

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first shots began to fire at them

They ran fast back to the starting point. They could chance tuning back to fire in defense, they couldn't chance losing any of them.

The ten soldier followed them diligently but had a hard time keeping up with them. As they made it to the hatch, Frank waited for Robbie and Greg to climb up first and he brought in the rear.

"O.K., you booked out." Joe said trying to understand. "That was the plan."

"Not entirely." Jason intervened. "Book, yeah. Get chased . . . no. I saw them coming. Running. Being chased . . ."

"Get ready!" Robbie called to Jason. "Get it ready!"

Running in a hunching line, side by side they picked up even more speed feeling confident they had the edge over the soldiers that chased them in the tunnels. They . . . were wrong.

Up from the high grass, along the grade the led up to the site, rose another squadron of men. The gunfire grew rapid. Frank waved his hand at Jason knowing they were seconds from him. "Fire her up."

Jason, confused and hand shaking he began to depress Henry's birthday into the pendant, the third number into it, he felt the burning pain into his thigh as a bullet had nailed him. Hitting the last number, the doorway lit up and he heard another close shot. As it flew passed his head he felt his body being shoved by Robbie thorough the time machine door.

"You're leaving out the most important factor. What happened to Greg?" Joe asked then looked to Frank. "Frank?"

Frank peered up.

"Greg!" Frank was ready to step through when he saw Greg go down. "Greg!" Stepping back to get him, Frank was sidelined by a soldier who dared to physically accost him. Trying to spin the soldier from him in his race against the seconds to get Greg, three more dove forward and in Frank's struggle he stumbled through the

archway.

“End of story.” Frank said then checked out his bandaged arm. “Thanks El.” He gave her a smile. “So you see, Dad. I swear we were set up.”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Impossible. They were heavily guarded and we just didn’t know that. But you tried, you boys did a good job and you tried.” He walked up to Robbie patting his son on the cheek. “Cheer up. So we can’t go this route. After you heal Robbie, you get motivated go get the supplies and we’ll begin the assassin squads. Only you’ll have to do it without that map we so much wanted.”

Robbie raised his eyes. “We lost Greg Dad. We lost Greg.”

Saddened, Joe took in the silent lab, he turned to Henry who also had his head down. “You sensed this.”

Henry shook his head. “Not this Joe. Not this. Something is just not right about what happened. And now . . . and now . . .” He lowered his head again. “And now my hair is crooked Joe.”

A sudden outbreak of moans occurred, yet they weren’t all bad, something about Henry’s emotional vanity sparked the tension reliever they needed, even if briefly. But over the moans an oddity occurred. The radio hissed and Frank’s name was called.

“Frank come in. Frank, are you there? This is Steve at Tower.”

Frank looked around for his radio that he had left in the lab, he spotted it on the counter and he walked to it picking it up. “Yeah tower. What’s up?” Frank was dreading it being bad news.

“Something odd is happening . . . Frank . . .” Steve paused. “There is a man and a child at the front tunnel gate. He says . . . he says he’s Greg, Frank. But isn’t Greg with you?”

Frank’s eyes widened as he lifted his head to everyone that suddenly sprang up. “Tower keep him, there we’re on our way.” Bolting without hesitation for the door, Frank only paused to grab a set of jeep keys. Looking at the number on it, he jumped in the correct jeep and started to drive before Robbie and Joe barely made it in the jeep with him. He pulled away with a screech. Not noticing or waiting for everyone else who followed in another jeep right behind him.

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The twenty-something man had surpassed the age of forty. Stockier than he was when he walked through the time machine, Greg was in good shape. And it was definitely Greg. His hands shook as he brought the mug of coffee to his lips. He sipped it then took bite of the biscuit Joe had given him. "This is very strange for me." He spoke, his voice sounding different, worn, unlike it had been. "It was only a little bit ago that you saw me. It's been too years since I saw any of you." His eyes shifted to the floor where Ellen was helping the little boy eat. "That's Devon. I found him during the plague. We've been living in Canada. I went there to a very remote spot. I didn't want to relive the plague again, so I thought it best to relive it somewhere secluded. I couldn't come back here earlier. If I did, you wouldn't believe me, so we waited until this day and the right time. Actually . . ." Greg sipped his coffee again. "Actually we've been camping out for about three days just outside in the woods. Luckily I know where Robbie sets his traps."

Joe edged closer. "Greg. What happened? Frank, Robbie, they thought you were dead. You didn't make it back through."

"Yeah I know. Imagine my horror when I saw the archway close and I watched them all go through. But the thing was, I got shot in the leg and fell into the grass." Greg rubbed his leg. "The other soldiers never saw me. They withdrew and went back. My leg wasn't that bad. I hung out up in the fields until it started to get dark. Then I remembered, you know after I started feeling sorry for myself. I remembered I can come back to Beginnings. It was just going to take a long time. So knowing I was there and knowing I was stuck, I thought I'd make the best of it because I had one thing working in my favor."

Frank folded his arms as he listened intently. "What is that?"

"I know Beginnings like the back of my hand. Even if they had guards running about, I knew how to get about. And I did. I started thinking, even though it would be years to me, if I could get you the information and return to Beginnings on this day with it. There would be no time lost, for you of course. So knowing the tunnels as well as I do, I took the round about way, to make my way down to the cryo lab. I had it all planned. I would set

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off a can of gas, run in there and grabbed the information and head my ass out of there. But I never went to the cryo-lab. I never went in there.”

Joe understood. “It was a good try though Greg. We appreciate your efforts. I suppose they caught you.”

“No Joe.” Greg shook his head. “The whole point of the time trip was to get information that not only could lead us to the scientists and their whereabouts, but why they want us so bad. Right?” He saw them all shake their heads. “Well I have that for you Joe. I got that for you.”

Joe sprang up from his lean. “You what? Where? Is it in your bag?”

“No.” Greg stood up, and walked to the door. “I need you guys to come with me. It’s too big.” He opened Joe’s office door. “And Henry, bring your tools.”

Greg’s voice echoed in the damp dripping tunnels. He was the only who spoke as they walked. “I knew that I would have a hard time remembering after all the years. So I marked it.” He shined his flashlight. “Let’s hope it’s still here, if not, I know it’s around here.”

Thinking Greg may have spent too much time outside the walls, Frank followed with apprehension. “Why are we at this end of the tunnels Greg. There is nothing here.”

“Oh I beg to differ Frank.” Greg stopped, he smiled widely as he faced the six men who stopped with him. “Look.” He shined the flashlight on the concrete wall. The beam stopped center and it shone on a brown ‘X’ a small arrow pointing right was beside it. “This is it.”

Hating a repeat of the year before Joe ran his hand on the ‘X’. “A wall.”

“Yep.” Greg nodded. “Henry, do you remember how you opened the last wall?”

“Yeah I do.” Henry set his tool bag down. “Is there something behind this wall Greg?” He grabbed the proper tool and moved to the wall. “Another lab?”

“Let’s say your answers..”

Henry, knowing everyone was waiting with anticipation felt for the creases between the concrete. "If this opens . . ." He grunted placing the large screwdriver high and into the crease. "This should trigger the . . ." The floor shook and sounding like a stampede, the rumbling started. Dropping the screw driver Henry stepped back, arms extended and he joined the other men who watched. Watched as the wall slowly, not only slid open to the right, but another section slid open to the left exposing a deep, dark room.

Joe stepped forward. "Holy mother of God. What is this place?"

Greg, flashlight in hand stepped into the room. "As I told you before Joe, this is your answer. I saw it when I was heading down to the cryo-lab. I knew as soon as I saw it, this was it. This is what you needed." He disappeared into the dark room. With a loud click a humming occurred and one by one rows of ceiling lights came on brightening the once dark room. A large room, deep. Set in the center were three tables of electronics. Monitors of some sort, unlit intricate panels next to each one. They laid there, like video games waiting to be turned on and played.

Robbie knew exactly what it was when he stepped in. "This *is* it Dad."

Joe's head dropped and he let out a breath of relief. "Thank God. Greg, . . ." He lifted his head. "What can we say? Thank you?"

"Eh." Greg waved his hand and moved about excitedly. "Joe, in this room." He pointed to a door. "Boxes, Joe, Boxes and boxes of cellular phones. That's why we have fiber optics in Beginnings. We were designed for phone communication."

Frank was just as stunned. "Dad, is this what I think it is?"

"Yep." Joe took it all in. "This gentleman, is a communication center. Remember these panels from the service Frank?" Joe pointed. "These can be used to pick up any signals being sent, via phone line, satellite, radio etcetera. And that." Joe pointed to the blacken wall length board. "I am willing to bet any money that it lights up and indicates also."

"It needs linked up." Greg said then pointed to a door in the back. "That door leads to a storage room. The means to build the link up dish is in there."

With a smile, Joe looked to Henry. "Can you do it. Can you

mantle the dish.”

Henry scratched his head. “Yeah, it may take time but Joe . . . call me stupid.’

“Stupid.” Robbie snickered.

Henry glared. “What’s the big deal. We have phones. Whippy. Really, this can’t be what the society wants so bad. Phones? How hard would it be to start that up again.”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” Joe said as he held out his hand in a indication of the room. “The Garfield project wasn’t the center of the food industry for them. It wasn’t the center of their cryogenics process. It is the heart of their whole plan. This is supposed to be the center of their operations. The main communications link.” Joe spoke with much arrogance. “And they never expected for us to discover it. This is what George protected, and wanted so bad. His eyes to the world. He would be able to see it all. Yeah, yeah, he’s growing, but so what? We don’t need massive forces to bring the society down. We can do it little by little, bit by bit. Surgical strikes. Because they have to communicate. All these troops they send out. They aren’t out there blind. They’re out there, and so will we be. And the moment we get this place up and running, the moment anyone, a single soldier to an entire brigade, sends out a signal, we will receive it, we will locate them, find, and then . . we will take them out.”

A RACE AGAINST TIME

HENRY'S JOURNAL

March 29

The satellite dish is complete, the lines are hooked up, and tomorrow we see if what I have done, works with the programming Forrest completed on the computer network in the communications center. If it does, then Robbie's return from getting equipment will signify his leaving soon. Only it will be to stop anything that is near or comes close to us. I've always prided myself as being the master of tools. But today too much hinges on the fact that even the slightest incorrect insertion of a screw will spell failure. Fingers crossed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

March 30

Beginnings, Montana

"The master of the nomads has returned." Robbie made his announcement as stepped into his farther's office.

"Christ." Joe shook his head and stood up from behind his desk. "Just in time too." Joe embraced his son. "Glad to have you back."

"Just in time for?" Robbie asked.

"Henry finished everything. Right now he's running the final connections up to the satellite. You didn't see it when you came in? It's right by the front tunnel on that hill."

"No, we came in the back gate. And I am ripe. How much time do I have?"

Joe looked at his watch. "About an hour. But you may want to allot time to stop by the clinic. You're an uncle again."

"No shit?" Robbie grinned. "Denice had the baby? How's Frank and Johnny being?"

"Frank's ecstatic. Johnny, well, he's about as excited as he can be. It's being considered Curt's blessed event. He's married to Denice. Who the hell knows. I'll never understand these issues."

"You should. You signed that law."

Joe chuckled at his son, reached back and grabbed his clipboard. "That I did. I'll walk with you. I want to go down this list and see what you got and didn't get."

"Everything." Robbie opened the door. "Dad we are hooked up. We're ready. Has Frank been working with my squad?"

"Daily. Run into anything out there?" Joe pulled the door closed.

"Nope." Robbie walked with his father. "And it kind of makes me wonder."

"About what?" Joe asked.

"Are they really out there?"

“Oh they’re out there Robbie.” Joe laid his hand on Robbie’s back. “They just aren’t expecting us.”

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Frank knocked once on the mobile lab door. He didn’t get an answer and figuring he couldn’t possibly be considered an intrusion, he just walked in. “Dean.” He called out to Dean whose back had faced him. Frank stepped closer to him as he did, he noticed that Dean had headphones on. His head moved some in a nod as he wrote something on a clipboard. Wanting to peek and see what song Dean was writing the words to, Frank opted to disturb him first instead. With a Frank-style flick, he beamed Dean in the back of the head at the same time he called his name loudly. “Dean!”

Dean jumped removing the headphones and spinning as he stood from his stool. “Frank. Shit, you scared me.”

“Where’s Ellen?”

Dean was about to answer, but he stopped with a inconspicuous sniff. “Were you drinking?”

“No.” Frank scoffed. “It’s eight in the morning. Where’s Ellen?”

“Oh. Henry picked her up a few minutes ago. You just missed her. He’s showing her the satellite and they’re heading down to the test.”

“Not that I want to. You want a lift?”

Dean shook his head. “No. Johnny’s on his way up, I’ll take his jeep.”

“All right. I’ll see you there. Oh . . .” Frank stopped in his walk to the door. “What were you listening to?”

“Myself.”

“Since when did you start singing?”

“What?” Dean laughed. “I wasn’t listening to myself singing you goof. I was listening to myself talk.”

“I guess someone has to.” He grabbed the door, laughing at his own wit, Frank started to leave but stopped when he heard the sound of something falling and crashing. He quickly turned around. “Shit . . . Dean!” He ran over to him.

Dean held on to the counter, his head down, and he gripped the edges as if trying to get his stand.

Seeing him, Frank grabbed hold of him, trying to steady Dean. “What’s wrong?” Frank looked at him. “Dean?” He saw the far off look in his eyes. “Dean?” He snapped his finger.

“I’m . . . I’m all right.” Dean gripped the counter harder. He mumbled softly.

“What happened?” Frank asked.

“The . . . pain.” A focus began to return to his vision and Dean saw the serious look Frank was giving. “I got hit with a bad pain. It was something I ate.” He grabbed for the stool and sat down, breathing slowly and from his mouth.

“Man. Must be bad to knock you over. And since you mentioned that . . . I’m making an escape.” Frank gave a hard pat to Dean’s back and stepped away. “If you ate something that gave you gas pains that bad. I don’t want to be trapped in a small metal tube with you. See you at the test.”

Grabbing his bearings and wishing he felt slightly good enough to chuckle at Frank’s comments, Dean turned around. “Oh and Frank?” Frank was gone. “Thanks.” Starting to feel better, Dean clenched his fist. He opened his hand staring down into the palm of it. Seeing the evidence of how he gripped the counter so fiercely in his pain, he nearly drew blood.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It was huge. A painting of a window with a spring landscape. George sat in his office, rocking some in his chair with a curl to his lip as he stared at it hanging on his wall. “Pathetic. What the hell is that?”

“You mentioned you wanted a window with a view.” Steward said. “Until we refurbish the oval office that’s for you.”

“Well take it down.” George spun his chair around. “It’s stupid.”

Steward spoke as his head was down to his notes. “You’re

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irritable because of the situation.”

“I have every right.”

“Yes, but not to take it out on the hard work of a very talented man.”

George scoffed. “Give me the news.”

“All calls have been placed out. Should they not hear back from us, our men are to assume Beginnings has successfully linked up the communications center. Radio and telephone silence. No one is to use the phone. From here on in, unless notified otherwise, messenger and morse code.”

“We’ve regressed,”

Steward shrugged. “For the time being. Until they realize how big we really are. Good news though. Sgt. Doyle reports Jess Boyens has moved into the brigade in which he will defect from.”

George mumbled a ‘whatever’

“You’re sulking.”

“And with every right.” George snapped. “A little piss ant dot on the map is about to cripple us more than they even realize. And I’m supposed to . . . UH!” George shirked when the phone rang. “I thought you gave the order for no one to use the phone.” With a hard snatch up of the receiver, George spun his chair and barked. “What! No calls!” An immediate ringing silence hit the office which was broken by the slight creak of George’s chair when he leaned forward. “Say that again.” He nodded and turned his chair around again to face Steward. “When.” He spoke soft then closed his eyes. “Thank you. Keep me posted.” Slowly his hand extended and hung up the phone. His eyes met the questioning ones of Stewards. “That was Burke. The virus and antiserum match up. They work. He’s starting production on the inoculations and the two virus strains. He said about four weeks it will be ready.” George sighed softly in relief. “We have our means of getting Beginnings . . . now . . .” He ran his hand over his mouth. “How do we get it there?”

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“There you are.” Joe stood up from the seat he had next to Forrest and Jason. He presented a great mood to Frank, Henry, Robbie and Ellen when they walked in the communications room. “We’re anxious to test this thing.”

Forrest stood up also, extending his hand to Henry. “An-ray. Good jobe. You must be very happy dat it is don. Boot, after all dis. I butt you luck to tuck a brick. Oui?”

“Um . . . yeah Forrest sure.” Jittery, Henry stepped back, biting his nails in anticipation.

Joe picked up a box and laid it on the counter table. “All right, here’s where we stand. While Henry has been working diligently on the satellite. We learned this system again. There were three manuals and between Jason, Forrest and I we think we have the system programmed to react . . .” He slowed in his speech when Dean, so dragging-like walked in. “Dean.”

Raising one hand in sluggish wave Dean moved into the room. “Am I too late?”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Not at all.”

Ellen noticed right away, Dean’s demeanor. She quietly scooted to him. “What’s wrong?” She whispered.

“Nothing.” He grabbed her hand, squeezed it, then released it. “We’ll talk later.”

Joe cleared his throat and continued. “As I was saying. I think we have this programmed correctly. The only problem is, we’re unable to go too far beyond the US. But, the US is our main concern right now. We’ll work the bug out that’s holding us back. Anyhow . . .” Joe’s mood stayed ‘up. “When any phones or numerous radios used, we should get a signal on the big map.” He pointed to the board behind him that lit up the United States. “Since we don’t have the man power, we only hooked up one table of monitors. That’s all we’ll need. We can pin point the type of signal and a close proximity where it is coming from. For the time being, Jason, Forrest and I will monitor down here around the clock until we train someone. Now in this box.” Joe’s hand tapped on the box he leaned against. “We have sixty of the phones programmed and ready to use . . . Ellen.” He smacked her

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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hand away. "Hands off. Henry worked really hard on these. So lets use these to run a test. Henry power up that satellite. It's your baby." Joe pointed to the circuit box on the wall.

"Um." Henry shook his head. "No, Joe, I'd rather not."

"Henry!" Joe scolded. "Turn on the goddamn satellite."

Nodding, Henry took a breath and moved slowly to the box. Just as his hand reached for the switch, an annoying buzzing sound from Robbie made him stop.

"Sorry." Robbie snickered. "Go on."

Shaking his head Henry, with another breath. Turned on the switch. A beep through the speakers of the system indicated it was on. "All right. Now let's test it."

Joe pulled out a phone and handed it to Henry. "This is all charged up." He then saw Ellen's hand waving fanatically about. "Yes Ellen?"

"Please Joe. Oh please can I call Henry on the phone. Please?" She begged like a child. "Please?"

"Oh all right." Joe gave her the other phone. "Power it up and dial . . ."

"Joe?" Ellen looked at the phone. "Is this little number pasted her, my phone's number?"

"Oh, Joe" Ellen powered it up. "I love these things. I used to love my cell phone. Boy did I use to rack up the monthly charge on that . . ."

"Ellen. Dial!" Joe calmed himself. "Dial . . . 390-7766."

Ellen giggled with every beep of the phone. She pressed send and placed it to her ear. "Oh my gosh it's ringing." Immediately Henry's phone rang. "Come on Henry answer." She lifted her eyes to Joe. "I hope he's home."

Hesitantly Henry answered. "Hello."

"Oh hi Henry it's me, Ellen." She spoke chipper. "What are you doing?"

Ignoring Ellen's annoying phone mannerism. Joe waited with bated breath and fingers to his mouth in the room that only held Ellen's chattering. He along with everyone but Ellen stared at the big board. "Come on. Come on." Joe beckoned. Then suddenly, like the startle of an alarm

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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clock a loud beeping pattern began and a red light blinked on the United States map. "Yes!" Joe shouted along with every else. "Jason." He turned around. "Pull it up."

Frank looked down at his watch. "Not bad. Forty-five seconds for the signal."

Jason moved his fingers quickly. He too was nervous for the first real test. "Got it Joe. This is telling me it is a fiber optic communication. It says single signal." A few more taps. "Coming from Montana."

"Can you get it closer Jason?" Joe asked.

"I'm trying. Yes . . . Garfield County Montana. Nearest listed location. Approximately . . ." Jason clapped his hands. "Forty-five miles west of Rock Springs."

Relieved to hear that, Henry dropped his head. "It worked."

"Oh Henry." Ellen spoke in the phone. "You did so good. Let me talk to Frank."

Henry smiled and walked the phone over to Frank. He tapped him on the shoulder. "For you."

Frank took it and placed it to his ear. "Hello? Hey El." He looked at his father covering the receiver. "It's El."

"Give me the goddamn phone." Joe snatched it up. "The test is over Ellen. Hang up." He switched it off and down went the signal.

Ellen whined. "Joe. I was having fun." She ignored Joe as he reached for her phone. "Just let me try one more call."

"Ellen!" Joe yelled. "Who the hell are you going to call? No one else has a phone. We're giving them out tomorrow. Just give it back. Now!"

"O.K." With a slam to his hand, Ellen laid it hard on Joe's palm.

"Jesus Christ." Joe folded up the phone. "Someone get her out of here." As he walked by Henry, he patted him on the back. "Good job. Very good job Henry. I'm proud." Joe placed the phone back in the box with the others. "Now Robbie, from here on in you are on call. As soon as we get a signal, you and your crew have a direction and are off." Joe smiled. "People I have a feeling it is going to be one hell of a spring."

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### Bowman, North Dakota

The warming spring breeze carried a silence and solemnness to it. There were two noises for the moment in Bowman. The flap of the flag in the wind and the sound of taps being played slowly on the bugle. Hands at sides, knees ever so slightly bent, and look of pride upon their faces, the men of Bowman stared at the lowering flag. All activity froze. Evening colors.

The last note played, the flag was brought down and the men dispersed for dinner at the mess.

It was long and brown and it ran down to the plate like a combination of molasses and chocolate syrup. The Captain's eyes stayed adhered to it. "Something went amiss in the reconstitution of that gravy."

"I'm sure it tastes fine." Elliott said, waiting for his helping.

The Captain moved his tray down the line. "Ah, the fruit looks . . ." He tilted his head. "Semi better." with a chuckle he grabbed the mystery fruit and placed it on his tray. At the end of the line he filled his coffee mug and walked over to the table where the officers sat.

The men at the table rose when the Captain approached the head.

"Be seated." The Captain nodded and took his place. "Elliott." The Captain pulled forth a fork. "You're walking funny. The buttocks giving you trouble?"

Elliott rolled his eyes. "My rear is not accustomed to being bounced for fourteen hours upon the back of a horse."

"You need to learn." The Captain said. "I saw you with drills. Impressive maneuvering of the sword while riding. And don't worry about the rear, Elliott. It will stop hurting as soon as the callouses form. Like me."

Elliott paused in the breaking of his bread. "You have callouses on your backside?"

"Yes." The Captain reached for his bread.

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“And you admit this?” Elliott asked.

“Sure, why not. And . . . who cares. It’s not like anyone wants to see them. Unless you do . . .” The Captain stood up.

“No.” Elliott shook his head when the men at the table laughed. “You’re in a good mood.”

“I am.” The Captain said. “Two more days, Elliott and we implement the scouting parties for the society and more survivors. You’re just in a sore mood because I changed your orders.”

“Upset, yes.” Elliott nodded. “I worked them out down to the mathematics with the rations.”

“You had them out too long.” The Captain took a bite of his brown food and tried not to cringe. “I don’t want them worn down. It’s a big country, we still are training, we have time. One week out, one week home.”

Disgruntled Elliott nodded. “Did you stop by the Women’s house to prepare them for possible surviving women?”

The Captain nodded. “And I sneezed, thank you very much Owens for giving them the perfume.”

“Guilty.” Owens raised his hand. “Call it a bribe to not have to service Grace this month. I hear, Captain she has taken an interest in you.”

The Captain glared up. “That isn’t even funny.”

Elliott intervened. “Perhaps if we mentioned your calloused buttocks she may back away.”

The men at the table laughed and The Captain had to joined them, even if it was at his own expense. “Speaking of women.”

The laughter stopped. In fact the entire mess hall drew silent.

The Captain looked around. “No, no.” He spoke to assure the men. “They aren’t requesting yet.” The clanking forks continued and so did the conversing. The Captain looked at Elliott. “I heard a rumor. I need you to tell me it isn’t true.”

“It isn’t true.” Elliott continued to eat.

“I didn’t say what it was.”

“Rumors are never true.”

“I see.” The Captain leaned back in his chair with a snide look. “So it’s merely a fallacy that you are offering a reward of sorts for the man

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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who locates that woman in the picture you carry.”

Elliott snickered. “That is absurd. Who told you that.” Seeing that the Captain was pointing, Elliott turned his head to where the point aimed. “Sgt Owens. . . .”

“Nope.” Owens held up his hand. “That isn’t what I told him. Begging the Captain’s pardon, but . . . he’s starting trouble. I merely said that you mentioned her to one of my men who were going out for survivors.”

Elliott cringed, bringing his hand to his face. “A mention does not a reward make.”

The Captain laughed and stood up. “We’re having fun with you Elliott. We know you’re obsessed.” He gave a pat to Elliott’s back.

“I am not. I haven’t even looked at the picture in . . .” Elliott fluttered his lips. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“And defensive as well.” The Captain stepped back. “I need more bread. Anyone else?” He asked, then headed to the food line.

Elliott just shook his head and returned to his food. He wasn’t obsessed by no means with the picture. There was just something comforting about it he enjoyed. If the Captain’s little tease at the table was a taste of the juvenile harassment he would receive, Elliott was grateful he kept that promise to himself not to mention that photo ever again to the Captain.

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## Beginnings, Montana

The duffle bag was small, but packed enough to be solid. It landed by Robbie’s front door with a thump that went through Ellen.

She crossed her arms tight to her body, she felt herself shiver, not from cold, but from fright as she watched Robbie geared up to go.

“Man.” He grinned with excitement looking at Frank. “I can’t believe we got a signal this early.”

“Well, we knew that would happen. “Frank visually checked out his brother. “Should be at the location by dawn. As soon as you finish, you call us.”

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“Got it.” Robbie nodded.

“And don’t forget to plug the damn charger into the lighter. We don’t want to lose phone contact.”

“Yep. I am so excited about this. El . . .” Robbie saw her turn away. “El.” Ready to go Robbie stepped from the door to her. “What is it.”

“Why do you have to do this?” Ellen turned to face him, as she did she wiped a tear that rolled down her face. “Why you?”

“El, come on.” Robbie tried to give a scoff.

“How long will you be gone. Robbie, you’re leaving me alone.”

“You’re not alone.” Robbie looked at a silent Frank then to Ellen. “You’re not alone. Enjoy having a home to yourself. And El . . .” He softened his voice. “I’m not going to be gone that long. I could be back in two days.”

“And what if you aren’t?” Ellen asked.

“Can I be blunt?” Robbie raised his eyebrows. “Then I’m not. We’re stocked up and I’ll be out there with my men as long as needed. I’ll come home, but if signals call, I’ll go back out. It’s a tour of duty, El . . . one I miss. This is what I want to do, I don’t want to spend my life behind these walls. None of us do. Think of it as my way to freeing the way. O.K.?” He asked then moved into her.

“I am so worried about you.” Ellen embraced him,

“Thanks.” Robbie kissed her cheek. “I’ll call you all the time. I promise. We’re buddies. He stepped back. “And don’t have that baby without me. I want to see the outcome myself.” He winked. “I better go.”

“BE careful,” She grabbed his hand.

“I . . .” Robbie shifted his eyes to his brother. “In Slagel tradition I will answer that as . . . always.” He smiled. “Frank?”

Frank only gave his brother an embrace, a tight one he really didn’t want to let go. :take care and check in all the time, little brother.”

“You got it.” Robbie inhaled deeply. “I’m up for this.”

Frank gave a subtle nod and proud look as he opened the door. “You’ll be just fine. You’ll do great.”

Robbie lifted his gear. “I’ll miss you both.”

So engrossed in watching Robbie leave, Ellen stepped to the

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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door. A soldier going off to war, duffle bag in hand, a slight slant to his proud walk, she kept her eyes on him until he was no longer seen. Closing the door with so much sadness, Ellen turned around. Frank was gone. “Frank?” She heard the ‘clinking in the kitchen. “Frank?” She walked in. “Hey.” She said softly as he finished off a drink. “Putting on a big front out there.”

Adding a splash of whiskey to his empty glass, Frank set down the bottle. His heavy breathing was heard as he stared at the alcohol, after one more breath, he downed the drink and put the glass on the counter.

Ellen moved closer to him. “Please don’t tell me you’re worried something will happen to him.”

“Nah. I’m just . . .” Frank’s voice graveled with concern. “I’m just worried about *him*. He’s my brother, El. The only one I have left.” Reaching out, Frank first grabbed hold of Ellen’s arm, then he pulled her into him. “The society hasn’t a clue that we’re coming. Som really, what could go wrong?”

Head against his chest, Ellen listened to the strong thumping of Frank’s heart. She felt his worry, and only hoped that through his words he spoke what he felt, not what he wanted to make himself believe.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It was part of Sgt. Doyle’s job, one he hated, but he stood there. Stern and tall, waiting for George to finish his tantrum so he could speak.

“They were given orders!” George blasted.

“Yes, sir. I know.”

“No one! No one was supposed to communicate or use any means of communications! You did make that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Sgt. Doyle nodded.

“But they did. Good thing we didn’t pick up! Those idiots deserve exactly what Beginnings is going out to give them.” George with fury

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walked around his desk. "And that's where Beginnings is headed. To take out that squad. These are men under your command. You are responsible for their error! Do you know that!"

"Yes, sir."

"No you tell me, what do you suppose we do?"

"Send more men out."

"For what! To take out an assassin squad we may never find?"

George shaking his head turned to go back to his desk.

"No, sir . . ." Sgt. Doyle swallowed preparing himself for the backlash. "To die."

George froze. The first thing that went through his mind was how in the world did he acquire so many morons working for him. Figuring, what the hell, he'd play along with it before shooting Doyle himself, George appearing calmer, turned back around. "Sure. Why not. How many do you suggest we send out to die. What seems appropriate. Another twenty, thirty?"

"No more than fifteen squads."

"A hundred and thirty men." George nodded then if his eyes could have turned demon red they would have. "What are you? An asshole."

"No, sir. I believe I am a highly gifted military strategist and if you would give me one moment, I'll explain."

Knowing Doyle had to be frozen for a reason, and not just to write those stupid 'how to' Society military manuals, George leaned against his desk. "Go on."

"There is no ultimate gain with out sacrifice and loss. What, sir is your ultimate gain?"

"Getting Beginnings back."

"And you want to use the virus to do that. That is in motion, When will it be done? A couple months?" Sgt. Doyle received the annoyed nod of George. "I say we sacrifice. Beginnings gets signals, they send their assassin squad out, they hit our troops. I say we let them get arrogant, let them think they have the upper hand. We not only send our squads out, but we send them out with orders to be at specific locations and specific times to send a radio signal."

George gave his attention. "A goose chase."

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“Exactly.” Sgt. Doyle said. “They think they are coming after us, when in actuality, we are leading them on a well timed path to our virus via a route home.”

A slight smile hit George face. “The last troop they encounter has the virus. They send the signal, Robbie and his men go to that signal.”

“Only we’re waiting.” Sgt. Doyle said.

“My God. I never thought of that . . .” George said in awe. “What better way to deliver the virus to Beginnings, then to send it through the front gates . . . with their very own men.”

CHAPTER FORTY

June 27

Vale, Oregon

Vale, Oregon. Robbie wrote the word across his journal as he sat by the smoldering campfire. A campfire he kept going all night. As he wrote, the amber color that glowed against his face with each hit of his cigarette, became less predominant with the early morning light that was beginning to shine. Robbie reflected as this trip neared its end. The sixth squadron run since the communication center was operational. As he wrote and thought of the sixteen SUTs they took out, Robbie couldn't help but let his mind drift off to how much more was ahead.

Would him and his men always have such an easy time. Being told where to go. Heading to that city, taking out the small camp and then heading home. No injuries, no resistance, no problems. Were the men of Beginnings trained that well? Were the SUTs just that uninformed? Or were they, what Robbie feared, off to a lucky start?

It was hard to tell as he scribble a body count down, along with a detailed account of what happened. Another sneak attack in the night. Another raid where the SUTs stood not one single chance. Too easily it was all done and that made Robbie's gut scream. Would the simplicity of the runs vanish once the men started to wear after hitting three or four cities in a row? Or worse yet, what would happen once word got around through their communication that the SUT camps were being targeted. Robbie had a certain fear with the answer to that.

The camps would soon be waiting and ready for them. Anticipating Beginnings arrival. And when that happened, there would be no more sneak attacks. No more hit and run raids. All hell could break loose with every hit on each camp. The chances of injuries or death to the Beginnings men would increase. There would be resistance, there would be fighting. And Robbie knew well, that before long, it would be nothing more than a hand to hand combat war in a post apocalyptic world.

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Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

It was a communications center of their own, but the one not far from where George based his office in Quantico, it looked more like something from a pre-World War II, era. The beeping of Morse code filled the room, and George stood behind Sgt. Doyle patiently waiting and watching him write.

The dot of the lead pencil tip to the paper was loud and Sgt. Doyle stood straight. "Sir . . ." He paused to smile and hand George the paper. "Signal received . . . Mr. Slagel and his men were just given the orders."

George took the paper and read the barbaric means of communication. But no matter how raw the form of the message came, they were words that George needed to see.

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Bowman, North Dakota

Chaos. Elliott wondered why chaos had to be so loud. It was too early in the morning to be dealing with it. But it was becoming a daily occurrence in the growing town of Bowman. In his office, next to the Captain's, Elliott could hear the pandemonium on the street. The Captain's voice was loud as he administered order. Elliott swore as he worked on ration and work order sheets, that it was the worst it had ever been and he dreaded going outside to help. Scouting troops, and 'Hope' runners, the ones who looked for survivors, were due in. But Elliott didn't recall in all his scheduling having them all due in at the same day and same time such as they were doing that morning.

Elliott expected the scouts that were looking for society camps, and the Hope runners to bring willing joiners back. But never did Elliott

expect the numbers they received so fast. In the few short months since they had begun sending men out, the little town of Bowman, the UWA, had grown to nearly five hundred strong. Almost all were men, wanting badly to join a cause that would help put an end to the days of their running from death squads that randomly hit their homes.

The UWA accepted them and Elliott grew concerned. Feeding them, clothing them, finding uniforms weapons and training would be overwhelming. Especially with the strategically planned attacks on the stationary Society camps not that far in the future. But with every ounce of worry Elliott had, the Captain countered that with calm. He wasn't the least bit concerned at all. The Captain fully believed that things would work themselves out. Their cause was too good.

"Sgt. Ryder, sir." A young corporal entered his office.

"Yes." Elliott looked up.

"Sir." The corporal seemed a bit nervous. "You may want to now this. Sgt. Owens said to tell you that a woman was picked up. She has long blonde hair and looks like the one in the photo . . ." Before the young corporal could finish, Elliott had stood up and walked from his office.

Where was she? Where was she? Elliott wondered as he stayed focused walking out into the filled streets. He knew he would confirm if it was her the moment he saw her. How could he not? He had stared at that picture so much, he knew every scar and line on her face.

Elliott's heart dropped. He spotted the back of her long blonde hair as it wisped some in the wind. She stood with Dr. Blue and two soldiers. Every voice around him, every call of his name became like a tunnel hearing. They faded as Elliott stayed transfixed on the woman walking tall and with determination to her.

Pounding in his chest, his breath thinning the nearer he stepped to her. Her head was down and from behind Elliott reached out his hand, laid it upon her shoulder and gently turned her to him, "Excuse . . ."

The woman didn't just scream. She cried out in terror stepping back from Elliott with her arms up and thrashing about. "Don't touch me."

Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

Don't touch me!"

It wasn't her, Elliott's lips moved slightly in a stutter. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm very sorry.:" He winced at the screaming that continued despite Dr. Blue's trying to calmer. He watched them lead her off, perhaps to where she would feel comfortable. The House of women. But Elliot just stared until a slap to his back snapped him out.

The Captain chuckled. "Ought to confirm to you Elliott, that you are not an attractive man."

"But I am a foolish man."

"Nah." The Captain nudged him and smiled. "Not at all." The Captain stepped back. "It's a glorious day, isn't it?"

"It's an insane day." Elliott responded. "Where do you want me to be?"

"Uniform distribution will work." The Captain said as he started to walk away. "When you finish, find me. Owens says there are four survivors we need to talk to."

Curious, Elliott looked at him. "Did he say why?"

The captain tossed his hands up. "Nope. But meet me in town hall when you're done." After a thumbs up, The Captain turned and walked away.

If Elliott didn't know the Captain as well as he did he would have a hard time understanding the Captains; exhilaration over the chaoticness of the street. After taking a moment to cringe, Elliot began to embark on the duties requested.

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Vale, Oregon

Robbie blew the last of his cigarette smoke from his mouth tossing his cigarette out to the side of the camp. "All right gentleman! Rise and shine. Let's go. We've added yet one more stop to our long trip home." He looked upon the sleeping men, fourteen of them, two of which were survivors. He shook his head, bent down to where he sat before and grabbed

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his notebook. Walking more upbeat than he should be at the crack of dawn, Robbie moved to Greg who sat at a table with a map. "What's up." Robbie patted him on the back as he joined him at the small table.

"Not much. Just planning where we are going to fuel up."

Robbie glanced over the map of Idaho. "How about near Boise? That's what thirty miles. That'll keep us fueled for the sighting fifty miles further."

"Should we be doing this sighting Robbie, I'm worried about it. The men are wearing down. This adds another three days to our trip, swinging all the way around like this."

"We're good on food, right?"

Greg nodded. "Yes. But that's if we don't pick up anymore survivors. Robbie, the mood has dropped since our last hit. We hit them hard and good, but we lost two men."

"Yeah I know." Robbie hung his head down. "But the Seattle site was a big one. How many scientist did we find? Three? All these runs we've done . . ." Robbie opened his notebook. "Fourteen, not including what we'll hit today. And that was the first site we actually saw a lab. And what are we going to do? Head home, rest up and head out again?"

"Yes. We could have done that. Come on, the site is perched out of a small town. What's the odds of it being another lab site. Zero. We could have gone straight home and came back."

"Greg." Robbie's finger went down to the map. "Look at where it is. Idaho is here, Montana is right next to it. I don't want to chance them moving more. Do you?"

"No, I guess you're right." Greg closed up the map. "And it is a moving site so they won't be ready. It should be easy for us."

"Good boy." Robbie stood up. "Time to pack up and head on out." He paused in his stride to the camp's center. "Greg, cheer up. We'll be home and back to that kid of yours soon, I promise."

"Yeah." Greg nearly mumbled as Robbie walked off. "You said that last week. Why do I get the feeling, I'm never going home."

Beginnings. Montana

Frank could hear the whistling as he approached his father's office. It wasn't anything he recognized, an erratic tune that made him wince as he opened up the door. Getting ready to plaster his father for not whistling anything good, Frank stopped stunned to see Forrest standing by the file cabinet. "Hey."

"Ah Frunk. How are you dis fun moaning."

"Uh, yeah it is isn't it." Frank shut the door. "What are you doing here Forrest."

"I um hopping out you far-their. He asked if I cooed use my organ-ny-zay-shun skills. I said what da huck. Oui?"

"We what?"

"Oui, what da huck, I hop out."

"What the fuck?" Frank scratched his head.

"No, what da huck uh said. I hop out Josef. What da huck."

"You mean hop out and scare him?" Frank titled his head clueless with his hands on his hips.

"Aw!" Forrest waved his hand at him. "Never mund Frunk. I wheel go buck to what I was doing, oui?"

"We what?"

"Forget It." Forrest went to the file cabinet.

"You do that." Frank turned around spinning on the heel of his boot when his father walked in. "Hey Dad, you're late."

"I was down at the communications center. They were going a little crazy. I told everyone not to use the phones. But there's something about Saturday mornings and telephones that make women go crazy. I had to shut them all down and start the phone back up to send my message." He shook his head in disgust. "I thought you were setting traps?"

"I will be." Frank set his phone and clipboard on his desk. "I thought you told me you wanted a couple placed in special spots. You are suppose to have those mapped out. That's why I'm here."

"Oh yeah." Joe opened his desk drawer. "Here."

“Thanks.” Frank took the clipboard. “I saw El this morning. Have you seen her? She looks . . . she looks pale.”

“I didn’t see her.” Joe walked around to his desk and sat down. “So you stopped by for breakfast again.”

“Yeah.” Frank smiled. “Things are going good. She’s still not back fully with Dean, which surprises me. So I think, I’m thinking once this baby is born it may be time to move her out of Robbie’s place.” Frank cringed at Forrest’s bad note. “Forrest stop that.”

“It bothers you Frank, oui?”

“We, yes. It bothers, we.” Frank rubbed his forehead. “Good thing I speak fluent French.” He pointed to Forrest. “He’s tough to interpret. And I have to get going on these traps. Oh.” He stopped before leaving. “Did you talk to Robbie?”

“Yes. They should be hitting the last site in a few hours. They’ll be home in a couple days.”

“Bringing any survivors with them?” Frank asked.

“Two. You know it just amazes me that there are actually survivors who are willingly joining up with the society.” Joe shook his head. “Don’t they know?”

“They don’t care. They see food, clothing and such and they just don’t care what the cost is. And by the time they find out, ‘pop’ their brains are removed and they don’t know anyhow.”

Joe winced. “You have a keen way of putting things.”

“I’m the literary guy. And I’m the out of here , Guy. Keep me posted.” Frank opened the door and walked out.

Joe began to sift through his paperwork and paused when he saw it. “Shit.” He lifted up the one. Frank forgot this.”

Forrest turned from the filing cabinet. “You want me to tuck it to him?”

“Nah.” Joe pushed the phone aside. “He has his radio on if I need him.” Putting the phone down, Joe returned to his work.

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Bowman, North Dakota

The Captain had to nearly ream his boot into Elliott's shin to stop the impolite snicker that came from him. After a warning shift of his views to Elliott, the captain with a nice smile, looked at Harry, a survivor they had picked up. "Utopia?" he swiped his hand down his face to remove a smile. "You've found it."

"No." Harry's voice was rough. "We are looking for Utopia. It exists. It really does."

"Sir," The captain folded his hands. "What constitutes Utopia?"

"Food. Fresh water,. Medical attention. People."

"There you have it." The Captain lifted his hand. "Us. You heard about us."

"We heard about Utopia. From people who have been there, thrown out. They have fields that flow for miles. Hospitals. They are civilized. We hear it's the old world secured behind a wall."

The Captain's eyes shifted to Elliott, Immediately he knew they were on the same wave length. The man must have heard about the society. "Harry." The Captain took on a soothing voce. "This Utopia. They have . . they have what are called peace ambassadors. They spread the word that this place is good to go to. Join. But it isn't. *They* are the ones we are fighting."

Harry shook his head and lifted a small blue knapsack. "Your men said we are fighting the ones with the 'CS' on their uniform. The people of Utopia are not the same. See." He dumped the contents out on the table. Items that included, jars, cigarettes, canteens, shells. "We've been collecting evidence. Following a trail. And then we found this." Harry lifted a white tee shirt with what looked like, grease on it. "Captain, what is the name of your town?"

"Bowman. Bowman North Dakota." The Captain answered.

"Then you are not Utopia. The people who made this are." Harry handed the shirt to the Captain, making sure the little homemade tag showed.

The Captain looked at the tag and the hand stitching on it. "Property of . . ." He showed it to Elliott with a curious look. "Beginnings,

Montana?”

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Nothing. Absolutely nothing but a busted radio was all Robbie and the men had found in what appeared to be a former campsite. The tracks indicated they were heading east. It was a start. Awaiting the return of his scout, Robbie rested against a tree. He wiped the sweat that formed on his brow from the heating up sun, enjoying the shade of the tree that protected him from a day that was on its way to being a scorcher.

He unzipped his bag pulling out a new box of cigarettes and that's when he saw it. It made him smile. Pulling out the square case, he read the label on it. "C.L.B." Robbie spoke softly and opened the case. "Cyborg-genic Lobal Programming." With a snicker, he removed the round disk object, placing his index finger in the center hole and letting the sun reflect of its smooth shininess. "Are you what Henry has been waiting for to help him with that chip?" Robbie smiled. "I'm willing to bet you are." Staring in awe at his discovery, he spun it by its edges around his finger as if it were a top.

"Robbie!" Greg called to him.

"Yeah?" Robbie replaced the disk in the case and closed the lid. "What's up?" He looked up at Greg squinting.

"We have smoke. We saw some darkening of clouds and the scout confirmed that it is smoke. Possibly a campfire."

Robbie jumped up. "Where?"

"Ten or fifteen miles northeast of here we're guessing. We didn't want to get too close without your go ahead. It has to be them."

"It has to be." Robbie grabbed his bag. "Let's get the men geared up and ready. We'll take the trucks that way. Close in with in four miles. Sound good?"

"Yes." Greg followed him as he walked. "From what we can tell, it's over the hill in a deeply wooded area."

"Even better." Robbie made it to the truck tossing his bag in. "They won't be waiting for us. Gather up the men. Let's go finish this trip off." Excited and feeling motivated, Robbie wanted to get it done. He, like

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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everyone else wanted to just head home.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Beginnings. Montana

"You're making me worried. Really worried Dean." Ellen ran her hand down Dean's arched back as he leaned so upset into the counter. "Please."

"El." He shook his head. "Just read me what it says."

"Dean." Ellen moved closer to him. "What is happening?"

"Right now El, everything is blurry and I want to finish the tests."

Ellen rested her head against his, sensing how upset he was, wanting so much to help him. "I wish I could help you more than just reading what you need to see."

"At least the headaches aren't as bad. They're still bad, but not as bad."

"And it makes it all right?" She turned his face to her. "What are you going to do when Johnny gets here. No one knows but you and me."

"That's why I want to finish this test now. Just incase it happens again. I don't think it will though. It's starting to subside." He blinked several times. "And rarely do the episodes happen that close to one another."

Shaking her head, Ellen ran her hand down his face. "I am so worried. This has me so upset. There has to be something . . ."

"Just let it go El."

"I'm not letting it go Dean. No." She watched him stand up right and breath slowly. "It is killing me watching you go through this and there's nothing I can do. I can't tell anyone. For six months this has been going on. We ran all those tests. Aren't there anymore. Maybe it's time that we bring in . . ."

"El." Dean laid his hands on her shoulders as he faced her. "No. No more tests. We know all there is to know about this. Especially that it now, just a matter of time." He walked away from her. "A matter of time." He chuckled at that thought and shook his head. "Come one, let's finish

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these up.”

“Hey Doctor Dean.” Johnny walked in. “El.”

Ellen kept her stare on Dean, seeing so much fear in his face. “Johnny, could you give us a minute please?”

“Sure, I’ll go back . . .”

“No.” Dean stopped him. “I want to finish this test right now.” Dean kissed Ellen on the cheek and whispered in her ear. “I’m fine. You’re not. You aren’t feeling well. Go home.” He kissed her again sliding his hand down her face. “All right?”

Ellen nodded.

“Doctor Dean, you want me to start on these samples?” Johnny asked.

“Yeah, please John. I’m finishing this and then I’m reviewing. El?” Dean spun to face her. “There’s a stack of new tests over there. If you feel up to it, you think you can go through them at home?”

“Sure.” Ellen agreed. “I don’t think I’m . . .” She smiled widely when the lab door opened. “Hi Henry.”

“El.” Henry grinning, walked up to her. His lips went to her cheek and his hand to her stomach. “You ready to go home?”

“Yep.” Ellen answered. “Let me grab these folders Dean wants me to, and we’ll head out.”

“Folders?” Henry turned to Dean. “Dean, that isn’t very nice. You aren’t making her work are you.”

“I’m a slave driver.” Dean threw his hands in the air.

Ellen, smiling walked past Dean sliding her hand over his back, whispering. “Now where are the folders?”

“On the first shelf.” Dean pointed without looking.

“Oh, I see them.” Ellen tipped toed and raised her arm. “There isn’t that . . .” Wide went her eyes and her arm dropped down. “Dean!” Her face turned red and her knees buckled as a knife stabbing pain through her abdomen hit her and she fell some grabbing the counter for support. “Oh God.” She grunted.

Henry ran over to Ellen, grabbling her from behind. “El?”

Dean hunched down to her level. “El, what’s wrong.”

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Ellen grabbed her stomach. "Something . . . Oh God." She shrieked horribly in pain.

Dean shook his head laying his hand on Ellen's stomach. "It isn't labor pains. El?"

Clinging tightly to Henry's arm that held her, Ellen let out a breath and stared at Dean. "It hurts so . . ." She grunted loudly. "Help me."

"Henry carry her to the jeep." Dean ordered. "Johnny . . ." He looked up to Johnny who stood horrified behind Henry. "Call your father."

As Ellen felt Henry start to lift her, her one hand grabbed the counter and the other grabbed Dean. Her eyes slowly looked at him and they watered up. "Oh no." She started to cry.

"What?" Dean asked in a panic. "What is . . ." He saw where her eyes had shifted down to. On the floor by her feet was a pool of blood and more poured down her legs. "Shit! Henry get her to the jeep now!"

Henry swept her up into his arms and frightened he looked at Dean as he bolted to the door. "Dean, she's bleeding bad. What's happening?"

"Get her to the jeep!" Dean ran with him. "Johnny call your dad. Tell him . . . tell him to get to the clinic. It's . . . it's bad." With a slam of the door Dean was gone.

"Shit." Johnny spun around looking for the cell phone. Quickly remembering his farther's number he nervously dialed. It rang and rang and finally Forrest answered. "Forrest? Where is my father?" Johnny's head dropped. "Is my pap there?" The short momentary pause seemed like a lifetime. "Come on come on . . . Pap! Pap where's my Dad?"

"He's outside the walls setting traps. Why?" Joe replied.

"Get him on the radio Pap. Ellen's bad. She's hemorrhaging and they took her to the clinic." Before Joe could respond, Johnny hung up the phone and headed out. He figured he'd take the other jeep and try to find his father also just incase they couldn't reach him by radio.

Henry held Ellen's trembling body tight as he stepped into the jeep with her. "Dean, you drive."

"Got it." As Dean climbed in the driver's side he saw Jason

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running out.

Jason jumped in the back. "I saw Henry carrying Ellen. What happened?" He reached up to her and noticed the blood all on Henry and her. "Abruptio placentae?"

Dean nodded as he started the jeep. "My fears exactly Jason." He sped off.

Ellen clung to Henry. "No!" She screamed tearfully. "Henry. No. Not the baby."

Holding Ellen, Henry moved his eyes to Dean as the jeep bumped and banged in his journey. "What is that?"

Dean silently shook his head. "Jason? Do you have your phone?"

"Yes." He pulled it from his pocket.

"Call the clinic. Tell them to prepare a room for an emergency cesarean." He looked back at Henry, then straight ahead banging his hand on the steering wheel emotionally.

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John Matoose walked into the communications room sipping his coffee as he did. "Hey Mark, take a break."

"Already?" Mark turned from the monitor. "I thought I had another half hour."

"Nah." John walked up to behind him. "I had time, take the break now."

"Thanks." Mark smiled. "It's so boring anyhow. Well, all except when the people in this town keep calling each other. Then it's a pain in the ass because you have to pull it up to check and make sure it's no one near by."

"Joe said he's work on that." John took the seat that Mark freed up.

"O.K., well I'm ought of here for some fresh air. See you in an hour."

"Take your time." John raised his hand in a wave as Mark left.

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He leaned back in his chair, stared at the monitor and sipped his coffee more.

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Like a dare devil on a stunt run, Frank sped through the back gate recklessly and fast, screeching the bike to a sliding sideways stop when he saw Johnny in the jeep. "John. What's going on?"

"Dad." Johnny was out of breath. "She doubled over in pain. She . . . she started bleeding really bad Dad. It's . . ." With a loud rev up of the engine and a screech, Frank sped off again, leaving nothing but dust and Johnny behind him.

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"Get her on the table now!" Dean charged out as they burst through the glass doors of the clinic. "Where is Andrea?"

Patrick stood by the Gurney. "She's in an appendectomy." He watched Henry lay Ellen down. He handed Dean a fetal scope as Dean neared.

Dean lifted Ellen's shirt, holding his hand up to silence everyone. "Get her to a room. Get her ready! Stat!"

Henry, holding Ellen's hand, ran with the Gurney. "Dean, please, tell me it . . ."

"Dean!" Joe flung open the doors racing down the hall after them. His hand barely touched Ellen's leg as the cart was wheeled faster and away. "Dear God. Dean." He grabbed him. "What's happening?"

"Joe." Dean walked backwards. "I can't . . ."

"Dean please."

Taking a breath through his nostrils Dean stopped walking. "I believe her placenta has detached. It's not good Joe. Though the baby is early, that isn't what the problem is. We're losing her and . . . the baby's heart rate is weak." Dean spun around.

"Dean please." Joe grabbed his arm. "Do everything you can. You hear me. Everything you can to help Ellen. I lost my wife this way, don't

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let me lose a daughter too.”

“I’ll give it my life Joe.” Knowing what he had to face would be the hardest thing he ever had to do, Dean flew into the operating room. “Jason, you preparing for a spinal? I need her awake.”

“I’m on it Dean.” Jason held a syringe.

“Good.” He looked as Patrick and Henry undressed Ellen. “Patrick hook her up.”

“Doing it.”

Dean ran over to the sink and began to scrub his hands. “Henry when you’re done, you’ll have to go.”

“No.” Henry dropped Ellen’s clothes to the floor and helped Patrick cover her.

“Henry. You can’t stay!” Dean moved to the table.

“I’m not leaving her Dean.” Henry kept his stares on Ellen. “I’m not. She’s my friend. I’m staying.”

It as not a moment to argue and Dean knew it. He moved to the operating table. “Fine, then stay. But you’ll help Roll her on her side Henry. Jason . . .” Dean held out his hand. “The needle.” He received it. “Patrick, I need you to go out into the hall and let them know what’s going on. Then find Andrea.” Dean checked out the syringe and then Ellen’s bare back counting up the lumbar region to his spot. “Hold her tight Henry, this will be painful.”

Henry wrapped himself around a shaking Ellen. “Hold tight.”

“Henry.” She whimpered. “I’m so sacred. I’m so scared.”

“El, you’ll be fine. I’m right here.” Henry closed his eyes as Dean injected the anesthesia into her spine.

“Done.” Dean tossed the syringe. He helped Henry roll Ellen on her back. “Jason, bring over the tray.” He adjusted the blankets to expose only Ellen’s stomach. While Jason brought over the cart, Dean lifted the fetal monitor to Ellen’s stomach. He moved it around. “Shit!” He dropped it harshly. “We have to go in and we have to go in now. I lost the baby’s heartbeat.”

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The sound of his heavy boots preceded him as Frank raced with his heart down the hall of the clinic. He saw his father standing outside of the operating room. "Dad."

"Frank." Joe looked so distraught.

"Tell me. Tell me everything is O.K."

Joe shook his head. "It's not good Frank. They're in there now. They're taking the baby."

"Oh God." Frank's head dropped. "How is she. How is Ellen?" He saw his father shake his head slowly and Frank's heart dropped. He walked over by the operating room door running his hand across it. "Please let her be all right." Frank leaned into the wall resting his head there. And silently and to himself he prayed.

"Henry how is Ellen?" Dean asked, shifting his eyes up. "Henry?"

Henry wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. "She's holding in there Dean."

"Jason, her vitals."

"Stable Dean." Jason watched the monitor.

"I'm in." Dean spoke as the he set the scalpel down. "Jason I need more suction, there's lots of blood. The placenta did detach." Avoiding Jason's hand that brought in the tube, Dean reached for the scalpel again. "It's clearing, I see . . ." His eyes lifted to Jason and his voice lowered. "I see the baby." Poking a small hole in the amniotic sac, Dean set the scalpel down again. His hands reached inside Ellen's womb, he took hold of the umbilical cord, clamping it and cutting it. Then cautiously reaching in, he dislodged the baby boy who was curled up so tightly inside the warmth of his mother. "I have him." Dean, grasping the baby in both of his hands, and lifted the newborn from Ellen. The moment he raised him above her open abdomen, Dean's heart sunk to the pits of his soul when the little baby boy's body, so lifelessly just flopped over his hands. Holding back his emotions that seeped into his eyes, Dean laid the baby in the awaiting blanket Jason held sadly out. "Just . . ." Dean made eye contact with Jason. "Just try."

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Henry knew, and so did Ellen. Not wanting to see Jason take the baby across the room, he closed his eyes again, hiding his pain.. “Dean, how’s Ellen doing.”

“I’m . . .” Dean looked over to Jason. “I’m working on her. She’ll be fine Henry. That’s what’s important right now. She’ll be fine.” Dean, heart racing, completed his operation on Ellen. For the first time ever in his entire career, his hands felt as if they were shaking and out of control. He wished with all of his heart he wasn’t the one in that room working on her, but a part of him wanted no one else to be.

The tears fell down Ellen’s cheek fast. “Henry, the baby.”

“No, El.” He whispered. “We can’t worry about the baby now.”

“Henry he died.” Ellen’s eyes closed tightly.

“No El.” Henry’s voice cracked. “We can’t . . . we have to worry about you.”

Ellen began to sob pulling at Henry for comfort trying to drown her hurt somewhere. “I’m sorry Dean.”

Dean’s hands froze. Literally froze. Ellen was sorry? He just didn’t know what to say. If he could take away her hurt at that moment he would. But it was a world of hurt delivered in that operating room. Hurt that no one could take away. Hurt that was coupled by the silence of the room. Holding back his own emotions, Dean silently worked. He knew then and there nothing would make it better, nothing except . . . the one long baby’s wail that suddenly and startling broke the deafening quiet of the room.

Dean’s hands dropped the instrument he held. Every emotion he held in, released. He could breathe. He raised his eyes to the ceiling and softly spoke. “Thank you.”

Both Ellen and Henry looked up and from the their tears came an emotional laughter. They held on, both breathing heavy.

Ellen’s chest was warm, she could barely speak. “Jason, Jason tell me?”

“He’s fine Ellen, I have him breathing normally.”

Loudly and emotionally Henry let out the breath he held. He clenched Ellen’s face kissing her. “Yes.”

Continuing in his work, Dean worked with more enthusiasm, the

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entire air of the room had suddenly changed with that one simple cry. The one cry that now turned into several. "Apgar reading Jason."

"Slow." Jason answered. "But with in normal range now. Tiny kid. Tiny, tiny kid." Jason chuckled. "Four pounds seven ounces. But alive. This little boy is alive."

Frank's head lifted when he heard it, it rang through him like a shot. "Dad?" He turned around and faced Joe. "Dad?"

"Music to our ears Frank." Slowly Joe walked to his son, embracing him tightly. "That is a good sign."

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### Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Steward, holding a phone, nodded and handed it to George. "The call is safe."

Perturbed at the chance the Beginnings person took, George grabbed the phone. "Yes?"

"It's me." The whispering voice spoke from the other line. "I wanted to let you know they are on their way."

"Good. This is perfect." George looked at his watch. "And be secure in the fact that, if our calculations are right. In a weeks time, whether they win or lose today or not, Robbie Slagel and his band of merry men, will be no more." Ending the conversation, George hung up the phone. He looked up "Stew. The next time John Matoose calls, double check he's controlling that communications room. I want to take advantage of our opportunity to communicate." Cupping his hands behind his head, George sat back in his chair . . . and he smiled.

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Bowman, North Dakota

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## Druga-Marchetti/State of Time

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The Captain chewed on the end of his pencil like it was the cigarette he didn't want to end. Over his desk he leaned, a map spread upon it. Something was not right. Something was screaming to him to make sense out of it. "Beginnings, Montana." He repeated staring at the map. It wasn't listed. Was it that small? Was it renamed. Figuring that had to be it, the Captain moved his thoughts to 'natural resources'. Like they had in Bowman, he looked for a dam or nearby lake that they were near. Finger gliding across the paper surface looking for where this Utopia could be, the Captain stopped.

His eyes looked up and he turned his head to the right. Like a sign it sat there, Forrest Caceres novel. With a rush, the Captain grabbed the book, and the map and flew out of the office.

"Ready." Hands behind his back, the Captain stood before Elliott's desk.

"Yes." Elliott nodded. "What?"

"We, you and I Elliott are . . . stupid!" he dropped the map and book onto Elliott's desk. "Completely utterly, dumb. Wait. Wait until you hear how dumb we are. Oh and how we went on and on about a weapon." The Captain chuckled.

"I am lost." Elliott tossed his hands up. "What are you talking about."

After opening the map and securing the rolled up edges what ever Elliott had on his barren desk, the Captain pushed the book forward. "We missed it again. Remember we dismissed the Caceres book. We said he was name sake only? Well . . ." The captain hit Elliott on top of the head with the book. "We're stupid."

"So you've said. Where is this coming from."

"I was looking for this Utopia. Out of curiosity. Then when I saw it. It came crashing to me like I was hit with a wall. Forrest Caceres did indeed come up with the whole basic idea. His book is about building a small community. A conceptual community designed to be self sufficient. Food water medical, room for growth. Communications. All secured behind a

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protective . . . wall.”

Elliott’s eyes lit up. “Utopia.”

“Sounds strangely similar. Elliott . . . Utopia is the enemy of the society we have been searching for.”

“How do you figure?” Elliott asked.

“Everything that survivor told us about Utopia is what Forrest Caceres described to a tee in the book. The enemy didn’t steal a weapon from the society, they stole the vital starting point, What the whole society was originally based on. . . look.” The Captain’s finger landed on the map.

“Oh my God.” Elliott peered. “Garfield county.”

“Yes.” The Captain snapped his finger. “It makes sense, the Garfield Project isn’t a means of mass destruction it’s a place. Utopia.” With a wide smile the Captain looked at Elliott. “Guess what we immediately start looking for?”

Elliott grinned in return. “Beginnings, Montana.”

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It broke the silence of the woods like a scene from an old cowboys and Indians movie. Like hooting animals, seven of them, savages, jumped from the trees, arrows and spears in hand.

Robbie felt the first blow to his back as the loin cloth covered man leaped upon him. Flipping him over with a grunt, Robbie broke the man’s neck in the process. “Fire at will!” Robbie called out, charging forth and pulling another scavenger from Greg. He decked him, sent him to the ground and pulled out his revolver delivering a single blow center the scavenger’s forehead. Blood splattered upward and out mostly covering Greg who had rolled from the way.

Running out to another, Robbie dodged a flying arrow, diving himself on another attacking scavenger. He picked him up, tossed him into a tree, catching the bouncing back body with a bullet and dropping him also. Seeing that he had taken out another, Robbie held out his revolver aiming as he watched the other four go down at the hands of his men. Savages. They raped the land and took what they wanted. Why were they facing them now?

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This was not something they expected, this could not be what the signal led them to.

After it had ended and the wooded area became silent, Robbie and two other men began to search east while the others moved about cautiously.

“Robbie!” A voice called him from the woods, it echoed. It was Neal. “Robbie this way!”

Stopping his search, Robbie and his two men joined up with Greg as they followed the calling voice. He stopped cold when he saw Neal. Neal bent over, holding on to his knees, vomit regurgitating from his mouth. “Fuck!” Robbie looked up at what sickened Neal and another man. Hanging from the trees were eight SUTS. They hung, dried pools of blood at their feet. Dead. And by the appearance there was no doubt in Robbie’s mind that not only were they skinned alive, but half eaten as well.

“Robbie.” Greg called out, sounding so panic stricken. “There’s . . .” He emerged from behind a tree. “Our men found more. This way.”

With his men Robbie raced to what else it could possibly be. He didn’t have to see it before it hit him. The smell. The foul smell of rotting flesh filled the hot stagnant air. Covering his mouth, he moved closer to where the odor came from and he saw. More savages, only these ones were not alive and running rampant. These ones were dead. Dead and scattered about. Laying on dirty blankets. Blankets covered with dried vomit and remnants of their own waste.

By the look of the scene and the smell, Robbie knew. By the color of their faces, the sores on their bodies, the evident violent sickness they experienced. It could only be one thing. The one thing Robbie and Beginnings feared. It was without a doubt . . .the new plague.

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## Beginnings, Montana

“Sweet Jesus, wait!” Andrea’s blasting voice was hear before she stepped inside the operating room with a whew. “I am so sorry. How is

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everything?”

“Finished.” Dean covered up Ellen all the way and rolled the cart off to the side., he grabbed another blanket and handed it to Henry. “Keep her warm Henry. She’ll be just fine.”

Andrea smiled pleasantly, “How’s the baby.” She walked over to where Jason worked on the child.

“Good.” Jason covered him and picked the blanket bundle up. “Before you examine him, why don’t we let Ellen see the baby first.”

Andrea peeked. “Oh.” She giggled. “Cute. Jason, you can get the warming bed ready and tell Joe and Frank to give us a minute then they can come in.”

“I’ll do that.” Slowly and with a smile Jason handed down the baby to Ellen. “All yours, You did good.”

Henry extended his hand. “No Jason, thank you.”

Giving one more smile, Jason left the room As he walked into the hall, he was immediately accosted by Frank and Joe. “Hold it, hold it.” Jason held up his hand. “Mother and son are fine. Give a few minutes and you can go in there. The baby is early but, nothing we can’t handle.”

Wanting to hug Jason but deciding against it, Frank looked at his watch to time a few minutes.

Humming a few bars of some show tune, Andrea smiled. “Times up.” She took the baby from Ellen’s arms. “He is so cute.” She covered him up again.

Ellen’s hands still extended in a stunned manner. She said nothing.

“El.” Henry tapped her on the arm. “El? What’s wrong.”

Ellen only looked at Henry.

Scrubbed up and clean, Dean clapped his hands together and walked over to Andrea. “Can I see?”

“Nope.” Andrea shook her head. “We’ll wait for Frank. Shouldn’t we wait for Frank, Ellen?”

Ellen shook her head, her mouth still open.

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Henry pushed up on her chin. "Not a becoming look, El," He stood up. "Andrea, can I see him. No matter whose the father, I get to help."

"Well, I suppose you can." Andrea said.

"Let me see." Henry opened up some of the blanket and looked down at the baby.. His eyes moved to Ellen, to the baby then to Ellen again.

"Henry?" Ellen looked up at him.

Henry scratched his head. "I don't think he was done. That's it."

"Henry." Ellen spoke in almost a whisper.

Dean dried his hands. "I hate to do this to you guys, but I'd like to take a look at the baby before Frank comes in and steals him." He reached for the bundle from Andrea.

Andrea backed up. "We'll just wait."

Dean chuckled. "I don't understand what . . ."

"Times up!" Frank flew into the room. "El!" He ran over to her immediately throwing his arms around her. "I was so worried about you. So worried" He kissed her over and over. "I thought I was losing you. I would have died if that happened."

"I'm fine Frank." Ellen ran her hand down his face. "But . . . right now there's . . . Henry?" She saw him leaving. "Stay here."

"Yeah Henry." Frank looked at him then he sat down with Ellen. "Check out Henry El. He's all frazzled." Frank made fun of Henry's nervousness. "Besides Henry, you were the one being all fuckin persistent about being here. Stay here and see the baby."

"I uh . . ." Henry stuck his hands in his pockets again. "I saw the baby Frank. You see the baby."

"Stay Henry. Stay to see me announced as official biological father of my baby."

"My baby." Dean corrected.

Frank looked at Andrea. "Is it?"

"Let me just say . . ." Andrea smiled when she saw Joe walk in the room and Henry staring to leave. "Henry stay put. Joe . . ."

"Is that my grandson." Joe said proud.

"Yes. Would you like to see him before I let the fighting fathers?" Andrea asked.

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“Love to.” Joe said with a clap of his hand. He snickered as he reached to the blanket’s edge. “What’s up with . . .” He lifted the cover. “Oh, Jesus Christ.” He covered the baby back up.

“All right. Enough.” Dean yelled out. “Can we get this over with. I want to do the blood test and see my baby.”

“My baby.” Frank said.

Andrea stepped in toward the two men. “First, no blood test is needed. The paternity of this child’s father is evident the moment you lay eyes on him. So there will be no arguments. None, you hear me?”

Frank looked at Dean. “He has to look at me.” He reached for the baby. “Can I?”

“Sure.” Andrea handed Frank the bundle.

Dean edged in closer.

Frank grinned and nodded when peaks of black hair poked out. “Oh, yeah. Check out his mane. Prepare to cry little man.” Frank adjusted the baby so small in his arms. “Man is he tiny. Weighs nothing.” Frank so proudly spoke, his eyes gleaming as he cradled the baby. “Shit, Andrea, you got him all covered with this blanket. Gonna suffocate my kid and all.” He lifted the blanket. “There now you can breath . . .” There was what Frank believed to be a choking sound that came from Dean and it made for an eerie backdrop as it mixed with the sounds of Joe’s moans and Andrea’s giggles.

Andrea nodded as she stuck her head in between Dean and Frank who just stared at the baby. “Hmm.” She smiled. “He certainly does look just like his father. Wouldn’t you two boys agree?”

Lifting his eyes and head suddenly, Frank looked at a cringing Ellen. Quickly his eyes went back down to the baby, then to Ellen, to Joe and finally to Dean. Reddened face and biting his bottom lip, Frank heard the slam of the operating room door. “Where?” His head turned about the room. “Where is he?” Huffing, he handed the baby to Dean. “Hold this kid.” He bolted to the door. “I’m gonna fuckin kill him.” Charging out and flinging the double doors so hard that they slammed back and forth loudly against the wall, Frank raced with speed down the corridor of the clinic. “HENRY!”

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