

BEYOND THE WALL
Beginnings Book 3

Jacqueline Druga

CHAPTER ONE

October 8
Beginnings, Montana
FIVE YEARS POST-PLAGUE

The shrill cry of pain echoed through the quiet halls of the clinic, an indication that something had gone awry. In a very pregnant state, Sarah's tall body went numb and her knees buckled upon her entrance through the double glass doors. A split second before her unconscious body careened face forward to the floor, her arms were grabbed.

It took everything Dr. Dean Hayes and Ellen Slagel had to lift Sarah to the awaiting cart. Both small, they struggled with the heavy woman who still was three weeks from term. Barely laid upon the gurney, Dean and Ellen wheeled her with speed down the corridor.

Hand on Sarah's neck, Dean peered across the cart to Ellen. His words were breathy through his rushed movement. "Pulse is really weak. Skin's clammy. Respiration shallow. Everything ready?"

"O.R. Two," Ellen replied. "Prepped and waiting."

"When did she radio?"

"Not long before she walked in."

Dean looked down to Sarah. "Did she say anything else?"

"Just that she was in labor."

Without losing speed, they turned the bend swinging out the gurney wide and nearly knocking over Dr. Andrea Winters who moved in a quickened pace.

Spinning, Andrea walked backwards as she called out. "Where are you taking her?"

"O.R. Two," Dean answered.

"Can't." Andrea said. "That's our burn room. Take her to Three."

"We have two ready." Dean stated. "She's in distress."

"And I have twenty men battling a blaze out at Cole's house. I need room two." Andrea turned again and charged off calling as she did. "Take her to three."

"Shit." Dean shook his head. "This sucks." They moved the gurney near the operating rooms. "Sarah can't spare our prep time."

Ellen felt Dean slowing the cart down. "What are you going to do?"

"Screw it." Dean turned the gurney in a rush. And even though they weren't supposed to, feet-end first, they barreled the gurney through the double doors of operating room two.

"Bring it in closer!" Joe Slagel ordered out in his rough style. He moved with authority through the men who manned the hoses. Attached to a water tanker driven to the living section, and the valves that emerged from the ground, everyone who could, worked to battle the blaze on the corner home. "Keep it going. Keep it steady. They aren't out yet!" He pivoted to the right tapping his hand on the shoulders of Scott and Dan who held tight a heavy hose. "Take it to Bill's. Keep watering him down." Joe indicated to the first house in the next row. "We can't save this place, let's protect the others." He moved back to where the larger grouping of men concentrated on fighting the flames that lit up Beginnings' evening sky as if it were day. He peered to the team preparing to go in. "Henry!" Joe sought out his cohort in council. "Henry!"

"Here, Joe." Lanky and tall, Henry sped Joe's way.

"Shut down all valves. Sectors two through nine." Joe instructed in a fast manner. "Down them. I want everything diverted here. All water pressure here. Got that?"

"Clinic's sector four."

"Shit. Can you bypass?"

"I'll see what I can do."

“Good boy.” Joe gave a swat to Henry’s arm in his move back to the fire fighters. “I need that team in there! Now! Christ.” Joe slid his hand down his smoke covered and sweaty face. “Where the hell is Frank?”

No more than a second after Joe asked, a jeep screeched to halt and Frank jumped his towering body from the just stopped vehicle.

“Sorry, it took so long, I was ten miles out. What started it?” Frank began to take off his shoulder harness. “Bet me it was David.”

“He’s twelve, Frank. No.” Joe said.

“He’s a pyro, Dad, he started the fire at the field house last Tuesday.” Frank looked to the burning home. “They didn’t come out?”

“David did.”

“See, what I tell ya.” Shaking his head, Frank carried his shoulder harness to the jeep, set it on the seat and reached in the back for a tarp.

“What are doing?” Joe asked.

“Going in.” Frank carried the tarp and dropped it on the street into a large puddle that formed.

“The hell you are. We have a team for that.”

Frank rolled his eyes and stomped on the tarp saturating it.

“Frank. No. That’s an order.”

In the distance a voice called out. “He’s out. He’s out.”

“Thank God.” Joe stated and turned to see. His eyes closed briefly when he spotted only Cole, coughing and grabbing his chest, emerge from the house. “No. Kimmy must still be in there.”

“Shit.” Frank raced ahead, forgoing the tarp. “Hose me down! Hose me down!” He cried out.

Joe seeing his son walking into the water’s stream, charged to him, grabbing his arm. “No Frank, it’s too bad in there.”

“She’s six years old, Dad. Six.” Wet from head to toe, Frank pulled from his father’s hand and stormed to the house. Holding his arms over his head, shoulder first, he blasted through the front door of the fire enraged house.

“Son of a bitch.” Joe grabbed on to a hose and moved closer to the house. “Keep it on the second floor!”

The beeps of the heart monitor were steady and nearly the only noise in operating room two.

Ellen secured the final patch to Sarah’s chest. “Hooked up. Vitals are stable. Talk about unable to handle labor.”

A crooked grin graced Dean’s face as he looked to Ellen from the caesarean section tray. “Be nice.” He grabbed the anti-bacterial solution and painted it on Sarah’s stomach.

“She passed out. If I were the first person to give birth in, I don’t know, say . . . four years. I’d make a big deal out of it.”

“She did make an entrance.” Dean lifted the scalpel.

“That she . . .” Ellen’s words were cut short by the immediate, rapid, out of control beeping of Sarah’s heart monitor. “Dean?”

The scalpel clanked onto the tray when Dean dropped it. Wide his eyes grew and he stepped a foot back from Sarah. “Oh, my God.” His hands lifted in a hover over the protruding stomach.

“What’s happening?” From the monitor to Dean, Ellen finally looked. “Shit.”

Not only did Sarah’s body shift, but her stomach moved violently as well. Fetal limbs were clearly seen moving about under the skin’s surface as if some sort of monster trying to poke through. “Dean.”

“Tell me this baby is not convulsing in utero.”

“That’s impossible.”

“I’m not chancing it.” Swiping up the scalpel to continue where he left off, he brought the sharp instrument close to the flesh of Sarah’s stomach. Just as he was about to slice, the one long beep of the

monitor caused him to stop. He looked up . . . Flat line.

How long? Too long. Joe watched the inferno before him and witnessed no sign of his son's emergence. He didn't know whether time had just passed quickly or if it was his father's worry that made it seem like Frank was in that house forever.

A thunderous crack emanated and he looked to see flames sear through the second floor windows. Joe closed his eyes. His heart raced watching the fire rage, and seeing what was happening, sent a fear through him. A fear he could only convey through a prayer in his mind. "God help you, Frank."

With another burst of flames that caught everyone's attention, came a loud crash of glass. Out of the front window of the first floor, Frank burst through. His back arched as he rolled out and on to the grass, cradling in his arms, the body of the little girl. Stumbling to his feet he held Kimmy's limp body, her lifeless arms and legs dangled over the sides of his huge arms. He dropped to his knees safely from the house.

"Back up." Joe called out as he barged through those who gathered around. "Back up." He broke through. "Frank."

With a hand bigger than her face, Frank felt for a pulse on the still little girl. His dark eyes raised to Joe. He shook his head, and then Frank, laid Kimmy on the ground, hovered over her, pinched her nose and covered her mouth with his.

Joe, like everyone else who wasn't working on that fire, watched Frank and prayed.

"Nothing." Ellen kneeled upon the cart, her hands cupped and compressing to Sarah's chest.

"Stop it." Dean ordered out. "Stop."

"But, Dean . . ."

"Don't. Her body's moving enough." Dean tried to hold steady the jolting stomach. "Prep the P.C.R.S. instead."

"Dean, I . . ."

"Get it ready! I have to go in." After a deep breath, Dean inserted the scalpel and made a quick clean incision across the distended flesh.

Ellen raced across the operating room. She grabbed the syringe and the vial marked 'P.C.R.S.', She plunged the needle into the vial and filled it accordingly as she made her way back to Sarah. "Ready."

"One minute."

"Dean." Ellen looked to the clock on the wall.

"I'm almost there. Find your spot."

Ellen's trembling fingers felt about the breastbone, and to the left of it, she stopped. Steady she held her index finger there and the ready syringe above it. "Tell me."

"One more minute. Not before. On my call." Dean's words were strained. "Come on, kid, stop moving. I can't grab him."

"Dean, hurry." Ellen watched the secondhand of the clock go around again.

"I almost . . . now, El." Dean ordered out.

In a swinging ax motion, Ellen brought down the syringe with all of her strength, rammed it into Sarah's chest and injected the serum. "It's in."

"He's out." Dean's small hands lifted the frail and violently shaking infant who struggled and gurgled in his breaths. He stared at the heart monitor still holding the child. His head nodded slowly as his mind beckoned for the noise of Sarah's life, and then his eyes closed in relief when he heard the beeping. "Close her up, El." Dean moved from the operating table. "I have to take care of him." Not two steps from the table, Dean's stomach instantly gnawed. The infant in his hands, the small baby boy that shook and gasped for each ounce of air, stopped moving. His tiny arms and legs just dropped over Dean's fingers. His short life . . . was over.

“Come on.” Frank begged, tilted his head with a intake of air then brought his mouth back down to Kimmy. He shook her gently and breathed into her again.

Andrea slid into the grass in front of him setting down a small oxygen tank and mask. Her trembling hand reached for Kimmy’s neck as Frank continued to try to revive her. She lifted her stethoscope from her bag and brought it to Kimmy’s chest.

Frank noticed no one except for Kimmy. He tried to give her the life that she seemed to so much be resisting. Breathing into her over and over again.

“Wait.” Andrea held her hand up to Frank as she listened. Her smiling eyes lifted to him. “I have a pulse.” She quickly placed the oxygen mask on Kimmy.

Frank’s head went far back in relief and he gasped out the adrenaline that still pumped through his veins. He closed his eyes in gratefulness. Kimmy shook in his arms and coughed uncontrollably. But one thing was for sure, she was alive.

CHAPTER TWO

October 9

Perhaps they were an addiction from his years in the CIA, but Joe loved wearing his short sleeved, white button down shirts. To him they spelled comfort, not to mention the front pocket was a great place to put his cigarettes. He did however, become increasingly annoyed at the fact that they kept getting stained. It wasn't like he could run out into the apocalyptic world and pick one up at will, and Beginnings' clothing division just hadn't grasped the hanging of making dress shirts.

Joe thought he walked alone. He didn't. He should have known the second he walked into his office not to take a sip of his coffee, because it never failed. The passing of the hot beverage through his lips was disrupted when Joe jolted from the sudden intrusion into his office.

"Hey, Joe." George Hadly called out chipper.

"Goddamn it." Joe wiped the splashed coffee from his shirt. He walked around to his desk and sat down. "You're early."

"I finished my inventory." George took a seat before Joe's desk. Though the same age as Joe, George looked older. His hair was gray as opposed to Joe's barely receding, non-silvered crop. And he had a lot more lines on his face. Perhaps aged scars of the worry he gathered in his years of presidency. "Short meeting with or without our third council?" He asked.

Joe smiled. "Henry can't make it. Seems he's a bit preoccupied with situating the wireless radio system."

"Yes!" George exclaimed, drawing in his clenched fist in a youthful excitement to his chest.

"It worked." Joe leaned back. "You're brilliant. I wasn't sure when you brought the notion up. But you knew Henry."

"Once he puts his mind to something, he doesn't finish until he figures it out."

"Like the wall." Joe whistled. "Thank God the wireless is taking his mind off of that."

"I thought we were losing him." George twirled his index finger around his own temple.

"Thanks for not letting that get out."

George closed his eyes and shook his head in a 'not a problem' manner.

"All right. Agenda." Snapping forward, Joe pulled a stack of papers before him. "Top priority. A guard at containment. Winter's coming. Stragglers will be nil. We can put some of Frank's men on shifts in there, instead of the greenhouse."

"Sounds good. And speaking of Frank." George watched Joe roll his eyes slightly. "How is he? I thought, and I'm sorry, but I thought his stunt last night was a hidden suicide. You know, go out literally in a blaze of glory."

"You and me both." Joe shook his head. "I don't know where his head is anymore. Frank's always been mean, but lately." He whistled. "And he doesn't care about anything."

"Ever since the Robbie incident and we became more lenient with the survivors, he's been tougher on his men and the survivors who screw up." George stated.

"It's not that." Joe said assured. "Not the survivors at all. It's Frank. And you said it all in the beginning of your statement. Ever since the Robbie incident. Period." Seemingly so lost, Joe leaned back in his chair. "It's been months. He's not getting better. And I'm afraid if something doesn't snap him out of it, Frank . . . is going to snap."

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"I'm not here." Ellen announced as she stepped in the clinic lab and shut the door.

"That's a switch." Dean said sarcastically. He sat on a stool before the center counter separating papers.

"I mean if Frank comes by." Ellen walked to him "Maybe I can disguise myself. Change my hair."

She lifted up her dark blonde hair. “What do you think?”

“I think hiding from your spouse is not a sure sign of a lasting marriage. And, you just missed him he was here ten minutes ago looking for you.” Dean finally peered up at her. “Why are you hiding from your . . . *husband* anyhow?”

“He’s in one of those ‘find anything to yell at El about’ moods.” She shrugged. “And why do you do that. Get all bitter sounding when you say ‘husband’?”

Dean chuckled. “You’re kidding right? You’re not.” He shook his head. “You have the nerve to ask that, when you’re hiding from him. Besides El, I lived with you for five years. I get kidnapped; you two seize the opportunity and get married. When was that? Months ago. I have every right to be bitter, I just found out last week. And . . .” Dean reached out and grabbed her hand, despite the fact she looked away. “You’re still wearing my ring.”

“It’s still stuck.” She pulled her hand away. “You really have to get over this. Really. Especially with us working together. So . . .” She grabbed a stool and pulled it across the counter from Dean. “Results.”

Dean would have rather of been discussing Frank. His head dropped.

“Dean?”

“You don’t want to hear it.” He took a moment, “Sarah’s baby died of . . . of our virus.”

A gasp of defeat came from Ellen. “Dean. The plague was years ago.”

“And I told you it became the air. The baby wasn’t immune. As soon as he was exposed to our air, it was like a time bomb to him.”

So desperate Ellen looked and sounded. “You said two immune parents would produce . . .”

“An immune child. Yes. But there was always a slim chance. This was the slim chance. And I’m so frustrated, El.” Dean stood up with a slam of his hand on the counter. He ran his hand through his blonde hair. “We stopped working on a cure. We stopped. At twenty-five percent effectiveness we stopped and said, ‘why bother’. Sarah’s baby was why you and I should have bothered.”

“What about others?”

“It’s possible.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “Then we have to start again. We have to pick up where we left off and work until we finally beat what wiped out this world. Because we can’t chance losing another child. I . . . I can’t chance losing another child to this plague.”

Dean slowly looked at her then moved across the lab. “You have to get pregnant first.”

“That was cold. You know how hard Frank and I are trying. Maybe since the miscarriage something happened to me.”

Dean laughed. “It’s not you, El. It’s him. You and I didn’t have problem. First shot and we had twins.”

“Frank has a theory on that. He says you were a virgin, and when thirty-five years worth of built up sperm was released, they invaded me like Normandy beach.”

“There’s something not right about him.” Dean said with a hint of anger. “Frank is full of theories and reasons when it comes to finding excuses for himself.”

“Dean, stop it.”

“No. He’s blaming you. That’s not right. It’s a constant blame. Come on, El, the man was in here last week asking Andrea how to jump start your ovaries.”

Ellen snickered. “You have to admit it was funny.”

“It’s not funny.” Dean said with seriousness. “Frank is looking for something to take away the pain of his brother’s death. There’s a lot more going on in Frank’s mind than you, I, or anyone else knows about.” He moved to her softening his voice. “Frank’s behavior goes way beyond a man mourning. And his focus for having a baby is just a cover up.”

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There was another way to get to his office from town, and Frank was never one to avoid things just

because it stirred up feelings in him he didn't want to deal with. But he was actually debating on taking a new route, because each day that went by, it grew harder and harder.

It wasn't just any warehouse in Beginnings. It was *the* warehouse. And he passed it every single time he went back to his security office. Always ending up being the same routine that he tried, honestly tried not to do. But he did. Mind fixated on something that had to do with the community. Head high. Stare forward. Stride steady. Then the moment he tried to make it by the warehouse it seemed, almost as if it had hands of its own, the warehouse grabbed him. Frank always slowed down, his stomach immediately gnawed and before he took another step forward, he would always say a small prayer. If Frank believed in ghosts, he would believe that Robbie's was the cause of it. Lingering in that warehouse where he met his death.

The gnawing and emotional pulling would have stayed with him had it not been overwhelmed by the anger. Anger that spawned from his inability to deal with things. And that anger grew worse everyday, staying with him longer. It was reaching the point, and Frank knew it, that the anger would fail to leave all together.

Enraged with himself, Frank stormed into his office, hoping to calm down. He unzipped his leather jacket, took it off in his stride, then as if he were trying to toss the feeling out, Frank in a spin whipped his coat across the office.

Smack!

"Ow!"

Frank hunched his shoulders in a slight chuckle when he saw Henry sliding the jacket from his face. "Sorry. I didn't see you follow me in."

"Obviously." Henry held up a small box. "Got a surprise for you."

"It's not a piece of that wall is it?" Frank walked behind his desk.

"No. I didn't tear it down like I said. I'm over it. I think." Henry sat down in a chair. "Yeah, I am."

"Am what?"

"Over it."

"Over what?"

"Frank!" Henry snapped then calmed himself. Frank was on edge as it was, and yelling at a man on edge was never a good idea. Especially when he was as big as Frank. "I . . . am over that cold."

"Good. I didn't know you were sick."

"Um, yeah. Anyway." Henry slide the small box to Frank. "Your surprise. I picked up the entire stock yesterday on the run. My paper plan is ready to put in motion, and I'm hoping when you see, it you'll help."

"I love surprises." Frank pulled the box closer. "You should have wrapped it." He lifted the lid and nearly shrieked. "Oh, yeah." So excited like a kid, Frank lifted the headset radio from the box. "For me?"

"Yours for when we get it working."

Standing, Frank grinned as placed it on. "Lightweight, easy to move my head." He shook his head back and forth.

"When you use it watch how loud you talk, though." Henry instructed.

"Yeah." Frank spoke in awe. "I look cool, don't I?" Frank nodded then struck a quick mean pose.

"The coolest."

"Check me out." Frank placed both hands on his desk and leaned into it speaking graveled. "There's a bomb on the bus."

"Oh, my God Frank, that is so good. You look just like him in an older, worn down apocalyptic sort of way."

"Yeah." Frank stood straight. "What did you need me for?"

"Well, I have to get the signal transmitters set up so we can use them at a distance. I wanted you to go beyond the wall with me to see where we can plant them outside."

"Hell yeah, let's go." Frank hurried to the door, picking up his coat. "I want this system set up."

"It's still gonna take awhile. I have the whole community to map out. Find spots. Hook up. God."

Henry whined. "What a project. You would think George . . ."

"Henry, quit bitching." Frank silenced him as he stood by the open door. "Let's go. I'm up for this."

Henry took a step and the door closed. He was glad to see a smile on his friend's face. An expression not seen in a while. Henry even began thinking that maybe Frank's enthusiasm over the wireless system would be the answer to changing his whole recent awful behavior.

"Henry." Frank opened the door. "One more thing. After we get the jeep, I wanna stop at containment to yell at El."

The moment that Frank left again, Henry thought 'maybe not'.

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The skills room in containment was the place the survivors gathered. They learned, they amused themselves there. It also was the place where most of the trouble broke out as well. Ellen hesitated in her entrance into the skills room to linger at the door. Miguel was in there. He was seated at a round table with a survivor. Miguel was big and brawny. Rough looking. He was society's epitome of his real old world job of a truck driver. But Ellen knew him better. He was nothing but a teddy bear. And he showed it as he tried with diligence to explain the passage in the bible he read to the survivor, Max.

"Don't tell me you're my guard." Ellen said as she walked to him.

"For the time being." Miguel stood up. "Greg had to leave. I wasn't busy up at the field house. And Max, he's been problem. I just wanted to try to reach him. Perhaps reach someone."

Ellen smiled sadly. "Miguel, I know where you're coming from. Trust me."

"I believe you do. When our Denny died, Andrea, she won't share. She pulls away and is quiet."

Slowly Ellen nodded. "Maybe it just takes more time for some people. We're in the same boat. Only you get silence and I get . . ."

"El!" Frank's voice boomed across the skills room.

"That." Ellen pointed, folded her arms and cringed watching her survivors scurry in fear at the sound of Frank's heavy boots. "He sets them back when he's pissed at me."

"I'll handle him."

"El!" Frank called out again, knowing he was very obviously being ignored.

"Frank." Miguel walked to him. "She is conducting something important. Can this wait?"

"No."

"I'll get her if you tell me you won't start this screaming." Miguel spoke softly. "Frank, it's not good for your relationship."

"Don't." Frank stepped back with a heavy point. "Don't even fuckin give me marital advice when yours is falling apart." Turning in a huff, Frank marched away, got a few feet down the hall and stopped. He turned back around with a change in his demeanor. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I'm just . . . I just lashing. I guess that's why I'm here. El, always makes me feel better."

Confused by that remark, Miguel pulled the skills room door closed and walked to Frank. "Lashing out at Ellen makes you feel better?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you think that is kind of a sadistic approach to therapy?" Miguel questioned keeping his voice low. "Frank, if Ellen makes you feel better, then maybe your subconscious is telling you it's time to tell her the truth. She can help you through this."

"If you're suggesting that so you won't be the heavy any . . ."

"No." Miguel shook his head. "I find no shame in being the one everyone believes is the one who removed Robbie. But, inside you need to deal with that. Even if no one else knows, your wife should. She needs to know why you can not handle Robbie's death. She needs an explanation to this violent grief. I think she'll help you."

"No." Frank breathed heavy as he stepped back. "No, I can't tell her I shot my own brother. She loved Robbie. She'll hate me. She'll never look at me the same."

“How do you know that?” Miguel asked.

“Because I know her. Her and I, we think alike. We’re . . . connected. And how can I expect her to ever look at me the same way again, when I . . . I can’t even look at myself.” With only a slight twitch of his jaw, Frank said no more, turned and left containment.

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“Official History business.” George entered the clinic lab. “Dean?”

Dean turned from his work. “Oh, hey George.”

After rolling his eyes slightly, George held up the clipboard. “Tasks. Now, as duly designated history division coordinator, I think I’m fair. I’m not anal. I don’t ask for long reports. Hell, you can jot it on a piece of scrap paper. Just so I have a record to put in the files and something to read off of when I log it in the system. But . . . we log things, Dean. Everything. Timely. Deaths, births, accidents, attacks. Andrea registered her four burns and eight smoke inhalations by morning. You have one small child. What’s the hold up? Why aren’t you registering this infant’s death?”

Dean took a long blink. “Because I’m afraid for the cause of death to get out.”

George stared at Dean for a long moment. He laid the clipboard down. “Write it down. I’ll log it in the computer as highly classified. I won’t let it out.”

After letting out a sigh of relief, Dean wrote it down and slid the clipboard back.

George looked. “No wonder. I thought . . .”

“So did I.” Dean interrupted. “And I still believe the chance is minimal that it will happen again. But . . . we have we been preaching. Have children. These women are not going to want to have a child if they even think that it can’t stand a chance.”

“What can we do?” George asked.

“I’m kicking myself, George. El and I, we stopped working in the cure. Put it aside. And having a cure is the only thing we can do. Finally beat the plague. And we want to work on it again. Go at it full blast.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” George tucked the clipboard under his arm. “But if I recall, another reason you stopped working on the cure was because you and Ellen were getting a lot of slack for playing with the virus again. People pushed for you to bury it. Ignorance breeds panic.”

“I think this time we’ll just have to deal with the panic.”

“Do you really think you can beat it?”

“Yes.” Dean said with certainty. “I think given six solid months of putting our minds into it, we can come up with a serum that will counteract the virus should anyone be born with it.”

“Then here’s what you do.” George suggested. “You take the time. You work. You put your all into it. And when, only when you have a cure that is a hundred percent effective, then you let it be known you were working on it. Not before. That way there’ll be no pressure to inhibit your work.”

“That sound great. But can we pull it off without anyone finding out?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, George.” Dean said.

“Not a problem. I want this thing beat and put to bed finally. No more hanging over our heads.” He moved to the lab door. “You’ll keep me posted. Right?”

“Absolutely.” Dean responded with a slow lift of his hand to say goodbye.

“We’ll talk later then.” George stepped from the lab and turned into the hall to leave the clinic. He paused to look at his clipboard. He read the information about Sarah and her clinic visit, then he saw where Dean filled in the cause of her son’s death. After reading, and a brief moment of thought, George ripped off the top sheet, crumbled it up, put it in his pocket then walked on.

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It was getting late and Henry knew it. But what else did he have to do. He wanted to find all of his spots to place the receivers and transmitters or at least get started on the ones inside Beginnings. Frank actually had him hyped to get the wireless radios working. Beginnings was a lot bigger than anyone realized. Especially anyone who didn't work with the pipes and power lines that ran throughout the tunnels that set beneath the entire community.

Perhaps Henry in his search for destinations went through that tunnel on purpose. His mind justified his being there as the main tunnel under town. But subconsciously Henry knew. And his actions said it all when he stopped before the wall. The wall, that to Henry, had a mystery to it, that he just wanted to solve. It ate at him like nothing else. He found himself staring, wondering, looking at the power lines and pipes that seemed to disappear into a thick wall of concrete. And before Henry also found himself down at that wall for a ridiculous long time, he forced himself to move on. The wall wasn't why he was there. The radios were. And he had to keep reminding himself of that.

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With the flashing vision of blue eyes, and the loud sound of four gun shots, Frank abruptly awoke from his dream, sitting straight up in bed with a loud grunt. He pushed the covers off and swung his feet on to the floor. Breathing heavily, he rubbed his eyes. The nightmare was haunting him. It wouldn't go away. It was a part of him. Realizing he had to shake it off, he stood. His legs were weak, his thoughts were foggy, and his emotions rushed through his blood with every speck of his adrenaline. Frank could barely walk. As he moved closer to the door, he stopped. Taking in what he had just dreamt, he leaned forward to the wall. He lifted his arm above his head and placed it against the smooth surface. He rubbed the sweat from his brow across his wrist, then left his head resting there.

Ellen watched it all. She felt him jolt from his dead sleep, she heard him cry out. Quietly she slipped from the bed, creaking the floor boards as she neared him. "Frank?"

In his lifting of his head, Frank brushed the bridge of his nose against his arm, then turned his head slightly to look at Ellen.

"Frank?" Ellen questioned, peering at the maddening look he seemed to harbor in his eyes.

Frank blinked heavy, shook his head once, slipped by her roughly and walked in silence from their bedroom.

CHAPTER THREE

October 10

'Talk to me about it.' In her walk to the clinic Ellen heard her pleas to Frank not a few hours earlier.

'It was a stupid dream.' Frank had sounded so angry.

'They're happening more frequently. I know they're about Robbie.'

'You don't know anything!' He blasted her back.

'Let me help you.'

'I'll deal with this on my own.'

With her heart, Ellen tried to get through to him. *'You can't. You can't handle this alone.'*

'Then chalk it up as one more thing I can't handle. I can't handle the nightmares. I can't handle Robbie's death. And I can't even handle the simple task of getting my wife pregnant.'

Her body shuddered as if she slipped from a bad dream when she slipped from that memory. She knew, soon, something had to give or Frank was going to break.

First she set down the mug of coffee before Dean, then she leaned on the counter across from him.

From the coffee cup to Ellen, Dean looked. "You're early?"

"We need to talk."

Dean pointed to the cup then lifted it.. "You want something. Never do you come bearing gifts unless you want something."

"You're right. I want you to get me pregnant."

With everything he was Dean was glad he wasn't drinking at that moment. Shifting his eyes slightly, he looked at Ellen. "Clarify."

"Exactly as I said. I want you to get me pregnant. And before you get the idea that I want you to put me on my back. Scientifically I want you to get me pregnant."

"Oh." Dean chuckled out a breath. "A baby is good . But really El, you and Frank haven't been trying long. Sometimes these things takes time."

"Time is something *that* man does not have." Ellen reached over and grabbed Dean's hand. "He's breaking, Dean. I've never seen him like this. He wants a baby so bad."

Dean opened his mouth and nodded. "I see. In-vitro, or artificial insemination is going to be difficult. We'll need a sample from Frank, and you know how he feels about . . ."

"I don't want Frank to know."

"How in the world to you suppose we do that? He's going to wonder why all of the sudden you're asking him to masturbate in a cup."

"Dean, please." Ellen slightly cringed.

"El. Getting a sperm sample from Frank is not something we can do without his knowledge. We can't just go up to him in the middle of the night and take one."

"I want you to get me pregnant."

"I'm trying to explain that we need a sample from Frank and we have to get him . . ."

"Dean." She stopped him. "You. I need to have a baby Dean, and I want you to father it."

"Oh my God!" Dean exclaimed as his hand came to his head. "You can't ask me that!"

"No one has to know." She jumped from the stool and approached him. "You can artificially inseminate me . . ."

"No!"

"Dean we can do this." She moved closer to him. "Who's gonna know?"

"I'll know. You'll know."

"And that's all. Dean . . ." She placed her hands on his chest. "I'm asking you to help me. Look, It's perfect. I'm ovulating. We'll close the door. You go in the back . . ."

Dean's shriek of shock shut her up. "No, Ellen. No." He backed further away from her. Frazzled, he ran his hand through his hair.

“Why?”

“Well . . .” His words flubbed in nervousness. “Because. Because . . .” He fluttered his lips. “Because. There.” He saw her looking at him. He held up a finger. “And . . .it’s wrong. It’s deception.” He saw Ellen was not getting his point. With a calming breath, he led her to sit back down. “Think about what you are asking me. I can’t.”

“And I can’t believe you won’t help me.”

“El, besides the fact that the kid would never pass for a Slagel. I won’t father a child for you.”

“Fine.” Ellen shook her head. “Will you at least think about it?”

“El, I can’t . . .” After taking a second to get his thoughts together, he sat down next to her, and placed his hand over hers. “With all my heart I understand your mad rationalizing behind this, I do.”

“Dean, I wouldn’t even consider asking this if I didn’t think the time factor played an importance. It does. I don’t have another five years to wait for nature to say whoops. He needs this.”

Dean heard her words, and the desperation behind them. “Even if I slightly considered it, do you know what that means? I’ve wanted another baby myself. And you’re asking me to give up my flesh and blood to another man. Let alone a man I can’t stand. If I even did this, the pay-off for me would have to be huge. Huge.”

“Then you’re thinking about it?”

“El . . .”

“Then think about this. If you don’t help me. I’ll get someone who will. There are no women, it’ll be easy. And I’ll take the natural, not clinical route, if need be.”

Dean sprang up. “Hold that thought.” He backed up.

“But . . .”

“Just hold that thought.”

Ellen tilted her head in confusion as Dean raced from the lab.

^^^

“I don’t know, Joe.” Andrea sat at her desk. She stared down to her hands that ran gently over her desk’s surface. “Why is it that I can talk to you?”

“You should be able to talk to Miguel. Maybe you’re just not trying.”

“I am, but he’s in as much pain as . . .”

“Joe!” Dean nearly cried out as he flew into Andrea’s office and stopped with a squeak of his tennis shoes. “Whoops. Sorry, you’re busy. I’ll come back.”

“What is it?” Joe turned in his chair. “You look upset.”

“We . . .” Dean took a breath. “I . . . we . . . Oh, boy.”

^^^

Ellen’s mouth hung open as her eyes shifted angrily from Joe to Dean. “You dick!” She shouted then lunged her body hands first to Dean’s chest shoving him back. “I can not believe you told my father on me.”

“In Dean’s defense.” Joe held up his hand. “He’s merely diverting trouble. What is going through your mind is wrong. You can’t do that to Frank. I can’t even believe that you’re thinking of it.”

“Don’t you think you guys are overreacting a bit? I just want to give him that baby.”

“That’s fine.” Joe’s hands moved as he talked. “But if it’s meant to be it will happen. If not, then there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“He needs to have the baby, Joe. He needs something good to happen to him.”

“I understand that. But he needs to have *his* baby. Not Dean’s.” He placed his hands on Ellen’s arm. “Are you understanding yet?”

“My intentions . . .”

“Are bad.” He rested his lips on the top of her head. “Your heart is in the right place. But to be blunt . . . your head was up your ass.” Joe waited for Ellen to finish gasping. “How in the world did you think you could pass off Dean’s kid for Frank’s. They are on opposite ends of the physical spectrum.”

“I guess you’re right.” Ellen said. “I wasn’t all that dumb though. I was considering Henry.”

“Henry?” Joe’s hands dropped from her arms. “Henry?”

“Yes. He has dark hair, he’s tall . . .”

“He’s Japanese. I know my son is not that bright at times, but he’d notice if his kid were Asian.”

“O.K. you have a point, Joe. I’ll drop the idea. But you . . .” She backed up and pointed to Dean. “Have a death wish. You are marked. You’ll regret this, Dr. ‘I should grow up I’m still a tattletale’ Hayes.” She moved to the lab door. “Trust me you will pay.”

Dean watched her leave then he looked to Joe who started to leave as well. “Joe, I’m sorry to drag you into this.”

“No. It’s fine. You came to me. Ellen couldn’t be anymore a daughter than if she were my flesh and blood. I needed to set her straight.” He started to walk again.

“What do you think about me coming to you though?” Dean questioned.

“What does it matter?”

“Well . . . you’re Joe.”

Hands in pockets, Joe stopped at the door. “Personally, I wouldn’t classify you as a tattletale.” He saw Dean smile. “I would of have used the word . . . snitch.” Joe nodded with a closed mouth. “Yeah, that’s more me.”

Dean threw his hands up in defeat when Joe walked from the lab.

^^^

He was eighteen, but he looked more like a boy of thirteen lying in the hospital bed with a mild case of viral pneumonia. He slept while Andrea checked him. She ran her hand over his pale face which seemed to be in so much of a contrast to her dark complexion.

“You’ve taken an interest in him.” Miguel spoke softly from the boy’s door.

Andrea nodded, adjusted his covers, grabbed her chart and walked from the room. “Excuse me.”

“You’re mad at me.” Miguel spoke in his soft way.

“Yes. I am. Why are you here?”

“To see you. When I am home, you aren’t.”

Andrea raised her eyebrows. “Maybe you should take the hint.”

After closing his eyes briefly, Miguel chased after Andrea who had started to walk again. “I came to speak to you. There are supply runs that need to be made. I should go. But . . . if you want me not to I . . .”

“That maybe for the best. Maybe some time apart.” Andrea said coldly.

“Why . . . why are you shutting me out?”

“The truth?” Andrea’s voice softened. “It isn’t because I don’t love you. It’s because when we got to Beginnings we set out to be a family. You, me, Denny and Katie. You were the core. You made us have meals together, read together, all of that. And now, you aren’t the core. You’re just a painful reminder to me of a ‘whole’ family I can’t have anymore. Right now, I’d really rather not have any painful reminders.” After giving a brief, sad, stare, Andrea turned and walked away.

Miguel’s head dropped.

^^^

The loud metal bang outside of Joe’s office made him, George and Henry pause in their meeting, but not stop.

“Months.” Henry continued in what he was saying. “But that’s because I have other things on my

mind.”

“Like?” Joe asked, hindering on the edge of his seat, worried that ‘the wall’ would be Henry’s answer.

Bang.

All three looked up, then shrugged.

“Joe.” Henry huffed out. “Things break down in the community. Always. I’ll do the best I can to get the transmitters and receivers posted but . . . It could take months.”

George didn’t let his sigh of relief be seen. “Well, take your time Henry. Winter’s not that far. We don’t have security problems usually until April.”

Bang.

Just as Joe opened his mouth to speak, the banging happened again, only it was continuous. Slamming his hands on his desk, Joe stood up. “What the hell is that?” He walked around to his door, flung it open and stepped outside. “Frank!”

Mid kick, Frank set down his leg. “This thing is sticking out. What is it.”

“It’s aluminum siding you moron, and it’s my goddamn office building. Why are you kicking it!” Joe blasted.

“It was sticking out!” Frank stepped back. “It’s not anymore. I fixed it.”

Joe grunted. “Frank, did you stop by and see Ellen yet?”

“No. I didn’t understand the note you left me.” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “See.” He read it out loud. “*Frank, you better go talk to Ellen about this baby situation. She’s trying to find a way to get pregnant. Talk to her. Dad.*” Frank tossed his hand up and shook his head so confused.

Joe snatched the note from his hand. “Where are you lost, Frank?”

“Why do I need to talk to her. She should find a way. She has this problem getting . . .”

“No, Frank, you idiot.” Joe smacked him with the note. “*You* have the problem. Your wife was running around this community looking for ways to give you a baby. And I have news for you, none of them involves, let’s say . . . your sperm.”

Seriously, Frank stared down at his father lost. “O.K.”

Grumbling, Joe stepped back. “Think about it.” He tossed the note to Frank and went into his office. Upon his shutting of the door he heard the snickering of Georg and Henry. “Was it me?”

Henry, holding up his hand, stood. “Joe, if I may. Do you think it was a good idea to tell Frank that?”

“Henry, please.” Joe scoffed. “*If* he figures it out. It will be more of a reality slap than anything else. How bad will he be about it?”

The screech of the peeling out jeep was all the answer Joe needed. With panicked looks, and zero hesitation, Joe, George and Henry flew from the office.

^^^

“Ellen!” Frank’s chesty call carried through the hall of the containment into her office.

His strong voice went through her, snapping her attention from what she was doing. Ellen’s heart beat fast from the sudden jump start. “Shit.”

“Ei!”

It grew closer, Ellen felt as if she were in some sort of horror movie waiting for the inevitable moment. She braced herself.

“Ei!” Frank blasted as he stood in the doorway. “What the fuck are you up to, run . . . Uh!”

“Huh?” Ellen sprang from her chair confused. Was it her imagination or did Frank just sail sideways at an incredibly high speed away from her door. She heard the loud thump, followed by his grunts. She rushed to the hall.

“Get off me!” Frank yelled, his huge body underneath the ones of Joe, George and Henry.

Ellen giggled seeing council in some sort of football game in the hall. “That’s cute.” She went back in her office.

“Now!” Frank yelled.

Joe, closest to Frank’s ear, spoke. “Are you calm?”

“No.” Frank snapped. “I got a wiry neurotic man and two old guys on my fuckin back in the hall! How the hell am I suppose to be! Off!”

Slowly with apprehension they lifted.

“Thank you.” Frank stood up. “Wanna tell me what that’s about?”

Joe looked to George and Henry. “Thanks. I can handle it now.” He waited until they started to leave and then he turned back to Frank. “I had to stop you before you got out of control.”

“Did you think to just yell, hey Frank stop?”

“Would you have?”

“No.”

Joe pointed to Ellen’s office. “Let’s go in there and talk.”

Frank raised his arms. “That’s why I’m here!” Shaking his head he walked into Ellen’s office. “And stop!” He scolded at her laughing. “You and I have to talk. Right now. What the . . .”

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Sit. Ellen. Leave.”

“O.K.” Ellen hurried from behind her desk, flew from the office and shut the door.

“Sit.” Joe instructed again, pulling a chair for Frank.

“I think you guys dislocated my shoulder.” Frank rubbed his arm as he sat. “Now, you wanna tell me what’s up? You send me here and you tackle me. What is this pick on Frank day?”

“No, I sent you here to talk to your wife. Not scream at her. That shit is wrong, Frank. You can’t be coming in here blasting your emotions out on her.” Joe leaned down talking to him.

“You told me what she did. Did you think I’d let that go?” Frank tried to get up again, but Joe shoved him back in the chair. “And will you quit pushing me around please?”

“No. Because if I have to tie you up, you’ll listen to what I am telling you. Clear?”

“Yes . . . clear.” Frank ran his hand over his head and propped his elbow on the arm of the chair.

“Now let me explain something to you, you big, dumb-ass, hard headed, son of a bitch. I did not tell you about Ellen to have you come in here and blast her. I told you about your wife so *you* can do something about what *you* did to cause it.”

“Me?” For some reason Frank was shocked to hear that.

“Yes you.” Calmer, Joe stepped back and sat on the edge of Ellen’s desk.

“She’s the one Dad who’s out asking every guy in the community to knock her up because she doesn’t think I can do it.”

“Bull shit. That’s not why she did it. Somewhere in Ellen’s warped sense of thinking, she was doing it for you. And she wasn’t walking up to every man in the community asking them to knock her up. She went to Dean to get him to impregnate her . . . scientifically or something like that.”

“Dean?!” Frank’s hand clutched to the arm of the chair. “She went to Dean? Of all people. That really pisses me off that she went to him. And she wanted to pass his kid off as mine? Didn’t she think I’d notice? Shit, he’s like four foot.”

“And that’s not the best one.” Joe folded his arms. “If Dean didn’t do it, she wanted to see if Henry would donate the . . . you know.”

“Henry?” Frank blew from his mouth and shook his head. “At least he’s tall and has dark hair, I may not have noticed at first.”

Joe grunted and smacked himself in the forehead. “Getting off that subject.” He brought his hand down to his son’s shoulder. “Look, I have sat back long enough. I have to tell you now. Your behavior is what caused this. You have been obsessed with having another baby since you and Ellen lost yours. And your mood, and rage, is adding to the pressure that you two are feeling. Both of you think this kid is gonna change everything. It may take it away for the moment Frank, but the only thing that’s gonna make it better is you dealing with it.”

“I’m dealing with it.”

“The hell you are.” Joe’s voice raised. “This is dealing with it? This pouting, ranting shit that you’re

doing? It's not dealing with it Frank, it's making it worse."

"You can't sit there and judge the way I act. You don't know what I'm going through."

"You don't think?"

"No I don't. You didn't do it."

"Bull shit." Joe stood up. "I might as well have done it. I gave the order. *We*, Frank, you and I did it. We thought because Robbie was our family, that it was our responsibility to take care of it. And we did. But you're forgetting one thing. Robbie was my son." Joe brought his thumb to his heart. "My son Frank. Flesh and blood *I* created. You don't think with that comes a tremendous amount of guilt? You don't think I felt what you are feeling, and couple that with the fact that I too was responsible for my own son's death? It killed me. Killed me." Joe stepped back and let his blood pressure settle. "But I dealt with it right away. I didn't try to forget what happened or act like it never did. Every time I thought of Robbie, I saw that little boy playing baseball and it broke my heart. I had to go through a process, the same one you have to. And now I can think of Robbie and not want to kill myself over it. I know what you're feeling Frank." Joe's hand rested on Frank's. "I felt it. And you will get through it. You have to face it, deal with it, and get over it."

"I can't."

"You can. The first step is your wife. Go to Ellen, tell her is that the baby doesn't mean as much to you as she does. Get that off her mind. And second, you tell her the truth. Tell her what really happened in the warehouse. Let her help you deal with it, truly understand what you're going through."

"I appreciate the fatherly advice, but I have to handle this my own way. Telling my wife what happened is not an option. But . . . I'll talk to her about the baby issue."

"Good boy." Joe gave a pat to Frank's cheek and followed it up with a kiss. "I'll get her." He moved to the door. "No yelling. Or I'll kick your ass."

Frank rolled his eyes in sarcasm then stood when his father left. He told himself he would be calm, but the moment Ellen, looking timid, walked in, everything changed.

"Frank." She spoke innocently. "Look, Joe told me . . ." She stopped speaking when Frank's finger went to her lips.

Frank moved by her, poked his head through the door, saw his father wasn't there, then he slammed it. "What the hell were you up to?"

"You promised Joe you wouldn't yell at me. Don't."

"Don't?" He stepped to her. "How could you do it? You're killing me El, killing me. Do you not know how that made me feel? I want a baby, yes. And granted, I've been pushy about it. But!" His voice crept up but he caught it before it got out of control. "Do you think for one second, you running around having someone else donate is the way to make me feel better?"

"Absolutely not." Ellen shook her head. "No. It isn't. And I think you should know Frank, before you get yourself in an uproar about me. You should know the truth."

"Which is?" Frank waited.

Calmly Ellen let out a breath and walked to her desk. "Joe got his information wrong. It wasn't my idea. It was all . . . Dean's." With her high pitched last word, Ellen plopped pleasingly into her chair and grinned when Frank blasted out of the office. Smiling, she grabbed her radio from her desk, leaned back in her chair and kicked her feet up. She selected a channel, depressed the button and very calmly spoke into it. "Hello, Dean . . . run."

Dean heard her message. At first he shook his head and laughed. Then with a turn of seriousness, he remembered their last conversation. "Shit." He raced to the lab door and stepped into the hall. Too late. Frank was running in. "Shit." He quickly locked the lab door and went back to his work.

"Dean!" Frank knocked on the glass of the door. "Dean, let me in." He turned the locked knob.

"I can't, Frank." Dean sat before a microscope. "I'm very busy."

"Dean!" Frank's voice yelled louder, shaking the door handle more. "Let me in!"

Dean shook his head.

“Dean, I’m fuckin security. Do you think you can lock me out?” With a smile, Frank raised his humongous set of keys and dangled them up.

The look on Frank’s face, almost gloating as he bit his bottom lip and turned the knob, sent more than waning signals off to Dean, it sent immediate survival thoughts racing through his mind. After initially thinking ‘*I’m killing Ellen*’, Dean realized in the particular ‘Frank versus Dean’ situation at hand, Dean had the size advantage.

The moment the lab door burst open, and Frank stood there in an ape lunging manner, Dean power blasted his small body across the lab. The partial baseball slide he did to make it under Frank’s arms, sent him sailing into the hall. After rolling into a stand, and figuring he’d find Joe somewhere in his mission to live, Dean took off running. But not without Frank . . . chasing right behind.

^^^

The day before had been the preparatory phase. The set up. The back room of the lab was cleaned out to be utilized to hide the supplies when they were working on the virus. And the far back counter was cleared for work space. A work space that to the laymen would look like any other lab set up.

Across the counter lined up in racks, were test tubes. Sitting there waiting, all of them to be filled with different variations of ingredients, Dean believed in the right combination would be the solution and the new hope. But how many combinations would it take until he and Ellen nailed it, was the question. When he looked at it mathematically, the odds were greater that he would have hit the lottery in the old world than hitting the right combo. But Dean couldn’t think that way. He actually had an advantage. At least he could look at the combination he tried, see what worked, what didn’t work and build from there.

But still, it was a lot of work.

It was pretty late, and Dean knew it, but he wanted to get started. Everything was ready to begin and a part of him just couldn’t shut down for the night without trying something. Settling at the counter, papers before him that told him what they had tried and what they didn’t, he heard the flapping sound. It struck him as odd, but he didn’t pay much attention to it until it became steady. Turning slowly in his stool, his eyes caught glimpse of it. A simple white cloth emerged through the door and waved fanatically about.

Trying not to make a sound, and staying close to the wall so as not to be seen, Dean crept to the white cloth, and quickly he reached out of the door with a loud ‘ha’ as he grabbed the hand of the person surrendering.

Ellen shrieked, then laughed. “Is it safe?”

“Get in here.” He shook his head and gave a tug. “I ran for an hour you know.”

“Great exercise. Sorry about today.” Ellen walked behind him.

“We’ll say we’re even.”

“Oh, look.” Ellen hurried to the lab space. “You have it waiting for me.”

“Not really.” Dean moved to the counter. “How were the kids tonight.”

“Tired.” Ellen began to review the papers on the counter. “So where were you at in the work when I came in?”

“Actually. I was getting ready to shut down. I was in that debate phase. Go home. Stay. You know.”

“Oh.” Ellen’s voice dropped.

“You sound disappointed I’m not working.”

“No. Well. Yeah. I am. I was hoping to work.”

Dean laughed. “You work?”

“Stop that.” She smacked him with the white cloth she still held. “Yeah. I want to work on this virus. This is gonna sound odd, but . . . even with all that we went through, you and me. Working in this lab, with you, I like it. It’s like, tension free.”

“That’s because we have . . .” Dean reached around her and lifted a test tube. “Great . . . Chemistry?”

Ellen chuckled and shook her head at the joke. She took the tube and replaced it. “That was bad.” She raised her eyes and when she did, she caught Dean’s. She shifted her views from his eyes to his smile, then let out a breath. “I’m sorry. I’ll leave and let you get home. We’ll work tomorrow.” She stepped away and turned.

Dean reached out, stopping her. He closed one eye and tilted his head. “You know what. How about we work into tomorrow. Go all night.”

The corner of Ellen’s mouth raised sneakily. “I don’t recall you ever going all night.”

“Nice.” He nodded, and grabbed the cloth from her hand as she snickered. “You start on those previous tests, review them and I’ll go in the back and get what we need. Sound good?”

“Sounds great.”

“Good.” He smiled and stepped back. “Because . . .” Rolling the cloth, he snapped it at her. He tossed the cloth back and walked away speaking as he did. “We have a virus to beat.”

CHAPTER FOUR

December 24

George saw the light to Dean's laboratory was on as he took his pre-dawn walk. It wasn't unusual for him to get up at five in the morning, he had his entire life. He tried to eat up time before venturing out but he got bored and antsy with that. He felt like Henry. Henry was in a pacing frenzy the night before. George heard his screen door opening and closing all night. It unnerved him. Which was probably why George hid until he saw Henry go into his house. Something was strong on Henry's mind, and George wasn't in the mood to listen to his theoretical ramblings. He just wanted to take his walk and start his work for the day, so he could finish--like everyone else--early to start the celebration of Christmas Eve. Christmas was a holiday in Beginnings, that no matter how bad the world outside of their walls got, it was celebrated with the highest of traditions.

It was cold and perhaps Dean's light invited him in to the warmth, but more likely it was the curiosity of what Beginnings' superior mind was up to. The clinic was quiet when George walked in. "Burning the midnight oil a little late, or are you getting an early jump on things?" He called out to Dean.

"Oh." Dean took off his glasses as he lifted his head from a microscope. "The later. The twins stayed at Ellen's last night and I wanted to work before all hell breaks loose at the clinic. Which will happen with everyone wanting out for Christmas."

"Am I bothering you?"

"No come in." Dean sat on a stool and pulled one up for George. "What brings you here?"

"I was out taking my walk. I didn't sleep very well last night. Henry had me up. I could actually hear him outside my window going in and out of his house."

"I know, I saw him when I came in this morning."

"Did you speak to him?" George asked.

"How could I not? You know Henry, when he has something on his mind, he has to tell someone."

"What did he tell you?"

"Oh he's excited about it being Christmas. His wireless is done." Dean shrugged. "He's calling it his community gift of extra security. And he was going on about getting back to something else. I don't know, my mind wandered at that point."

"He didn't say what it was, did he?"

"Nope. He may have. I didn't listen. My mind is cluttered with this work."

"The virus?" George asked. "How's it going?"

Dean smiled, he had too, he was making progress. "A couple days ago. We hit thirty percent."

"Thirty percent cured? Wow that is great. How long till you cure it completely?"

"Never. It can't be cured completely."

"I don't understand. You said . . ."

"Let me explain." Dean said. "We, meaning you and I, are predestined to be immune to the virus in whole. Any way, shape or form of it. It's in our genes. But if someone is not immune, they don't have that in them. We can cure them of the present form. However, they can still die from it even after I've cured them, so to speak, if let's say they catch an altered version of our virus. And the chances of that happening are slim to none. I mean, who is going to alter our virus?"

"No one. Thank God." George stood from his stool. "I know you're busy, I'll let you go. Good luck and keep me posted."

"I will." Dean waved and placed on his glasses again. He appreciated George's interest in his work. He enjoyed sharing his work with him especially. Because George had been, at one time, the president of the United States, and there was some prestige in that.

He may of been a man of average height and build, but at that moment, Max looked small. The hand that came pummeling down in a grip to his shirt, crashed into his sternum making Max feel like he had a heart attack. But he knew his death was imminent when he was lifted from his feet, and brought face to sneering face with Frank, moments before he sailed backwards across the crowded skills room.

His back smashed into the wall and Max dropped to the ground, rolling in fear of the barging big man.

Joe's interception of Frank was Max's saving grace. "Enough!" Joe blasted bodily blocking Frank. "Knock it off."

"I'm killing him!" Frank glared passed his father.

"You will do no such thing."

"Then I will personally lift his skinny ass and carry him out of Beginnings myself."

"That is not your decision." Joe argued.

"Then council better make it. And make it now." Frank ordered. "This is the eighth time in two weeks. I want him out. He crossed the final line."

Max, shook as he backed himself in a corner pleading out. "No-no. I swear I didn't mean it. I swear. I didn't start it. I'm changing. I am. I'm learning the bible."

Frank took a step, and in his stride, bent down and ran his fingers across the floor through the red droplets. "You see this?" He held up his hand to Max. "My wife's blood. My wife's! Now whether you hit her on purpose or she got in the way of a fight you were in. Doesn't matter!" Frank blared. "She got hurt." He stepped back. "She goes out on a limb for all you fuckin people and this is what she gets." He swiped his hand on his pant leg and spun to face Joe. "I want a decision. Oust him."

Had Joe not stepped out of Frank's way he probably would have been knocked over when Frank just barged right out.

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The ointment was cold and soothing to Ellen's just stitched eyebrow. Dean swabbed it gently, standing before her in the lab.

"Done." He tossed the swab and lifted the ointment jar. "It's not bad."

"Aren't you gonna blow on it like you do for the kids."

Hard he blew, causing her bangs to fly up and Ellen to giggle. "El, did you see you have a Christmas gift?" He pointed to the counter across the lab.

"For me? No way." Ellen flew over to it. "I was caught up with being punched in the head. Oh, look." Her hands set upon the box covered in a cloth. "From you? You are Mr. Gift."

"Me?" Dean chuckled and put the ointment away. "I gave you enough. It's from Henry. He said something about telling you, since it's wireless day, he doesn't need the batteries as much."

Curiously, Ellen pulled the cloth from the box. She opened the flaps. "Oh!" She shrieked. "He fixed my tape player. And look Dean, batteries so it's mobile." Moaning in awe, her hand swept across the old player as if it were gold. "Now we can have music when we work. I have a whole box at home."

"Swell." Dean shook his head and walked across to the center counter.

"Oh, look. There's a tape in here." Another squeak of delight came from Ellen. "*Journey* Frank's favorite."

Dean saw her hand getting ready to press. "El, no. Don't play . . ." It was too late, the song started to play. Dean whined. "*Journey*."

Elbows on the counter, chin in her hands, eyes closed, Ellen listened to the song as if each word of it were a treasure. And they were, because the song just made her see Frank. Not the Frank she was married to. But the Frank she met on that first day of school nearly twenty-years before. It made her smile. She could still see him walking into anatomy the first day of classes. He was so awkward, so out of place. His black hair in a crew cut. To Ellen he was the tallest, skinniest, gawkiest, guy in that class. So out of place, so quiet. She probably would have never have spoke to him if he hadn't did what he did that very first day

of school. The song that played faded to the back of her mind and her first Frank encounter jumped forefront . . .

The campus bookstore, who would have thought.

Ellen had purchased just one book, she should have gotten more, but she hated the thought of parting with her cash. In her teenage mind she had it all planned out. Tell her parents she got robbed, hold on to the cash and let them buy the books. Ellen made her first mistake walking out of the bookstore with that cash in her hand. As she folded it to place it in her purse, a hand snatched it from her, along with her purse. "Hey!" She screamed at the man wearing black who ran past her. Before she could scream anymore, before she could chase him herself, a fast moving blur passed through her peripheral vision. As quickly as her assailant took her purse, that was how quickly he was on the concrete. That tall skinny kid from anatomy was soon lifting the guy to his feet, grabbing Ellen's belongings, then decking the man once sending him back down to the side walk. Ellen stood open mouthed as she watched.

"Here." He handed her stuff back.

With a deep breath, she turned to the voice who shoved her purse gently towards her. "Wow."

His thin face, still graced with acne, turned a slight shade of red as he smiled and began to walk away.

"Wait." Ellen called to him and chased him, grabbing his arm to stop him. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, you're welcome so much." He began to walk again.

"Do you always step in, save the day, then bolt?" She kept up to his fast moving stride.

"You're embarrassing me."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I never seen anyone do something like. You don't mind if I walk with you do you?" Instantly Ellen knew she liked this soft spoken guy. Besides the fact that he just saved her money.

"Not at all." His pace slowed down.

"My name is Ellen. We're in anatomy together."

"I'm Frank, Frank Slagel. Yeah, I know."

"Are you in nursing too?"

With a loud laugh, Frank stopped. "Hardly. I'm majoring in criminology. Anatomy is one of my courses."

"So you wanna be a cop?"

"No. I plan on joining the military after graduation. Get into military intelligence."

Ellen knew at that moment that was the reason for the hair. "Military intelligence. Wow, you must be pretty smart." Little did she know back then.

Frank shrugged. "I think I am."

"Are you headed back to the dorms? Wanna go with me to the . . ."

Ellen's memory came to a halt when the music on the cassette player stopped playing. She looked to the hand that nearly covered the small player. She knew instantly by the abundance of dark hair on the forearm, it was Frank. She slowly followed her vision up to his face. He was staring down at her. "Frank, I was listening to that. That's your favorite . . ."

"I'm glad one of us can have a relaxing day. Must be nice."

Ellen blinked in confusion. "Did I . . . Did I do something to you?"

"Why didn't you call me?" Frank asked strongly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about! When there's a problem at containment. You call me! Not one of my men! Especially when you get hurt."

"Oh." Ellen waved her hand. "I didn't want to bother you." She turned to go back to the tape player but the loud 'Bullshit' he hit her with made her jump and spin around.

"That's my job! You're my wife!" His voice was loud and frightening. "If you ever, ever fuckin go . . ."

“Frank.” Strong and demanding Dean’s one word halted him. “Don’t you dare talk to her like that again.”

“Don’t even tell me you’re threatening me.” Frank glared at Dean.

“I’ll threaten you Frank. I don’t care. Don’t you ever talk to her like that again. Not in my lab, not in my presence, not ever. I don’t care what the hell you have on your mind, she’s not to bear the brunt. Now get out of my lab.” Dean stared hard at him. “Now.”

Frank looked over to Ellen who just stared forward, eyes wide, biting her bottom lip. “Fine.” Frank’s hand cut through the air and he stepped back. “You were right this time, Dean. But don’t think I won’t pounce on the moment when you’re wrong.”

In the seconds after Frank stormed out, the silence in the lab was so strong that it rang. Then it was broken when Dean’s knees buckled, his hands hit the counter and he groaned in relief at the same time Ellen burst into laughter.

“That . . .” Ellen walked to Dean, laughing. “Took balls.”

“I’m a dead man.”

“Yeah.” She snickered and patted him on the back as she walked by him. “But I’m turned on.” She let out a dramatic ‘whew’ then stopped. “Hey, wait, does that make me a pre-necrophiliac?”

“Ellen.” He shook his head at her school-girl type giggling. “Work.”

“No.” Ellen darted to the tape player and pressed the button. “Journey.”

Dean grunted.

^^^

The last time Henry was so excited about something new happening in Beginnings was when Josephine reinvented the ‘Chocolate Kiss’. He remembered how he just ate and ate those new candies until he got sick, and eventually aggravated a cavity he didn’t know he had. He didn’t mind the cavity. He *did* mind getting scolded at by Dean, who like Andrea, was not only a doctor but the dentist as well. Henry still insisted Dean pulled that tooth on purpose just so teach Henry a lesson in gluttony. But that was another subject and Henry couldn’t believe he allowed his mind to travel to it.

The wireless was done. Ready to go. A part of him wished it was survivor straggler season just so Frank could get to use the headset in one of his runs to divert trouble. But that would eventually happen. At that moment, Henry just wanted to test the system, and he did, at the same time for everyone.

Continuously talking was never a problem for Henry. He did so into his own radio headset, from the fields to the underdeveloped living section. Rehashing stories of his youth and the uncle that used to pay Henry to pick his toes. He thought he was entertaining until everyone started telling him to shut up. But Henry had more range testing to do. So Henry began to sing. He was glad he saved the singing for last, because the last place he had to check were the tunnels under Beginnings. Not only did they span such a distance that Henry was able to capture all the top hits of the seventies and eighties, the tunnels also added that echoing effect that made Henry sound--at least he thought--like a singing sensation.

But being in the tunnels did one other thing. They made Henry . . . stop.

^^^

“It’s Christmas Eve, Dean.” Ellen said as she walked around her desk at containment. “Don’t you want to go home early, too?”

“Yeah, I will, eventually. Josephine is baking with the twins. So no hurry.”

“Doesn’t that give you like a frightening Hansel and Gretel feel? She eighty some and really . . .”

“El, be nice. O.K. listen.” Dean laid a stack of papers before her. “What would you say about . . . now no animal rights comments.”

“Not from me.”

“What would you say about removing the immunity strand of DNA from . . .”

The sound of marching boots made both Dean and Ellen look to the door. It sounded like a military protocol moving in.

“Dean.” Ellen slowly moved from her desk. “They wouldn’t without telling me, would they?” No more than two steps to the door, Ellen saw Frank and three of his security men move steady right down the hall. “They would. Shit.” She raced from the office.

“Ellen.” Dean tried to chase her.

“Frank!” Ellen screamed running to the skills room. “Don’t you . . .”

The frightened scream of Max bellowed out and so did he, straight from the skills room at top speed, knocking into Ellen and sending her flying back in his mad dash of an escape.

Ellen felt the hall spinning as she found herself on the floor looking up to Frank.

“You O.K.?” he extended his hand.

Ellen smacked it away. “Don’t you take Max.”

Waving her off, Frank walked by her up the hall where Max diligently pounded on the steel security door as if someone would open it for him. “Secure that man!” Frank ordered his men. “Let’s get him out of here.”

If Ellen could scream, she would have, but she stayed on the floor, still in a stunned state following her fall.

“El.” Dean bent down to her. “Are you all right.”

“Yeah.” She closed her eyes sadly.

“Come on.” Dean helped her up. “Are you sure you . . .”

“I’m fine.” Ellen walked to her office. “I can’t believe they took him.”

“That’s not important right now. You need to sit.” Dean walked in behind her. “You took a hell of a fall and that’s not good for . . .”

“I’m fine.” Ellen’s hands laid on her desk and she dropped her head.

Moving to behind her, Dean placed his hands on Ellen’s shoulders in a soothing rubbing manner. He spoke soft. “He was given a lot of chances. He’s just . . . he’s wild El. No matter what you do, you can’t change them all. Understand?”

“Dean!” Frank blasted his voice in the office. “Get your hands off my wife.”

Dean lifted his hands and backed up. He swiped up the pile of folders from Ellen’s desk. “I’ll talk to you about this later.” He looked only once at Frank and then he left.

Ellen’s words were barely heard. “I thought you were taking him out.”

“Dan and Greg are.” Frank answered. “It had to be done. Your safety and those here are my concern.”

“I have to wonder about that.” Ellen looked up. “I’m stuck between wondering if you really are looking out for my best interest or if you’re punishing me. If I smile, you take it away. If I talk to you, you yell. It’s almost as if, you want me to hurt as bad as you do.”

“I do.”

“What?” Ellen gasped out.

“It’s not right. I don’t mean to. I just . . . you’re the closest person to me and it kills me to see you smile or be happy. Especially when I feel like this. And maybe El, maybe we were just wrong about it all. We may have been great friends forever.” Frank looked down. “We may have been great bed partners. But as a couple, we’re proving everyone’s point. It’s not meant to be. I can’t handle the trying to be a husband. Not now.” He moved to the door. “So I’m just gonna let you smile, and let you be happy. I’m going to walk away.”

And Frank did.

Ellen huffed out a breath of her pursuant exhaustion when she walked into the bedroom of her home. But Frank did not acknowledge that he heard her. On the bottom of the bed he sat staring down to his

hands, and to something he played with between his fingers.

“Frank.” She whispered out stepping into the bedroom. “What are you doing?” She waited and didn’t get an answer. “Tell me . . .” she moved closer to the bed. “Tell me what you implied. Tell me that’s not what you want.”

“It’s not.” His voice was hoarse. “Trust me. There’s nothing more I want than to be with you forever. I even . . .” Rolled between his fingers, he blindly lifted a ring. Small, flat, different stones were pressed around it. “Was giving you my mother’s ring for Christmas. Since I can’t get you anything else.” Before Ellen could take it, he clenched it in his hand “But I’m not going to make you stay with me.”

“You aren’t making me do anything, Frank.” Ellen knelt before him trying to make eye contact that he avoided. “Yeah, sure, we’re gonna have our problems. We did when we lived together in college. But like then, we can’t quit. We spent too many years separate to let it fall apart when we finally have each other. My God, I know you better than I know myself.”

Emotionally Frank chuckled. “I doubt that.”

“Are you arguing the point with me? There is nothing about you I don’t know. Nothing. Try me. Ask me anything.”

A raise of his eyes finally made Frank look at Ellen. “Did you know . . . did you know I, not Miguel, was the one who shot Robbie?” Frank knew she tried to hide it, but he saw the flinch she made. “I killed him, my baby brother. I . . . I didn’t want anyone, no, I didn’t want you to know, because I knew what it would do to you. You wouldn’t see me the same way. I couldn’t live with that. But . . .” He let out a breath. “But I can’t live with this either. I saw what he did to you, to Dean, and I saw what he did to Denny, then I failed to see my brother and I pulled the trigger.”

“Oh, my God.” Ellen closed her eyes.

“See.” Frank twitched his head, his faced tensed up painfully. “But I guess it’s better you know what and who you’re married to. A cold blooded killer.”

“I’m not saying, ‘Oh my God’ over what you did. I’m saying it because you have been carrying this alone. I can’t believe you didn’t come to me. How . . . how could you think I’d judge you? I love you. There is nothing, I repeat nothing that you could do to make me stop loving you. And as far as who you are . . .” Ellen stood up. “We all had to change, Frank. We all became people in this world that we didn’t want to be. Sometimes we won’t realize why, and sometimes it stares us in the face. You’re lucky. It’s obvious why you became the way you are. Lives Frank, many of them, depend on you. And you’re the only one in this entire community with enough guts to face anything. And I know what and who I’m married to. I’m glad you’re like that. Because I swear to God, if these walls crumble or I get lost outside of them, you. You are the only person I trust to keep me safe and bring me home.”

“But I take . . . I take so many lives.”

“You do what you have to do. You protect. And you just don’t take life . . . you give it.” From her back pocket, Ellen pulled a small black square and extended it down to Frank. “I could have told you sooner. But, I wanted it to be my present. Hold it up to the light, it’s the best we can do at the clinic. Merry Christmas.” Ellen waited until he took it, but still he didn’t look as if he cared. Giving up for the time being, she slowly turned and moved to the door. No sooner did she get to it, that she heard a shuffling sound, and Frank’s hand pummeled forward shutting the door and leaving her facing it.

He moved behind her whispering in her ear. “Tell me this is true. Please.”

“It’s true. And it’s your son, Frank. We’re having that baby. Tell me you’re not giving up on us.”

Frank closed his eyes and gasped out near silently before turning Ellen to face him. Eyes still tightly shut, fingers gripping the bad ultrasound picture, Frank instinctively felt his hands up Ellen’s arms to her face. And the deep heavy breath he released preluded the kiss he delivered at that moment that said more than any words ever could.

^^^^

Joe was in the middle of getting dinner ready, but stopped to answer the door because it was his

community obligation as leader, not because he wanted to.

“Joe.” So frazzled, Andrea stepped inside his home.

“Hello to you, too.” Joe closed the door.

“We have a problem.” Andrea stated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh.” Emotionally, Andrea wrung her hands. “He never showed up for dinner. I know he’s alone. He said he’d be there. He never showed up. I haven’t heard or seen from him since before noon. Where is he. Oh, Sweet Jesus, what if he’s dead?”

“I know this may sound cold, Andrea.” Joe laid his hands on her arms. “But he’s been in a strange mood.”

“I know.”

“You don’t think he . . . he . . . killed himself, do you?”

Andrea gasped loudly. “Oh, poor Henry, I hadn’t any idea he was so down.”

“Henry?” Joe stepped back shocked. “I thought you were talking about Miguel.”

“Miguel?” Andrea repeated the same shock. “Miguel’s next door, and what would make you think a Christian man like Miguel would take his own life.”

“Um . . .” Joe fluttered his flips. “Maybe the break up?” he shrugged. “You have been pretty cold to him late . . .”

“Joe!” Andrea scolded. “I don’t want to discuss my marital problems. I do, however want to discuss Henry. Where is he?”

Joe’s mouth opened and closed few times before he tossed his hands in the air. He had an idea where Henry was, and Joe would find him . . . after he finished making and eating his dinner.

^^^

Dean complained about that tape player but he certainly was using it. Ellen could hear the Christmas music playing before she stepped into the lab. “Dean Michael Hayes.” She called out softly and walked in. “What are you doing?”

“Working on our virus.” Dean scurried about.

“It’s Christmas Eve. We’re doing dinner and stuff at Joe’s. I thought you would have stopped by.”

“It’s really not my place. Not this year.” Dean paused, then continued working.

“Must be on a brink or something, I can’t recall you ever, in the whole time in Beginnings, working this late on Chiasmas Eve.”

“That’s because I was never alone on Christmas Eve.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “Dean.”

“No.” He walked to her. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a damper, especially with you letting the baby news out. I’m just feeling kind of down.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Do you want to listen?”

“Of course.” Ellen pulled up a seat at the same time as Dean and they both sat. “Talk.”

“It’s just that . . . this is the first Christmas here I don’t have you or the kids. And, the days.” He shook his head. “I always had you to talk to. Come home to. And I always, always wanted to have another baby with you.”

“I never knew you were serious about that.”

“Oh, yeah.” Dean nodded. “I love having a family. And a baby, my kids, they are things no one can take from me. Or steal away behind my back. Now everything I had or wanted, Frank has. Gees.” He cringed and leaned forward, kissing her on the cheek. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be like this. It’s the Christmas thing.” He breathed out. “Even with the commercialization of it gone, it’s still the one time of year you realize how lonely you really are.”

“Ah, Dean.” Ellen stood up. “You still have me to talk to. I’m here. I won’t let you be alone. And,

we get along great finally.”

“I have news for you El, we always got along great. You just were too busy trying to deny it to see it.”

Slowly, Ellen walked behind Dean and wrapped her arm around him. “I did you wrong. I know. Please know I am so sorry for that.” She brought her lips close to his ear. “Shut down the lab for the night. Come on, go to services with us.”

“I will. They still aren’t for a few more hours. You go back to Joe’s. I’m going to work.”

Sliding her arm from him, Ellen moved to the door and stopped. “This . . . this may sound really strange. But I mean it with all sincerity. You helped me out more times than you needed to. After the plague, when I wanted to have a baby, and Frank refused, you fathered the twins. So . . . when you Dean, want to have that baby . . . just come to me. I may not be able to help you now, but I’ll give that to you. I promise.”

Dean smiled. “I can’t ask that of you and I won’t.”

“O.K.” Ellen nodded. “But know, the offer will always stand. A repayment, a gesture of friendship. However you want to view it. It’s there.”

Mouthing the words ‘thank you’ Dean stood up. “I better finish up.”

“You’re really going to work some more?”

“Another hour or so.” Dean moved to the back counter. “I just started this batch and I want to . . .” He stopped when he heard the door shut. Thinking, ‘she left?’ Dean turned around to see Ellen grabbing her lab coat. “What are you doing?”

“I said I won’t let you be alone.” She moved to him. “And that means tonight. Besides, I hate having you work on this virus without me.” Ellen picked up a clipboard. “What if you cure it when I’m not here. You’ll take all the credit.”

“Hell yeah.” He laughed when Ellen gave her fake look of being offended. Dean smiled. “Merry Christmas, El.”

Ellen returned the smile. “Merry Christmas Dean.”

^^^

Whistling? Footsteps?

Sitting on the ground of the tunnels, knees bent, notebook perched on his legs, Henry looked up to the sounds. “Oh, hey, Joe.” He said perky.

“Oh, hey Henry.” Joe walked to him. “I see you’re, uh, back at that wall again.”

“Yes.” Henry stood up excitedly. “I’m done with the wireless and figured, why not?”

“Why not.” Joe lifted his hand.

“So I was looking at it.” Henry held out his pen. “You know, the power lines and pipes. And I was trying to theorize where they went.”

“Of course. That’s just you.” Joe pacified.

“Yeah.” Henry grinned. “So I came up with a list of ideas.”

“I see.”

“I wrote them down.” He handed the notebook to Joe.

Calmly, Joe skimmed the list. “I see.”

“And I was also trying to come up with ways to take this wall down safely. You know, just in case it was a main sense of support I don’t want the community collapsing.”

“How thoughtful of you.”

So pleased, Henry nodded and looked back to the wall.

“I have something to say.” Joe hesitated then raised his voice slightly. “Eleven hours.”

“Huh?” Henry scratched his head.

“Eleven hours, Henry. You have been down here eleven hours staring at that goddamn wall. Eleven hours!”

“But Joe, I wasn’t just sitting down here, I was being productive. And if you just let me get behind

that wall . . .”

“You aren’t tearing down the goddamn wall, Henry!” Joe yelled. “Get it out of your mind. It’s a wall. Simple. If you had a logical reason to do it, I would say go on. But you don’t.”

“I beg to differ Joe. I have that list.”

Joe returned to being calm, but only for a second, after nodding one time, he lifted the notebook and with bodily dramatics, he whacked Henry upside of the head with it.

“Hey!”

“What the hell is the matter with you?”

“You hurt me.” Henry rubbed his head.

“So what!” Joe shoved the notebook to Henry. “Read your list, Henry. There is no Alien nest behind there. There isn’t a travel way to a secret society. It isn’t a time warp to a different dimension. It’s a wall. A simple wall. Leave it be. It is insane. Insane! People are going to move to have you ousted or tossed in containment if they find this shit out. Stop it. I can’t protect this behavior forever. Don’t let me catch you here again!” Shaking his head, and really having to get to church, Joe walked away.

Henry sadly tucked his notebook under his arm and followed Joe like a child. Joe didn’t want to catch him staring at the wall again, and he vowed right there and then, Joe wouldn’t. Because Henry, would just be more careful.

UNDISCOVERED NOTION

CHAPTER FIVE

January 18

“It was a government conspiracy!” The one survivor stood in the skills room. He was older, graying, but stout. His voice yelled as if he were trying to be heard a mile away. “The government released the virus. They had too. I said it from the beginning.”

“Oh, shut up!” Another male survivor stood up. “You say this every time it’s your turn to speak. Mr. Slagel, do we have to listen?”

Joe sat legs crossed, a notebook across his lap as he tried not to smile. “Sorry Bill, everyone gets to say their peace. Continue, Gene.” Joe pointed his pencil at the man who first spoke.

“A conspiracy I tell you. They wanted to wipe out mankind and start all over again.”

“With who left?” Bill stood up arguing again. “Even if it was some big conspiracy like you put it, who cares now?”

“I care!” With his thumb, Gene pointed backwards to himself.

“That’s because your more crazier than the rest of us. Now sit down, we’re tired of hearing your old man rantings.”

“Old man?” Gene shouted. “I’ll show you old man.” Grabbing Bill with both hands he tossed him across the floor.

Bill stood up. “I took it easy on you last week.” He dove to Gene and they began to brawl.

“El!” Frank stormed into the skills room in his search for his wife. He spotted Bill and Gene in a twisted wrestle style fist fight, and it annoyed him. Walking further into the room toward his father, he grabbed both men and threw them back away from each other. “Knock off the fighting.” Frank pointed, then proceeded to his father. “Dad, have you . . .” He noticed Joe just smiling. “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“I thought it was funny. Unlike Ellen, I let them go a little like I did when you and your brothers were teenagers. I always stopped it before it warranted an emergency room trip.”

“Dad, have you seen . . .” Frank heard the sound of scuffling behind him again. Irritated and angry, he turned. “Hey! Knock it off now! You!” He pointed to Gene. “Sit over there! And Bill! You over there!” Frank continued in a scolding manner. “I’m trying to talk to my father and you’re being fuckin’ rude!” He ran his hand over his face, took a deep calming breath, and refaced his father. “Anyway, have you seen my wife? I checked her Ellen agenda and . . .”

“She made you an agenda?”

“Yeah. With me having to make sure she’s taking it easy. She’s having my baby, you know. She made the agenda so I can find her.”

“Guess what? It’s not working. She’s not here. Go away, I’m conducting class.”

“I need to check her. It’s important.”

“Frank.” Joe slammed his pencil down. “Christ. Let the woman live. She’s just pregnant. She isn’t the Blessed mother.”

Loud was the gasp of offense that came from Frank. “Oh! You blaspheme. And I’m telling.” He turned to leave. “Someone. I don’t know who. But I am. I’ll try at home.”

“Good idea.” Joe shooed him. The moment that Frank walked out the skills room door, Joe led the survivors in a round of applause.

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“Dean.” Ellen threw her hands in the air. “I have no idea what it is that you want me to look for.” She sat on the floor with Dean in the center of the living room. They had moved the coffee table out of the way to make room for the hordes of paper they had sprawled around them.

“El.” He pointed to the first stack of twenty. “Just go through each sheet, see what we covered in our work that day. See if we missed anything.”

Ellen crossed her legs Indian style. “How am I suppose to know? You tell me what to do.”

“Exactly. I’m checking the formulas we missed. I need you to look over what we did. I think it is something so simple, that I can’t catch it.”

“Is that an insult?”

“No, no.” Dean showed her a sheet of paper. “Look, here’s the formula we’ve been following. Decreasing, increasing. Well, what if somewhere we skipped over the vital one. What if for example, we were supposed to use three drops of water and seven of my Radian mixture. But we didn’t. We moved to the next phase of four and eight. Get it?”

“Shit.” Ellen threw down the paper. “We’ve tried thousands of combinations, Dean. And you’re using nineteen different agents in four steps.”

“Exactly. I think we missed it. I think we missed it early on too.” He showed her another sheet of work. “Notice how since the first of the year our effectiveness has decreased? It’s there. I know it.”

“But that last week of the month, we tried the most combinations. I think you’re wrong. You wouldn’t have skipped something. You’re too thorough.”

“What else could it be?”

“Perhaps you just haven’t found the right combination yet?” She spoke sarcastically.

“Ha-ha-ha.” He looked at his watch. “We still have three hours before the twins get picked up. Let’s use the time . . .”

“El!” With a loud Frank yell, he walked into the house. “El?”

“God, Frank, I’m down here.” She raised up her free hand, not turning around, just wiggling her fingers.

Frank walked around to her. He stopped in shock when he saw the mess on the floor, but more so Dean. “What is going on?”

Ellen rolled her eyes as she barely lifted her head to him. “What does it look like we’re doing. We’re working. We needed the space. Why are you home?”

“Finding you.” Frank snapped. “El, your agenda said you’d be at the lab. You weren’t. You know how vital these pregnancy check ins with me are.”

From her work Ellen looked at Dean who mouthed in question, ‘agenda?’ Ellen just shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“But you’re on the floor.”

“I can sit on the floor, Frank.” Ellen spoke nonchalantly as she sifted through the pages. “Check the list of things I can’t do, it’s on the fridge. Sitting on the floor is not mentioned.”

“I’ll do that.” Frank turned and walked into the kitchen. His faded voice called back. “O.K. you’re right.”

Dean met his glance with Ellen. “He’s neurotic.” He whispered.

Frank came back in. “All right. Now that I know you’re fine. I’m heading back out. Don’t work too hard.” He leaned down again and kissed Ellen. “I’ll be home early.” He started to leave but slid to a stop. “Oh, hey El. Andrea gave me this really great book. I’ve been reading . . .” He noticed both of their heads turned and they looked upon him in astonishment. “I can read.” He snapped at them. “It’s a book on delivering babies. Remind me to show you something in there.”

A sudden surge of fear entered Ellen. “Frank, why are you reading *that* book?”

“El.” He walked to the door. “I’m delivering our kid. You think I’m letting *him* do it.” After pointing to Dean and shaking his head, Frank left.

Ellen turned her attention to a stunned Dean who still stared at the door. “Dean.” She caught his attention, closed her eyes and shook her head. “No.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, Dean relaxed and continued back to work.

“Soon enough it’s gonna have to stop being so weird around here.” Joe looked up to the sky as he stepped from his office that afternoon. He spoke to George as they headed from the utility buildings into town--clipboard in hands.

“Talking about your morning in containment?” George asked.

“Nah. That was funny. This damn weather.”

George removed his jacket as they walked. “It is warm isn’t it? Not a trace of snow.”

“And it’s terrible for morale. You know how the men look forward to it. I guess it’ll happen.” He let out a disappointment breath. “All right. Let’s divvy the afternoon. Distribution or stock?”

“Stock.” George answered. “Divisional reports or tour guide and housing?”

Joe slowed in his walking to think as they approached town. “We do have two survivors getting out. I’ll take the reports. But make sure you give housing to Miguel. Make it temporary though. It won’t be long before those two are back.”

“Shit.” George stopped cold, he looked up and cringed. He faced Joe.

“What?”

“I don’t think the Miguel housing will be temporary. It was brought to my attention to mention it to you, that one of them has found they developed deep feelings for someone else.”

“Why the hell do I care?” Joe said crass. “I run the community not the love lives.”

“Well, let’s say I forgot to tell you Andrea has feelings for . . .”

“Hi, Joe.” Sweetly, almost flirtatiously Andrea approached with a wave and a tilted head.

“You.” George continued with a snicker.

Wide eyed, Joe peered around George to Andrea, then back to George. “Christ.” Shaking his head and tucking his clipboard in his arms, Joe walked to the warehouses.

^^^^

The booming sound of the heavy metal lid being secured on the farm tool bin, didn’t make Henry jump, it made him smile. “Impressive.” He said to Miguel. “Such strength.”

Oddly Miguel looked over his shoulder at Henry as he walked from the bin. “You aren’t hitting on me, are you?”

“Me? No.” Henry shook his head. “I have a proposition for you. Since your break up with Andrea, I know you have been trying to stay busy.”

“I have been trying. Yes.” Miguel said and moved to the next bin. “Potato harvest is not much to keep me busy.”

“And the greenhouses are getting situated, right?”

“Yes.”

“So you may need a little extra of something to occupy that lonely, heartbroken mind.”

“Henry . . .”

“You’re a big guy, Miguel. Strong. Tough.” Henry clenched his fist. “You can utilize those natural physical attributes and, may I add, take things off your mind all at the same time.”

Miguel lifted the steel lid to the next bin and held it open. “What do you have in mind.”

“A secret project. No one is to know. What would you say about using that extra time of yours to tear down and move, I don’t know a, uh . . . thirty foot concrete wall?”

The lid slammed shut with Miguel’s shock.

^^^^

Round up time, Frank called it. Not that he would necessarily be there when everyone was finished being round up, but he felt apart of it. It was his duty, as a husband, father, and father-to-be. Especially with Ellen in her dangerous, delicate state.

After stopping at the Beginnings equivalent of day care to inform Hap, the older worker, that he'd be by to help Ellen, Frank headed to the clinic. He moved up the steps and to the double doors when Andrea came out. "Hey, Andrea." He reached for the door.

"Oh, Frank." Andrea paused on the bottom step. "Do you have a minute?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Yeah. What's up?"

"I know you and I don't see eye to eye."

Frank snickered. "Of course not, Andrea. I'm six-three you're like, five something. And especially not now." He said so serious. "You're down there on that step."

Andrea just looked at him. Hard too. After blinking several times she stepped up to the top to join him. "Anyway . . ." She smiled. "I was wondering if I could bother you for some insight."

"Is it something medical you need help on?"

"Um . . ." Containing her laugh, Andrea's words peeped out. "No." She cleared her throat. "On a personal level. You see, Frank. I was wondering, personally, what you could tell me about your father."

"All right. Let's see. He's like fifty-eight, I think. Brown hair. Glasses. Close to six feet, but I think he shrank. He used to be in the CIA before the . . ."

"No." Andrea held up her hand. "I mean personally. With . . . with women."

"Dog."

"Excuse me?"

"He's a dog. Well, was. Still would be if he could. He was married like eight times and engaged six. Or was it engaged eight. I don't know. Why?"

"Well." Andrea blushed. "I was hoping you'd put in a good word for me. I'm finding myself attracted to your father and . . ." Frank's loud laughter made her stop talking. "Frank?"

Laughing again, Frank turned and opened the clinic door.

^^^^

"No!" Dean raced like a madman across the lab to Ellen who held a dropper over a rack of test tubes. "You putting in too much."

"I am not. I'm putting in the right amount." She ignored him. "Besides, how can you put in too much. I'm doing drops."

"Your drops are too big."

Ellen tried not to laugh. "My drops are too big?"

"Yes, you need to be more gentle." He moved closer. "Here." He slid his hand down her arm to her hand holding it. "Relax your fingers." He cupped his over hers and they took hold of the dropper. "Now don't squeeze, just feel how much pressure I apply to the dropper." He brought their joined hands to above the test tube. "Now see, that is a little drop. You do monstrous drops."

Ellen snickered as she felt him directly against her. "Thanks for the lesson, Dean. I really . . . feel it."

"Why!" Frank's questioning voice bellowed into the lab. "Why is it every time I walk in here, you, Dean, are finding a reason to be up behind my wife. Back off! And in front of my kid, too." Frank pointed to Johnny who sat across the lab.

Johnny looked up from his urine samples. "That's nothing, Dad. You should see the counter action they get going."

Ellen giggled. "It would be the only action I'm getting."

"Dad." Johnny gasped. "Are you not putting out?"

"I can't. I don't want the baby to be deformed. Sex will do that." He hunched at the loud 'what' that came from Ellen. "Yeah, that blood disease you developed. Wait." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. "Prenatal Toxicodendron. Yeah. Look how good I said that."

"Give me this." Ellen snatched it from him "Toxicodendron is the name of the poison ivy plant family."

"No, El. You're wrong." Frank insisted. "Dean told me . . ." Frank's eyes widened. "Dean!"

“You asked.” Dean lifted the beaker. “Now is there something you wanted?”

“Yeah.” Frank answered then stared out. “I . . . shit. I forgot. I’ll come back.” He turned, took a couple steps, stopped and spun around. “Oh!” he blasted out in his remembrance causing a crash when Dean dropped his beaker. “I came to get El.”

“I’m not leaving.” Ellen said. “Johnny’s picking up the twins. We have a lot to finish up on the anti . . . uh, cold strain we’re working on, that’s it.”

Dean interjected. “So walk on over here, Frank. Maybe you’ll catch something.”

“Aren’t you the funny little man..” Frank moved to the door. “Not too late, El. Since I know we can have . . . Sex.” He laughed at Dean’s grunt. “I’m ready to go.”

Dean curled his lip in disgust. “Did I need to hear that?”

“Absolutely.” Arrogantly Frank grinned and walked out.

^^^

Henry pouted, stomped and mumbled like a five year old walking in the tunnels. “Won’t help me.” He carried his tool box. “Fine.” He set it down and ran his hand over the concrete wall. “I’ll do it myself.” He lifted the lid to the tool box and looked at the wall once more. Maybe it *was* a bit neurotic of Henry, but he just couldn’t let it rest. The wires, pipes and lines that ran into that wall sent Henry on a thinking frenzy. After reviewing his ‘theory; list Henry finally figured it out. Secured deeply somewhere in the concrete had to be a type of circuit box. A different type. One so advanced that it sent a signal to the computer component of the second solar generator telling that generator ‘do not shut down’. In all his years as a hospital maintenance engineer in the old world, he had never heard of such a box. But then again, Henry wasn’t dealing with a hospital. Beginnings--A.K.A., ‘The Garfield Project’ was designed by the government. And like Area 51, who knew what else they kept secrete. Henry was certain the special box was one of them. And he had to see this phenomenal box for himself.

Slowly, Henry lifted the tools he brought with him. The average size hammer in his right hand, the chisel in his left. Tapping, oh-so-lightly on the wall from the top, until he heard for himself where he wanted to start. A bit of it everyday, Henry thought, no one would even know he was doing it. Henry placed the chisel to the spot on the wall that he heard through his tapping as hollow. He revved back his hammer.

“Henry!”

Henry jolted, dropping the hammer with an echo. “Oh, hi George.”

“What the hell are you doing?” George walked up to him and snatched the chisel from his hand. “What is going on with you?”

“I uh . . .” He bent down and picked up the hammer. “George. I came up with, like Joe wanted, a logical reason to get into this wall. A box. A special secret circuit box. I really feel it’s buried behind this wall.”

“What are you nuts?” He also snatched the hammer. “The only thing your gonna see if you start breaking up this wall is a big hole.” George waved the hammer in front of Henry’s face. “This is sick Henry, plain and simple. Sick.”

“But George. I feel it George. I feel . . .”

“Psychopathic? Because that is what you are coming off as. Now . . .” With a deep breath George placed the hammer in one of his back pockets and the chisel in the other. “Because I like you Henry. Because I really like you, I will not mention this little masonry incident to Joe. Because as much as you’d like to think, this is not a logically based reason. And . . . I don’t want to see you jeopardize your position on the council. You do know that Andrea is budding for it don’t you?”

“Oh, My God. No.”

“Yes. And she can take it Henry. She’s trying to bed Joe.”

“She’s so devious.”

“She has it in her.” George reached over to the slumping Henry and pulled him with him. “It’s late.

Let's you and me just head on up."

"O.K." He kicked out his foot once and placed his hands in his pockets. "You go on. I have to clean up my stuff."

"Henry." George warned.

"Seriously, George. I'll be right up. Can I have my hammer and chisel back?"

"No." George walked away.

Grumbling and complaining in an uninterpretable manner, Henry picked up his stuff and walked slowly from the tunnels.

^^^^

"Uh-oh." Dean whispered at Ellen. He stopped moving as they entered the living section. "Run."

"Dean, I really don't want to race."

"No." He chuckled. "Henry." He pointed to Henry who could be seen pacing in circles in front of his home staring at the ground. "Don't let him see you, he'll corner you."

"Dean, that's terrible. Something is bothering him. I'll go talk to him."

"Yeah." Dean grinned. "Occupy him while I make the escape. See ya." He gave a pat to her back. "Good job. Tonight."

Surprised at Dean's lack of concern for a fellow Beginnings resident, Ellen vowed she wouldn't be like that. Slowly, she approached Henry. "Hey, Henry."

He stopped pacing and looked up. "El."

"Did you lose something?"

"My mind."

"Huh?"

Sadly closing his mouth, Henry shook his head. "Nothing. You'll think I'm as nuts as everyone else."

"Try me, Henry. I'm used to working with insane people."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded and folded her arms.

"This is it." Henry's voice echoed in the tunnel.

"So did you tell Joe and George what you told me?" Ellen stared at the wall.

"Of course I did. They think I've gone ballistic. They gave me strict orders to leave the wall alone."

"I don't understand why that is? So what if you want to see what this box thing is. They should believe you, you are way too rational to go overboard on something without good reason."

Henry's shoulders released in relief. "Thank you, Ellen."

"Of course I don't know a damn thing about current boxes or such. But . . . I do know you." Ellen leaned against Henry's wall. "So what are you gonna do now?"

"I haven't a clue. They won't let me pound a hole in it. They said if I keep obsessing over it, it's going to reflect on my council status."

"Oh that is such bullshit. Did Joe say this to you?"

"No, George did."

"George probably knows what's behind this wall. He was the president you know, and the government did build this place."

"No, that's not it." Henry leaned on the wall next to Ellen. "Andrea's budding for my position on Council, and you know her and Joe are close. If she comes off more rational than me . . ."

"Andrea is always in everyone's business." Ellen shook her head. "Anyway I don't see what the harm would be if you put a little hole in this wall. It's not like you won't fix it."

"Exactly." Henry held out his hand.

“You know what, Henry?” Ellen turned her body, resting her shoulder on the wall as she faced him. “This can’t be the only hidden thing here. Did you check all of the wire connections?”

“No. That could take forever. I lucked out with this one.” Henry noticed the look on Ellen’s face. “What? What are you thinking?”

“Well . . . what if . . . what if you were to start searching. The whole place of Beginnings. See if you find anything weird. That way you have secondary proof about this wall and you can investigate it without them thinking you’re a loon.”

“That would take a lot.”

Ellen snapped her finger. “I can help you.”

“We can look in our spare time. Make it a full fledged thing. Will you really?”

“I’d love to. I always thought I’d make a good detective.” Ellen smiled. “You too, Henry, you have that knack.”

“Thanks. And we may just find something that will give me the answer to this wall without tearing it down.”

“Like some secret plans hidden somewhere.” Ellen raised her eyebrows. “Imagine what you could find. Have any of us really searched this place?”

“No. We just assumed what we saw is what we got.”

“Obviously not.” She knocked on the wall. “This proves it. And . . . we’ll have fun. Kinda break the monotony of this boring place.”

“What if we don’t find anything?”

“Oh, come on Henry, this place was designed and built by the United States Government. You can’t honestly believe they’d only put one really cool invention in this place that we don’t know about. Do you? No way. Beginnings will be calling us, Christopher and Christina Columbus. Because, we, Henry, are gonna make the biggest discovery yet.”

“Yeah.” Henry smiled. Though him and Ellen sounded like something from a bad detective movie, she was someone that believed in him, and that was all Henry ever wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

February 8

Dean sort of heard the light tapping at the lab window. The steady noise sounding like spraying pebbles against the pane of glass. He heard it yet it stayed deep in his mind as he leaned slumped over the counter holding up the top of his hair with his hand. He was alone in the quiet clinic. In fact he probably was the only one in the entire community of Beginnings that wasn't tucked safely in their house for the night.

The high pitch of the wind that blew furiously outside was muffled by the cassette player, playing. He did hear the second back-up being completed in his files, after removing the disks, he returned to the huge journal before him. Flipping each page slowly, Dean seemed to move within his own world inside that laboratory. Nothing, absolutely nothing else mattered.

Lifting a section of shell bread to his mouth, he'd bite, read, swallow, read. A pattern he had done for hours. "It has to be somewhere." Dean flipped the page, speaking to himself, biting his bread. "Where is it? You are on one of these eight pages." He looked up to the agents awaiting him on the counter then lowered them back to the pages under him. He turned back three and brushed the crumbs from his mouth with the back of his hand. "God, why am I eating such dry bread." He tried to clear his throat. "I'm out of drinking water . . ." He slowly looked back up to the counter. "No . . . It can't be that simple." He peered down to the page he was on then back to the counter. "No." Excitedly he jumped from his stool catching his foot in the metal bar on the bottom, and tripping over it crashing the stool to the hard floor. Dean ran to the counter and began to add the formula together in the beaker he had waiting. He grabbed the beaker in his hand and swished the contents around several times. Nervous, and hoping, Dean filled a dropper of his newest mixture and added it to the lined up test tubes. He chose only one, the first one and added a few drops. It wasn't the number of drops, at *that* point it had to be the solution.

Tapping his foot, he looked down at his watch. Five minutes he had to wait. How long that would seem. As he waited on the time he finally looked to the window of the lab that faced outside. "Wow, is it snowing?" Thinking about going to see how really bad it was getting out, Dean stopped and walked back over to his counter and waited. The snow would still be there the moment at hand was one he had waited years for.

The five minutes was up. Carefully, so in his excitement he didn't break it, he lifted the test tube. Grabbing a clean dropper, he added a few drops of the thick solution to a prepared slide. The slide with the sticker on it that read--'Eb-2V'. Covering that slide with another, he slowly lifted it and set it under the microscope connected to his computer. He brought the image to the screen.

Watching it for only thirty seconds, Dean's head dropped, and his eyes closed. "Thank you." He lifted up, standing tall, and his arms and voice raised up. "Yes! Thank you!"

His body turned back and forth in his joy, but there was no one to turn to. He was alone. "El." Overcome with emotions he grabbed his coat, put it on as he ran out the lab, down the hall and to the double glass doors of the clinic. As Dean's small body flung into the doors, he bounced right back when the doors didn't open. Knowing that they weren't locked, he picked himself up off the floor. Any pain he should have felt was numb and lost in his enthusiasms. He stared at the doors. They weren't locked. They just wouldn't open. The snow had come down so hard while he worked, that a four foot snow drift had blown against the clinic doors, barricading him in. The ice that formed around the edges added to any impossible chance he would have had to push his way out. "Shit." Dean rubbed his head as he leaned against the cold glass.

He gave himself a moment there, staring out into the baron streets of Beginnings. He knew he had to get out. It was a time in his life that he wanted to share with someone. But how? Dean walked back to the lab to think of a solution. He always did his best thinking there.

“Frank.” Ellen walked in to her bedroom. “Will you *please* get away from that window?”

“El, this is so great.” He peered out, having the curtain pulled all the way out. “That blizzard was bad. There must be three feet of snow out there.”

“Swell.” Ellen moved to the bed and began to turn it down. “The twins are finally asleep.”

“Good.” His attention stayed at the winter wonderland just outside. “Hey El, let me take them out in this tomorrow.”

“Now way, if there’s three feet of snow they’ll get lost. They’re only three feet tall.”

Frank began to laugh. “Yeah, it’ll be funny watching them try to move.”

“You’re sadistic.” Ellen climbed into bed. “Are you coming? It’s late. What time are you doing the snow removal?”

“I told my guys about four a.m.”

“Then come to bed.”

“This is so great out there. I bet I can climb from this window and hang jump without breaking anything.” Frank was like a little kid watching the snow.

“You do that, Frank.” She shook her head. “But right now come to bed. You have to be tired.”

“Nah, I’m full of energy.” Frank walked to bed and fluffed his pillow before laying down with a plop on the bed.

“Well . . .” Ellen said seductively, laying on her side. “If you’re full of energy . . .” She trailed her fingers up his chest. “I have a . . .”

“I was thinking.”

Groaning, Ellen dropped backwards. “God.”

“No, I can think. Check this out. I came up for a name for our baby. Ready.” He nodded with excitement. “Brian. Brian Slagel. What do you think? I can hear it now. Ladies and Gentlemen. Quarterback, Brain Slagel.”

At first Ellen just looked at him. “Who exactly is he going to play football for? And what if this kid hates playing sports, and guns, and macho shit. What if he’s not big . . .”

“El, Please!” Frank stopped her train of thought. “He’s my kid, look at Johnny. Brian will be huge. He’s gonna be just like me.”

“Frank!”

“What? God, yell at me why don’t you.”

“Can we just fool around please. Please.” She reached up pulling him down with her. “Because.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “It won’t be long before you can’t put your body on mine. You won’t be able to feel me under you. Or . . .” Her hands began to roam his body. “Feel my hands slide across your . . .” Her words were halted with Frank’s lips and he began to kiss her.

A hiss of static from the radio, then came a voice. “Frank. Frank come in please.”

Frank slightly lifted his lips from Ellen. His face crinkled in a cringe. “Why am I hearing Dean’s voice in our bedroom?”

“Frank, come in.” Dean called out. “I know you’re listening.”

Frank pulled himself up from Ellen. “This better be important.” He grabbed his radio from the night stand. “What!”

“Frank, I’m stuck. I’m at the clinic.”

“Can’t help you Dean. I know I’m great at everything, but that’s your field.”

“Oh, you’re so funny. Ha, ha, ha.” Dean’s voice was agitated. “No, Frank. I’m stuck. There’s a drift at the doors and I can’t get out. I need you to come and get me right now.”

“Sorry, Dean.” Frank chuckled arrogantly. “Gonna have to wait. We’re digging out the snow at four.”

“No, Frank. I need you to come right now.”

Frank scoffed. “Tough. Right now is out of the question. I’m making love to my wife.”

“I can wait a few minutes.”

“Oh, just for that. Find a bed in the clinic and I’ll see you in about five hours.” Frank put the radio on the night stand.

Dean’s voice continued. “I’m not in the mood for this shit. It’s your job, Frank. You have to now. Quit playing around and come get me out!”

“Dean!” Frank snatched up the radio again. “It’s not my job to get out of bed from a very intimate moment with my wife to save your ass. Didn’t I tell you to leave the clinic early? Didn’t I tell you it was gonna be bad? I told you not to hang around because it looked like a blizzard. But no, you stayed anyway and now you’re stuck. Well guess what? Tough. See you at four.” Frank put the radio down and began to kiss Ellen again.

“Fine, Frank.” Dean spoke calmly. “I have all night. And you know what? You have to leave your radio on. I’ll just keep on talking. You can’t tune me out.”

Frank did. He removed his Ellen’s shirt as he pressed bare chest to bare chest, continuing in his lovemaking.

“Frank . . . Frank . . . Frank . . . I’ll sing.” Dean kept pestering. “Or better yet, maybe I’ll just start talking about some of the moments Ellen and I shared. Let’s see there was our first time. I still remember as if it happened yesterday. Let me share with you the details. First the camp fire . . .”

“Dean!” Frank shouted into the radio. “Shut up. I’m on my way.”

^^^

Frank loved driving the snow plow and he had it waiting outside his house so he could just jump in it. The plow could have been quieter but Frank did everything in his power to make sure it wasn’t.

Dean was so mesmerized with his results on his computer screen that he didn’t even hear the loud rumbling of Frank’s arrival. What he *did* hear was the loud thump on the lab window. He turned his head to the noise and saw a smashed snowball run down the glass leaving a wet trail. That vision was immediately followed by Frank who pressed his cheek tight against the window, lifted back, then ‘huffed’ against the glass to fog it. After Frank’s hand wiped the fog away he waved to Dean to come to the window.

“How immature.” Dean stood from his stool. “What?”

“Open up.” Frank mimed opening a window.

Dean did as instructed and opened the window part way. “What?”

Frank lifted it all the way up. “Step back.”

“You aren’t climbing in here, are you?”

“Move.” Frank’s top portion of his body emerged through.

“You can’t climb in here, Frank. You’ll get everything . . .”

Frank slid and crashed to the floor, bringing in a ton of snow.

“ . . . wet.” Dean threw his hands up and shut the window. “Why did you do that? Now we’re both stuck.”

“Hardly.” Frank brushed himself off throwing even more moisture around. He started to walk across the lab, he slowed at the computer. “Weird picture. Grab your coat.” He shook his head and walked out.

“Frank.” Dean followed, snatching up his coat and putting it on as he chased Frank down the clinic hall. “It’s useless, those doors . . . Hey, you cleared away the snow. Good job.”

“Thanks.” Frank stood hands on hips, his back faced Dean.

“But it’s still no good. Those doors are frozen shut.” He watched Frank’s head look up and down at the doors. “I tried but I couldn’t budge them.”

With a quiet ‘ha’. Frank faced Dean. He took off his gloves and handed them to him. “Here, hold these.” Frank clenched his fist and lifted it to the door. He began to pound his hand once in various places on the metal. He rubbed his hands together and pulled on the door, with bits of flying ice, it opened. He held it and looked at Dean. “You are so weak.” He grabbed his gloves from Dean.

“What in the world did your father feed you as a child? Incredible Hulk vitamins?” Dean zippered up

his coat. "Thanks Frank. See ya." He ran out.

"Hey!" Frank yelled out to Dean who was running down the just plowed path. "Where are you going? Your lab stuff is still on."

"I'll be back." He answered from a distance. "I'm going to your house."

"Oh." Frank shut the clinic doors. "My house?"

^^^

"Ellen." Dean flew through the front door to her home. "Ellen!" His voice was excited as he called out.

"Dean?" Ellen came down the steps. "What are you doing here?"

Dean smiled, probably the biggest smile he could ever have. He ran to Ellen as she stepped down the last step and picked her up and hugged her.

"Hey!" Frank shouted from the open front door, then he slammed it. "Put her down, she's pregnant!"

"Sorry." Dean set Ellen gently down. "El." He placed his cold hands on her cheeks and moved his face close to hers. "I . . . no, we . . . we did it."

In a whisper, Ellen spoke in shock. "We did it?"

"It's finally over."

"Oh, Dean I am so proud of you." Happy, Ellen threw her arms around his neck and embraced him tightly.

"We did it El. I couldn't have done it with out your help."

Ellen released a little from the embrace, but her excitement drew her back in, she shrieked with joy as she hugged him again.

"Enough!" Frank stepped closer separating them. "What the hell is going on?"

Ellen looked at Frank then to Dean. "Should we tell him?"

Dean nodded.

"Frank." Ellen wrung her hands and grabbed Frank's. "Look at me I'm shaking. Frank, we beat the plague."

"What are you talking about?" Frank asked.

"We beat it. Tell him Dean. Tell him what this means."

"It means it's over." Dean said. "It can't hurt us anymore. We beat it, or at least know how to beat it. Any baby born now, not immune, *will* live."

"Wow." Frank ran his hand over his head stunned. "El, this is really great. I didn't know you were working on that."

"No one did. We didn't want anyone's hopes up. Or anyone mad for working on it." She kissed Frank on the cheek then faced Dean, lifting her bangs from her eyes. "Where did you find it? How?"

"El." Dean shook his head speaking fast. "It was so simple I can't believe we missed it. So simple. We were thinking too hard. Remember solution seventy-three?" He saw Ellen nod. "That was the one. I went over the books. I was reading our results. Remember how it had a really high success rate and we couldn't figure out why it wouldn't get any stronger?"

Frank snickered. "What? Did you guys like, dilute it too much?"

Dean moved his hand to Frank. "There you have it. I told you we were thinking too hard. We added water. The solution in a non-diluted state was fine."

Ellen laughed in disbelief. "We added too much water?"

Frank snickered even more as he took off his coat. "The big mind of the little man scientist fails. You guys should have called me sooner. Look how fast I thought of that. Just like . . ." Frank snapped. "That."

Dean didn't care what Frank said, he was in much too good of a mood. "You're the genius Frank. El, I'm heading back to the lab. Stop by in the morning. We still have to figure out dosages and create the actual anti-serum before we let everyone know. So, Frank . . ." He turned to Frank who appeared to be

gloating. "Please don't say anything yet."

"Not a problem." Frank said as he walked in his livingroom.

"I'm leaving, El. Thanks again." Dean grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "The nightmare is finally over. Too bad it's not six years earlier huh?"

Just as Ellen was about to agree, Frank spoke up. "He wouldn't have done it six years ago. He couldn't have."

Sharply Dean turned to him. "I resent that. Why do you say that?"

"Because. That root shit you send us out for, the stuff they grow for you in the special green house, that's all stuff you used, right?"

"Right." Dean nodded.

"Well, would you have been using them six years ago?" Frank asked.

Speechless. Dean didn't know what to say at first. His mouth dropped open. "He's right."

"I am." Frank agreed arrogantly.

Shaking his head, Dean moved to the door. He stopped in his leaving. "I guess when you actually think about it, it makes sense, an eerie sense. Man used his own chemicals to create the virus that wiped out mankind. But it took God's nature to beat it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

March 3

With a whispering sound, Henry peeked his head into the skills room to get Ellen's attention. "Psst." He had to do it several times.

Finally, Ellen looked up from leaning over Gene's shoulder. She smiled brightly at Henry, held up one finger then walked over to Frank. Frank sat in a chair, corner of the room, legs spread, hands between them and his head rested back. She kicked his foot. "Frank?"

"Hold on." He looked up to Ellen. "What's up?"

"I'm going to talk to Henry. Keep an eye on things in here."

"No problem." He return to speaking in his headset softly. "So what was that?"

Shaking her head and laughing Ellen met Henry in the doorway. "What's up?"

"I brought you a surprise." He showed her a cloth bag. "Why is Frank sitting in there?"

"Oh, get this. Frank is my new Wednesday guard. Only I can't get the survivors to do anything they are to afraid of him. So now, Wednesdays are shot."

Henry looked into Frank, he saw him shaking his head and his mouth moving. "Is he talking to himself?"

"No, I think to Dan. He does that all day checking up on people. The survivors really think he's whacked. That makes them even more scared." She took hold of Henry's arm and walked with him. "Come to my office with me."

"I brought you rice cakes." He handed her a small cloth sack as they walked in her office.

"Oh, Henry. I love these." Immediately Ellen began picking at them as she sat down behind her desk. "So what's up?"

"Two things." Henry sat down in a chair before her desk. "Are we still on for tonight. We have the field house to investigate."

"Without a doubt. I'll dress warmly."

"Do that. And the other thing." Henry showed nervousness. "George saw us coming out of the bakery at ten o'clock last night. So . . . so I lied to cover up. I told him I was finding a reason to be alone with you because I liked you."

"Good one, Henry."

"But my concern lies with Frank. What happens if he finds out this little . . ."

It wasn't Ellen's voice that interrupted Henry. It was too gruff and sandy. "Oh most definitely . . . he will hurt you." George entered. "Crush you, Henry, like a bug."

Ellen's mind raced as her heart beat. "Oh um, hey, George. What's up?"

"I saw Henry coming here and I have to talk to you both." George crossed his arms. "You know me. I tend to butt out of everyone's business. But I see warning flags going up. I'm sorry to do this to you Henry, but, Ellen do you know how he feels?"

"I do." She smiled flirtatious at Henry. "Isn't it cute?"

"Cute?" George questioned.

"Who's cute?" Joe asked as he walked in the office.

"Henry." Ellen pointed. "He has a crush on me."

At the point where Henry's head plopped forward to Ellen's desk, Joe laughed. "A crush? You have a crush on Ellen?" Joe shook his head. "No wonder you're hanging around her so much. What better way to stop being attracted to Ellen than to spend time with her." He laughed harder and smacked Henry on the back.

Ellen gasped. "I can't believe you said that about me."

"I'm having fun with you." Joe walked around the desk and kissed her. "Lighten up, it's not good for the baby. And Henry, get over it fast before Frank find out and kills you."

"Who's Frank going to kill now?" Dean asked as he too waltzed into Ellen's office.

Ellen's threw her hands up. "What is this invade Ellen time?"

Joe still laughing, moved from Ellen. "Frank's gonna kill Henry. Seems he has a crush on Ellen."

Henry reached the point that not only was his head on Ellen's desk, but buried beneath his arms as well.

"Henry has a crush on Ellen?" Dean snickered shaking his head. "Henry, I thought you knew her better."

"Enough." Ellen's hands slammed to her desk as she stood. "Now why are all you people here. Is some major event going to happen that I don't know about?"

"Son of a bitch!" Frank's voice was heard loud and clear blasting from the skills room. The sound of panicking, screaming survivors, and trampling feet, immediately followed as they ran amuck.

"I spoke too soon." Ellen scurried from behind her desk. "Oh God, what did he do to them?" She waited for the stampede to pass her in the hall then she darted Frank's way. As she slid into the skills room, she saw Frank standing center, shaking his head, one hand on his hip.

"You have to be kidding me." Frank paced angrily in circles talking to the microphone in the headset. "No. No!. I'll take care of this." He snapped the headset off and looked up. He had an audience. "Where'd everyone go?"

"You frightened them, Frank." Ellen led the office crew into the skills room. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, get this." Frank shook his head in disgust. "There's a survivor at the front gate."

"The front gate?" They all asked together.

"Yes." Frank looked at them like they hadn't heard him the first time. "Can you believe it? The first nice day we have, the first nice day and one of them find us. We're in the middle of Montana. Can someone explain this to me?" Frank began to storm from the skills room. "Now I have to go march my ass up there, possibly let the psycho in, and haul his ass back here." His complaining faded down the hall with his heavy marching boots. "The middle of Montana. Not only does he find us. But he finds the hardest gate. What? Do the survivors have a bulletin board posted."

^^^

Frank was in no hurry. Why would he be? This person was invading *his* front gate without an invitation. He took the jeep up the roadway closer to the tunnel, parking at the end. He could have driven through, but his mood dictated he walk, possibly cool down by the time he reached the tunnel's end. He had a tendency to scare the survivors and had a hard time figuring out why.

As soon as Frank entered the dark tunnel he could see the figure at the far end. "Hey!" Frank yelled out to him and began to trot when he saw the person reaching out. "Don't touch that gate! Your ass will get fried, and I'm not in the mood to be scraping you up!"

"I apologize." The soft male voice called out. "I should have known."

Frank saw him. He stopped three feet from the gate at the vision of the man. His tall body covered by the long green hooded coat. The yellow trim caught Frank's eye--A man wearing yellow. The man, slightly balding, wearing round wire rim glasses held a duffel bag in one hand, and strapped across his other shoulder, a sack with cardboard tubes. "Stay back from the fence." Frank approached him pulling out his revolver.

"Don't shoot me, I've come a long way."

"You all do. And I'm not gonna shoot you, just step back from the fence." He held his gun up.

The man stepped back.

Frank checked out the uninvited visitor. He looked harmless enough. Speaking into his headset, he called to security. "Down the front." After the buzz of the downing fence, Frank reached for his keys.

"I realize this must be a shock." The man said. "I may be late. I've run into some difficulty."

Frank laughed to himself at the man. Shaking his head as he opened the gate.

"Thank you." He showed Frank his duffel bag.

"What? Carry you own goddamn bags!" Frank scolded. "What do you think I am, your boy?"

Taken aback, the stranger moved away holding his chest. His face looked shocked. "Before we go any further. I must know . . ." His head tilted. "I must know."

"Must know what?" Frank grew perturbed.

"Is this the Garfield project?"

Frank's mouth dropped. "What did you just say?"

The man looked as if he was catching his breath. His head began to sway and he reached to Frank to catch his balance. "I said . . . is this the Garfield Project?"

^^^^

"God Frank, What the hell did you do to him?" Dean stood over the survivor in the clinic.

"I didn't do anything to him. I told you the goof passed out." Frank waved his hand in front of the unconscious man who now laid in the bed. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know." Dean shook his head. "Possibly exhaustion, we're going to have to run some test." Dean noticed Joe and George standing in the doorway. "You two can come."

Joe stepped closer to the man. "Looks like he was warned about us. He tried to clean himself up."

Frank snickered. "You should have seen his coat. It had yellow trim."

Andrea entered the room, speaking as she did. "I think we may have a strange one on our hands. In fact when he wakes up, he may be too unbalanced to keep."

Everyone turned to her.

Joe spoke up to question. "Why do you say that?"

"Well." She held up a black wallet. "Look what he had in his pants. A wallet. Complete with cash, credit cards, drivers license. The works." She showed it about. "He's definitely delusional. And his name is Chester Arnold Nelson. Thirty-five years old. From Washington D.C."

Frank suddenly snapped to attention. "So that explains why he said that. He's from Washington D.C."

Joe hated when Frank did that. Said things that made absolutely no sense to anyone that was listening. "Frank, what the hell are you talking about?"

"This Chester guy. When I let him in, he asked if this was the Garfield project. It took me back. But then it makes sense. He probably raided the White House and found out about it."

Joe quickly turned to George. "Did you leave any information behind?"

"I uh . . . yes. Yes I did." George stuttered. "Who would have thought. I mean all of us in the shelter had a copy of the plan. I merely took mine."

Joe threw his hands up. "That explains it then. The guy probably is delusional."

Frank's loud grunt was heard. "A complete whack job. Get this, I open up the fence and the guy hands me his duffel bag to carry. He's lucky I didn't throw him back out for being a moron."

Dean's head shifted back and forth as he placed the stethoscope to Chester's chest. "You can't throw people out for being a moron Frank. If we could, who would be running security?"

Frank stormed over to him, grabbed the bottom of the stethoscope that was on Chester and brought it to his lips. "Hey!"

"God." Dean flung off the stethoscope. "There's something wrong with you."

Giving a snick sadistic laugh at the thought of irritating Dean, Frank left the room. He wanted to go to containment.

The laughing from Ellen's office made its way down the containment hall to Frank as he approached. "At least some people are having fun and not working today." He peeked in Ellen's doorway.

"Frank." Ellen looked up from her desk and the bowl there. "How's the person at the gate?"

"Don't ask." Frank walked in. "Henry, don't you have a job to do?"

“Yes I do. You know that.” Henry rolled his eyes at Ellen. “However, we’re having lunch and I was waiting for you. El and I were curious about this person at the front gate.”

After peeking at the contents of the bowls they ate from, Frank reached to steal a noodle, but his hand was smacked by Ellen. He gave up. “The guy’s a lunatic.” he pulled up a chair and sat down. “I go to the tunnel right? There’s this guy, wearing this green coat, not just green, but check this out, it had yellow trim. The whole country before him and he picks a coat with yellow trim. So I figure . . . Pansy. Harmless. I let him in. And he hands me his bag. I very politely tell him to carry his own bags. And he asks me, is this the Garfield project. Then he passed out. I had to carry him.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. “Oh my God.” She hurried and looked at Henry. “Henry, you don’t think?”

“Could be the real thing, El.” Henry nodded. “Time door.”

“Travel way.”

“He did say the Garfield project.”

“He knows.” Ellen nodded.

“Let’s go.” Henry jumped up and so did Ellen. Both of them flew from the office.

“Hey!” Frank called out turning in his chair. “Great. They up and leave to see some passed out guy who wears yellow trim. But . . .” Frank smiled. “They left me lunch.” Pulling the two bowls to him, Frank, like Goldie Locks, claimed Ellen and Henry’s food. The noodles were bland and cold, but he was hungry and they were a treat. A small consolation in retrospect of carrying the heavy stranger with a bad coat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

March 4

Ellen checked her list, and was actually grateful to Dean for not giving her too many arms to prick for blood. She was tired, and when Ellen got tired, she lost her focus. Making it somewhat uncomfortable for any patients that have to feel the wrath of her needle setting forth.

She tried to make herself more awake on this morning. She would have had more coffee, but Frank always had it ready to go and he hid the rest of it. 'Limiting your caffeine intake' he'd huff at her. So in a zombie-like state she dressed, got the twins off to school and arrived at the clinic. She was sure she fell asleep somewhere in her journeys, but wasn't certain when.

The easiest was saved for last, Chester. There was nothing Ellen like more than an unconscious patient. Curious about the stranger, and checking her tray of supplies one more time, Ellen walked into Chester's room. She slowed down in surprise when she saw George sitting there. "George, why are you here? It's only eight o'clock."

George stretched and stood from the chair. "I just wanted to speak to the guy about what he knew about the Garfield project. But, he's not awake."

"Maybe he will be after I stick him." Ellen set the tray on Chester's legs and rummaged through for her stuff.

"Let me know if he does." George began to leave the room. "Have a good one."

"You, too." Ellen lifted Chester's arm applied alcohol. She looked at the cloth that had wiped him off, it was clean. "Weird." She shrugged and placed a tourniquet on his arm then stuck him with the needle. "So my husband says you wear yellow trim?" She leaned closer to his ear. "Bad choice." She removed the tube of blood from the hub and added an empty one. "Almost done. Now aren't I gentle?" Finishing up, she wrote his name across each tube and placed them in the tray. As she lifted it and turned she saw his glasses on the stand next to the bed, she picked them up. They looked odd to her, setting them down it dawned on her--Chester looked odd to her. Placing the tray on the floor, Ellen began to do her own visual observation of the newcomer.

"Molesting patients while they sleep, again, I see." Joe called out to her as he stepped in the room.

"Joe." Ellen jumped and released the blanket she was lifting. "You scared me."

"Ellen why are you looking at that man?"

"Have *you* Joe?"

"No." Joe mad a face and shook his head. "I don't make it a habit to peek under the sheets of sleeping men."

"Stop it. Have you noticed him? Look at him. Look at his hair." Ellen pointed. "It's cut. Very neatly trimmed. And his face, shaven, or at least it was. And do you know when I rubbed the alcohol over his arm, there wasn't any dirt?"

"So what Ellen, where are you going with this? He cleaned up before he arrived."

"I'm just saying how odd he is. His glasses." She picked them up. "Not a scratch on the lenses. They aren't bent. And his hands, not a callous on them. Everyone here has hands that looked worked. Even Dean."

"Dean's hands are not the hands of a worker."

"Yes, they are. Even mine are and I don't work that hard." She showed him. "See. This man is in impeccably good, unscathed condition for living in the wilderness for almost six years."

"That's where he's been." Joe moved closer. "Where in the hell else do you think he came from? Outer space?" He noticed her mouth opening. "Jesus Christ, he's not an alien." He shook his head.

"Well." Very snooty Ellen picked up her tray. "I can see you aren't in the mood for anyone else's opinion."

"Ellen, you think the man's an alien."

"I'll just leave." She hugged her tray and began to walk out. "I think I'll go to the lab and take a

nap.”

“Yeah, yeah, you do that.” Joe grumbled as he pulled a chair closer to Chester’s bed. He paused before sitting down. “There all gone, I tell ya. Every single resident.” He picked up the pair of good condition eye glasses. Scoffing a laugh, Joe set them down. “Looks like you’re gonna fit right in.”

^^^

They seemed so far away. That simple duffle bag and knapsack with cardboard rolls. But there were a mere few feet from Henry, only the wire of the storage walls separated them. He stared at Chester’s belongings, knowing they held answers about the man who mysteriously showed up asking about the Garfield Project. Answers Henry wanted so desperately to have. He knew he could peek at the things Chester brought, but doing so meant going into storage, and that meant breaking rules.

Moment after moment Henry mind-argued with himself, and just when he justified his examination of the articles. Frank waked in.

“I know there’s a good reason you’re reaching for that padlock.” Frank stated.

“There is.” Henry released the lock. “I was checking it.”

“I see.” Frank stepped closer. “You weren’t by any chance trying to get to that duffle bag and knapsack, were you?”

“Who me?” Henry nervously laughed. “No. No. But . . .” he looked at Frank. “With him asking about the Garfield project, don’t you wonder if he brought anything, I don’t know . . . odd, with him. Something no one else would have.”

“Don’t need to wonder. I know. He did.”

“He did?” Henry questioned. “How do you know?”

“I looked in his bag.” Frank stood proudly. “I’m security. It’s my job to check his stuff.”

“And you found something odd. Something you normally wouldn’t see.”

“Oh yeah, absolutely. I found. Get this. A collection of . . .” Very seriously Frank leaned closer to Henry and whispered as if others were actually around. “A collection of striped golf shirts. How do you like that. Like he’s gonna golf.”

Upon Frank’s words, and after a quick look to the cage that held Chester’s stuff, Henry just left.

^^^

The smell of coffee was the thing that awakened Ellen from her sleep. The warm fresh aroma, the slight steam causing the moisture on the tip of her nose. With heavy eyes, she lifted up her head.

“Have a good nap?” Dean set the mug down.

Ellen groggily looked at her watched and her head snapped up. “Shit.” She removed her hair from her eyes. “I can’t believe I slept that long. On my arm too.” She reached for the mug, but stopped to feel her face. “I bet I have a red mark.”

Dean stared past the dreaded red mark of sleep on her face. “No, not at all.”

“Liar.”

He laughed. “It’s cute.” He moved closer to her. “Look what I did for you.” He pointed to the counter right above where her head was laying, then reached around her and picked up a slide.

“You did my smears, thank you.” From the slide, Ellen’s views shifted. She noticed his hand in front of her. She took hold of it and began to examine it.

“What are you doing?” Dean asked.

Ellen took the slide from his hand and looked at his palm. “See you do have callouses. I told Joe.”

“You and Joe were discussing my callouses?”

“It’s a long story.” She kept staring at his hand and she ran her fingers over it. “You have really great hands, Dean. I don’t think I’ve never noticed that before.”

Dean opened his hand extending his fingers. “Great hands, huh?” He moved his lips close to her ear.

“Great hands, you said once I had great lips. Imagine what I could do for you.”

Both laughing at his flirtatious comment, they stopped, and together, both of them, swayed their heads to the door. Just to make sure.

Ellen relaxed in relief. “I thought for sure Frank would be standing there.”

“He does have an impeccable sense of timing doesn’t he?”

“I think he has radar on me.” Ellen finished her coffee. “I better go. I want to get to containment today early.” As she stood from the stool and began to step away, her foot got caught and she started to lose her balance. She felt Dean quickly snatch her back.

“Whatever you do, don’t fall in here Ellen, or Frank will have the lab off limits too.”

Ellen began to chuckle shaking her head. “This is so weird.” She stopped laughing, and grabbed her small stomach.

“What is?”

“This baby. He started kicking and hasn’t stopped. He totally jumped out of the flutter stage.”

“Is he kicking now?”

Ellen nodded.

“Can I feel? I always thought that was neat.” He waited for her approval and stepped in closer to behind her. He slid his hand down around the front of her to her belly. “There. I felt that.”

“There it is again.” Ellen moved his hand to the kick.

Dean, one hand on Ellen’s shoulder, the other one on her twitching stomach, smiled. “This is neat. I can’t believe Frank gets this.”

Once again, his timing was right on. Frank walked in, vocal as usual. “All right. I can remain calm here. I don’t like what I see. So remaining calm . . . Dean, get your fuckin hands off my wife.”

Dean’s hand raised in reaction and he stepped back. “Sorry Frank, I was just feeling the baby.”

“El? Why are you letting him feel my son?” Frank moved to her and hunched to her level. “You look tired.”

Dean shouted from across the room. “She shouldn’t be, she slept on the counter again.”

Ellen dreaded that coming out. She gave a dirty look to Dean. “Thanks, Dean for . . .”

“El.” Frank interrupted. “Why were you sleeping on the counter. Is he working you too hard?”

Dean didn’t let Ellen answer. “Yeah, I’m the regular slave driver around here.”

Frank’s head swayed back and forth. “Why does he have to butt into *our* conversation.”

“Because your in *my* lab.” Dean replied.

Frank turned his views to Dean. “I wouldn’t be having conversations with *my* wife in *your* lab if you didn’t have to have her in here all the time. *Touching* her all the time.”

Dean laughed arrogantly at him as he continued his work. “Yeah, that’s why I bring her in here. To grope at your pregnant wife. Live out my fantasies. How many times do I have to tell you, Frank, I don’t need fantasies. I have memories. Besides, someone has to stimulate her intellectually.”

“You know . . .” Frank’s huge handed pointed outward. “I come in here, I remain calm. I try to be civilized. But no, you want to trade insults with me.”

“No, Frank I don’t. It would be inane, not to mention frustrating to me to get into a battle of wits with someone who still enjoys reading, ‘See Spot Run’.”

“That’s it. Calms over.” Frank charged forth. “Let’s see Dean Run.”

As Dean began to back up, Ellen, in a heroic move, grasped tightly to the back of Frank’s pants. She slid along with each step Frank took. “Go, Dean, run. I’ll hold him back.”

“Dean!” Henry bolted in, stopping the tension, being in his own way superman for saving the day. “That guy is waking up.”

Forgetting that there was even an argument starting, Dean stopped running from Frank and took off down the hall towards Chester’s room.

Frank, deciding that Joe would want to be there to find out about the survivor, pressed in his wireless on his belt as he and Ellen walked down the hall. “Dad, this if Frank. Come in.”

“Yeah, Frank?” Joe spoke into his radio, stepping out of Andrea’s office as he did. He spotted Frank

a few feet away and put down his radio. "What's up?"

"That guy." Frank continued speaking in his headset. "The one with the yellow . . ."

"Frank! I'm right here."

"Oh." Frank released the button. "Sorry. Chester's awake."

^^^

Chester groggily reached for his glasses and placed them on. It was an eerie sight at first watching all the people in his room, go from a blur into a focus. He sipped the water Andrea gave him. And placed it back down. "Thank you for your kindness."

Dean moved closer to the bed. "Chester, you passed out. Do you remember that?"

"Yes I do." He adjusted his glasses. "I remember being greeted by him." He pointed to Frank. "I asked him if this is the Garfield project?"

"How do you know about that?" Dean questioned.

"I was told to come here. I had the plans. How else was I to find this place. You know this." He spoke assuredly. "Oh I understand, this is a test. I must gain your trust."

"It's just that no other survivor knew that. And they weren't as well maintained as you."

"I certainly wouldn't think." Chester sat up further in bed. "Is that what you call yourselves? Survivors. I can't say whether I like that name or not. Anyway, no the other survivors shouldn't be as maintained as I. The skin should be dryer. I was in the better facility."

Dean's head shuddered. He stepped back. "Facility?" He turned back to Andrea and Joe. "Either one of you guys want to try him before council makes a decision."

Joe held his hand up and stepped forth. "Chester. What are you talking about facility?"

"The facility in Cleveland. Of course I have no idea how long I was frozen. I know it was suppose to be for one year, somehow the time system must have gotten . . ." He stopped when he heard the burst of laughter in the room. "Why are you laughing?"

"I'm sorry." Joe rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and took a breath. He looked to everyone behind him for them to be quiet. "It's just that you said you were frozen."

"Cryogenically frozen at the onset of the plague. Me and fifty-three others were frozen in the top facility in Cleveland."

Joe continued in his questioning. "Why were you and the others frozen Chester? And where are they now?"

"They died, as soon as the air hit them they caught the plague and died. Unfortunately most were the cryogenics personnel. Top fifty minds in different science fields. I am a Bio-physicist."

"Sure you are." Joe tried not to laugh. "And why did they freeze you and the other fifty top minds?"

"To start the country over again. You know this. Aren't you people the top fifty minds in engineering and medical that were frozen here?"

Dean's laughter came through the loudest. "You are greeted at the gate by Frank, and you have to ask that?"

Chester was confused. "You're not the top fifty minds?" He slid in his bed. "Then they're still frozen in this community. I thought it was odd that you were released."

Andrea was having a hard time controlling herself. To be polite she left the room. George followed behind her. Henry sat in the corner of the room in a chair taking it all in. He didn't want to take any tone of believing toward Chester, especially since he was the target of everyone's ridicule.

Joe was enjoying it, the delusion of the newest survivor. "So Chester there are fifty top minds frozen here in the community. Well Pal, we've lived here for almost six year and we . . ."

"Six years!" Chester sprang forth. "Six years? The plagues been over for that long? My God did the system screw up. I was not supposed to be out that long. How much damage was done in the last six years? We have to get those people and release them."

Joe noticed the excitement of Chester who began to thrash about. "Calm down. There are no fifty

frozen people here. You would think we would have noticed that.”

“You don’t believe me?” Chester became smug. “If there were a scientist amongst you, you would see that I am telling you the truth.”

“I’m a scientist.” Dean spoke up. “I have a hard time believing this. You say they cryogenically froze the top fifty minds in different fields? Well I was considered the top mind in my field and I wasn’t frozen.”

“Then obviously you really weren’t.” Chester raised his eyebrows in arrogance to Dean. “Now if you people will show me to my quarters and I can get to work.” He flung off the covers and stepped out of bed.

Joe stuck his hand out. “Hold up a minute. We have rules in the community, pal. We have steps everyone follows, and you, top mind or not.” He turned his head to snicker. “Have to follow them.”

Chester straightened his clothes which had become wrinkled from sleeping in them. He seemed appalled by it. “I hardly think you are going to stop me if I walk right out that door.”

Joe stepped back. “No. I won’t . . . He will.” He pointed to Frank.

With arms crossed, Frank stood toe to toe with Chester. “I carried your ass for a mile.” He voice pushed Chester back. “Don’t think I can’t throw your ass back in that bed.” Frank’s placed his hands on his hips and his face close to the visitor’s.

Chester jumped back and climbed into bed.

“Now stay there!” Frank commanded and moved to Ellen to lead her out.

“We’ll be back. Ellen, I need you to prep room in containment.” Joe spoke sternly and walked to the door.

Chester’s head twitched as he watched his visitors leave. “Containment? What’s containment?”

Joe smiled widely. “You’ll find out.” As Joe began to walk out he noticed Dean standing quiet by the door. “Don’t let that insult get to you, Dean. Consider where it’s coming from.”

Dean shook his head and waved his hand. “No, no, that’s not it. But . . . if they really did freeze the top minds. I would have been one of them . . . right?”

Joe reached over and patted him on the shoulder winking. “Sure, Dean. How could they forget you.” Finished with the pacifying, Joe grew perturbed. “Dean. Think about what you just said.”

“You’re right. That was pretty ‘Frank’ of me. Don’t take him to containment yet. I have tests to finish on him.”

“Not a problem.” Joe said and turned. “Frank.”

“Yeah, Dad.” Frank answered.

“I need you to stay by this door, make sure that Chester boy doesn’t run amuck in the community. Just until we get another guard here.” He took three steps forward and stopped. “And if you will, intimidate the guy for us.”

“No problem. I’ll just go in and stare. That usually works.” Frank winked.

“You do that.” Joe gave the thumbs up. “Let’s go, Dean.”

Before he followed, Dean inched his way to Ellen whispering. “Really, El, if they froze the top fifty minds, I . . .”

“Dean!” Joe snapped. “Get over it. Get back to work. Ellen. Containment. Henry . . . um, whatever.” He waved out his hand and walked on.

Behind the three that were led by Joe, Dean, dallied along, feeling--even without good reason--a little dejected.

^ ^ ^ ^

For some odd reason, Joe kept hearing in his mind the *Foreigner* song, *Cold as Ice*. It really wasn’t his style of music, so his memory had placed Frank Sinatra singing it in a bubbly, swinging manner and Joe’s rear did a little swish of a jig as he moved around his desk. He stopped in the middle of laying down his paperwork because he wore he heard a giggle. Shrugging, cigarette dangling from his mouth, he knew

he wasn't alone when he smelled the warm aroma of chicken soup.

With a 'huh' and removal of his cigarette, Joe turned around. "Andrea."

Andrea stood by the door, large mug in hand, waving and smiling. "Cute. I brought you lunch."

"Gotta go." Joe swiped up his paper work, grabbed his coat and moved to the door.

"Joe." Andrea sang out. "What's going on? We were getting so close. Sharing our grief, our sadness, our stories. I was starting to get used to . . ."

"Stop." Joe held up his hand. "That's the problem. You were getting used to it. Now, you're a married woman, Andrea. I know a lot of men in the community are into this 'share a woman respecting. . . .'"

"Understandings. They're called Understandings when two men share a woman."

"Whatever. That's not me. So before you want to divulge in a an understanding and you find yourself madly in love with me, I . . ."

"Joe Slagel!" She gasped out. "How dare you. Sweet Jesus, do you think you're some sort of Casanova that a woman won't be able to resist you?"

"For the integrity of the position I hold, I gonna believe the answer to that question to be yes. And use that as my excuse to . . . run." With that Joe opened up his office door and bolted.

^ ^ ^ ^

Frozen. Chester. People. Top minds. All whispered words that rose above the others and made their way to Dean as he worked in his lab. He tried to ignore the two cackling, low volume voices outside his door. But the more he thought they would end, they more the voices merged together and kept on going. Having enough, he walked across the lab, grabbing a phlebotomy tray as he went to the door.

"So then I was thinking." Henry whispered to Ellen. "I was . . . Dean."

"What about him?" Ellen asked.

"Dean." Henry motioned his head.

Ellen turned around, looked behind her and shrieked when Dean was right there.

Dean did a flash raise of his eyebrows. "Hey." Dean closed his eyes when at the same time, in some sort of excuse for what they were doing, Henry and Ellen began to ramble fast. Dean couldn't decipher their words, nor did he want to. "Stop. I don't care." He handed Ellen the tray. "If you want to investigate this delusional man. Go on. But get me some blood. Thanks." He turned and walked back into the lab.

Grinning, Ellen looked at Henry. "He is so smart."

"Yeah. And you know he wants to know. He just doesn't want us to know he does." He pointed to the phlebotomy tray. "His way."

"My way." Ellen hugged the tray. "I'll meet you at containment." Happily and almost with a 'Little Red Riding Hood' skip, Ellen moved down the hall.

"Afternoon Chester." Chipper and perky, Ellen walked into his room. She winked at Frank who sat in the chair, then walked to Chester's bed and placed the tray on the stand. "How are you?"

"Miserable. You people are holding me against my will and I have work."

"What uh . . . what kind of work" Ellen prepared the things in her tray.

"You are beneath me and I do not divulge information to grunts. And that's what you people are. The workers. Obviously with this gorilla watching me."

"Hey." Ellen turned from the tray. "That gorilla is my husband."

"Figures." Chester saw the needle she held. "I certainly hope you have had some sort of professional train . . . ow!" He shrieked. "Aren't you supposed to . . . ow . . use a . . . ow . . tourniquet when you . . . ow!"

Frank grinned.

^^^

“Here, Dean.” Ellen slammed the tray of blood in front of him. “I’m done.”

“What’s wrong? Talk with the new guy not go good.”

Ellen lifted her bangs from her eyes then tossed about her hair. “Let’s just say . . . Wait until I get him in containment.”

Dean laughed. “That bad?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think he’ll be rude with me again. I’m heading back to containment.” She gave a half wave and began to lave the lab.

Dean looked into the tray and pulled out tubes, slowly, almost in shock, he called out her name. “Ellen?”

“Huh?” She stopped in the doorway.

“There are twelve tubes of blood in here. How in the hell did you get twelve tubes of blood from him.”

“Arms, hands, feet, knees, and . . .” She smiled. “One little one from the groin.”

Dean looked astonished at all the tubes on the counter. “Can I ask why?”

“He pissed me off.” She turned and left.

Dean whistled loudly as he glanced over all the blood samples he didn’t need. But he’d find use for them. He did have to wonder, if in all the torturous venipuncture Ellen did, if she questioned him at all about the ‘frozen top mind’ plan.

^^^

“Nothing.” Ellen plopped in defeat into her desk chair.

“Shit.” Henry stomped.

“He’s a prick.” Ellen stated. “He’s not giving any information. He has attitude. And people aren’t going to believe him. I mean, they don’t even believe you about the . . .” Her eyes grew wide. “Henry.”

“You don’t think.”

“I do.” Ellen stood up.

“But how can we find out?” He asked.

“He said he brought information.”

“But that would be in his stuff.” Henry saw her grin. “That would be so wrong. It’s against the rules.” He watched her step closer.

“Henry, you’re on council. You would have every reason to. Concern for the community.”

Henry let out a sigh. “But I would get into trouble if I got caught.” He paused then spoke rapidly and excited. “So we’d have to do it after two a.m. when the lazy town guard is on.”

“Tonight?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah.” Henry nodded. “Tonight. Can you sneak out without Frank knowing.”

Ellen waved her hand and nearly scoffed in a nod. “Piece of cake.”

^^^

Of all nights for Frank to be snuggling up to her. Ellen looked at the clock it was near two. Yet she was trapped. Frank’s heavy arm draped over hers and his fingers intertwined with her own. He spooned behind her, head resting on her shoulder, foot crossed over hers. Ellen thought he must have known what she was planning. Why else would he pin her there like that, making it impossible for her to move.

Slowly she spread her fingers, and pulled her hand from Frank’s. Her hand tingled from the lack of circulation. She grabbed his arm and lifted it slightly. Slowly, without even shaking the bed she slid out and dropped on to the floor, laying his arm back down.

She made it. Tip toeing so not to wake Frank, she began to leave her bedroom.

“Where are you going?” He groggily called out.

“To the bathroom.” She whispered.

“Why are you sneaking?”

“I wasn’t, why would you ask that?”

Frank sat up and turned on the light. “El.” He rubbed his eyes. “I can tell. Where are you going?”

“I’m hungry. I’m just going to go downstairs now.”

“I’ll come with you.” He flung off the covers.

“No!” She held up her hands, screaming dramatically and immediately pulling up that fake crying sound. “Why Frank? Why! Why can’t I be alone to swim in a sweet substance to take away this pitiful pregnancy depression that . . .”

“All right.” Frank shut off the light. “Be alone.”

Smiling with a clenched fist and a thought ‘yes’ Ellen left the bedroom.

Outside Henry paced, hands in his baggy pants, his shoulders hunched, he made miniature circles around and around. He would have heard the front screen door open if Ellen wouldn’t have been so quiet at it. He didn’t notice her coming out.

“Boo.” She whispered loudly then giggled as he jumped.

“What took you so long?” Henry tried to pass off that she startled him.

“Nothing.” Ellen looked up to her bedroom window. “Let’s hurry, before Frank hears us.”

“Oh he’s just gonna kill me if he finds out I had you out at two in the morning.”

“Frank will never know. I’ll be back in bed before he even notices I’m gone.”

Ducking the guard that walked the street, Henry and Ellen quietly made their way to the large silver building which rested in a line with the other storage facilities.

Henry, nervously fiddled with the keys for the door of the building without windows. He kept peering behind him to see if anyone was approaching or seen them. His finger tips were numb from the cold. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Shut up and open the door.” Ellen stayed close to him.

Henry pulled off the padlock then entered his security code in the alarm. “All they have to do is run a security check and they are gonna know I was in here at this hour.”

Ellen shoved him in, then shut the door. “So what. John Matoose or Frank would be the ones who do it. They’ll go to you first. They won’t snitch.”

“Let me find the light.” Henry felt the wall next to him and turned it on. “Look at this place.” He stared around the warehouse with cage-like storage bins. “This way.” He led her to the cage with all of Chester’s belongings. Once again, he fiddled with his keys and opened that lock. “This isn’t right.”

“Quit being such a sap.” Ellen hurried inside, immediately dropped to the floor and unzipped the duffle bag. “Oh look. He neatly folded his clothes.” She began to pull them out, shaking them, going through the pockets, then tossing them. “Henry, check those tubes.”

Henry apprehensive did.

“Henry, he *is* a Bio-physicist.” Ellen pulled out a large blue text book. And read the title. “FUN WITH PHYSICS, by Chester Arnold Nelson.” She tossed the book aside. “He has absolutely nothing in here that has to do with the Garfield project. What about in those tubes?”

“Nothing.” Henry plopped on the floor. “They’re posters of cars. Old ones.” A little angry and disappointed he whipped the poster of the red convertible across the chicken wire cage. As he reached over to pick it up he noticed the back of it. “This isn’t right.”

“What’s wrong?” Ellen crawled over.

“The back of this poster.” Henry picked it up and ran his hand across. “I know this paper.” He brought his finger and thumb to the corner of the poster and fiddled with it, it began to peel apart. “Bingo.” He pulled on the poster as it separated from the paper Henry recognized. “Check the other one.”

Ellen grabbed the second poster. "This is one. too. What is this?"

"Plans to the community." Henry held the rolling up blue prints. "I need to spread these out somewhere."

"Let's take them."

"Oh, El we can't do that." He said, though not convincingly.

"Sure we can." She waved her hand at him and rolled up the blue prints. "Who's gonna know? We'll roll the poster part of these plans back up, stick them in the tubes, and if Chester notices, no one is going to believe him anyway."

Henry caught a twinkle in his eye. "For the sake of the community he really shouldn't have these anyhow."

"That's right."

"And if we find the frozen smart people, then the point of us taking these will be moot . . . O.K."

Henry rolled up his plan. "Let me grab the other one, and we'll get the hell out of here and look at these back at my house."

"Do you know how to read these?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, sure. Yeah. I think. I'll try. Let's go. We don't have much time. Frank will know you're gone." Henry gathered up the stuff as quickly as he could. Not really caring, they just tossed Chester's clothes back in the bag, figuring they'd blame any wrinkles on Frank. Leaving the things laying like they were, they hurried from the storage facility to Henry's house so they could view the plans.

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Ellen didn't mind having to sneak back into the house, she planned on that anyway. What she did mind was the fact that she was cutting it so close. She was annoyed that she fell asleep during Henry's anal examination of the blue prints. Spreading them out on his table one by one and going over them with a magnifying glass. Passing out would have been all well and fine for her had Henry just shook her and told her to go home. But he let her sleep until he realized how late, or rather how early it actually was.

Slipping off her shoes before opening her bedroom door, Ellen bent down to check for light through the crease in the bottom. The room was dark. Slowly, without making a sound, she opened the bedroom door to the silent room. Ellen was relieved. Frank was still asleep. Ellen . . . was wrong.

The bedroom light flicked on, brightening the room, and Frank, who laid on the already made bed, fully dressed. He face was stern, his jaws twitched as he glared at her. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Hi Frank. Boy you're up early." She fake stretched and unzipped her pants as she made her way to her side of the bed.

"Answer me." He stood from the bed. "I wake up, I see you're not in bed. I look downstairs and see the light. I figured, hey, I'll get dressed first then go down and tell you to go to bed. But what do I hear?" His hand flung out. "I hear the front door opening. It's six o'clock in the fuckin morning Ellen! Where were you?"

"Frank. You're overreacting." Ellen grabbed the blanket off the foot of the bed. "Can we discuss this later."

"No! We'll discuss this now! Overreacting?" He snatched the blanket from her. "My wife is sneaking into the house at six in the morning and I can't ask her where she was?"

"All right. All right." She spoke trying to calm him, even though he did look sort of intimidating staring at her with his hands on his hips, gun in his shoulder harness. "I was with Henry."

Frank took a shocking breath. "Henry. You were with Henry?"

"Yeah, we were out looking . . ."

"That's all I need to hear." Frank snatched his radio from the stand. "I'll speak to you later."

"Frank stop." Ellen charged at him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to see Henry." Frank huffed. "Because this shit is going to stop. I let you two run around, chasing God knows what. But the line has been crossed. No more misfits of Mystery, El. No more."

“You can’t tell me what I can and can not do.”

“Watch me.” Frank pointed angrily at her and stormed from the bedroom.

Ellen jolted slightly at the slamming door. She shrugged her shoulders, grabbed her blanket, and laid down for a little before she had to start her shift work.

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Henry was on the final blue print. The one he had waited to get to. The one with ‘the wall’. Perhaps Henry should have viewed it earlier. But he wanted to wait. It was like he had to build the excitement to reach a certain momentum and he was now there. As he placed his mugs around the edges of the curling paper, three very loud, banging pounds came from his front door. Quickly, he rolled up the blue print and tossed it under his table. He walked slowly to his front door and opened it. Frank stood there leaning in the archway, arms crossed in the usual Frank manner. He looked angry to Henry, but then Frank was wearing his black leather jacket, and that always added so much depth to Frank’s intimidation. “Hi, Frank. Come on in.” He opened the door wider.

“Up really early, Henry? Or were you out all night?” Frank’s words were sharp.

“Actually.” Henry started walking to his living room. “I was working . . . shit.” He turned quickly on his heels to Frank. “It’s not what you think.”

“It is exactly as I think.” Frank slammed his door. “What the hell is the matter with you?” Frank stepped to him. His voice loud but not at it’s highest level . . . yet. “Huh Henry? Do you realize you had my pregnant wife out running around this town at two in the morning?”

“Frank look, I can explain.” Henry backed up. He knew that look on Frank’s face.

“Then go on Henry explain to me. Explain why you had my wife running around all night.” He moved closer to Henry. “But let me tell you one thing. I like you. You’re my friend. But I am this close.” Frank’s hand made a sharp cutting action downward. “This close to beating the fuck out of you for putting her and my baby at risk.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right..” Henry saw a little of the glare leave Frank’s eyes. “But she wasn’t running around the whole time. In fact she slept most of it. We were working in here.” Henry pointed back to the table. “And she fell asleep. I got caught up in our work and I kind of lost track of the time.” He hunched up his shoulders.

“What are you working on?”

“I can’t tell you yet.” Henry noticed Frank’s vein in his temple. And he had to stop that boiling point from happening. “But listen to me Frank. This is for real, and very important. It’s more important to the community than you or even Ellen and I, expected. And we’re so close to an end.”

Frank began to calm down. “How close?”

“Real close.” Henry looked him in the eye. “We are right there.”

“Twenty-four hours.” Frank zipped up his coat.

“What?” Henry chased him as he began to leave.

“You heard me. Twenty-four hours, Henry. If you’re that close, end it in twenty-four hours. After that, I have to pull the plug.” He opened the front door. “This is my wife, this is my baby.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Cause I mean it Henry, next time I won’t be so nice about it.” He stormed out shutting the door harshly.

“Glad you were being nice, Frank.” Henry spoke to himself sarcastically. Then after shuddering off the air of mean Frank left behind, Henry returned to the blueprints.

CHAPTER NINE

March 5

Joe heard it as he drew closer to Frank's office door. That steady thumping sound. It was loud and slow. And the closer he came to the door, the louder it was. "What the hell is that?" Joe spoke out loud as he reached for the handle. Hearing one more thump, he turned the knob, opened the door, and stepped inside Frank's office. "Hey Frank are . . ." *Whap!* Taking him by surprise and beaming him in the head was a red rubber ball that Frank always threw about.

"Shit Dad, I'm sorry."

"Frank." Joe picked the ball up and whaled it back across the room at Frank, smacking him in his chest. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry." Frank picked the ball up off the floor and shoved it in a drawer, trying not to laugh.

"Christ Almighty." Joe rubbed his head and grabbed a chair, pulling it to Frank's desk.

"So what's up." Frank sat back down, rocking a little in his chair.

"It's one o'clock."

Frank glanced down at his watch. "That it is. Thanks."

"Frank! We're suppose to meet here at one today to discuss security."

"Oh." Frank snapped forward. "I knew I had to be back here for something. Can we not get too in-depth. I have a lot on my mind."

"I'll try not to inconvenience your thoughts."

"Thanks."

After a grunt, Joe read off the papers he held. "I was reviewing your morning reports. Now, what about the back perimeter. Is it all right? You reported a problem with the beam."

"Fuckin squirrels. They keep gnawing on it. They keep on thinking they can chew on this silver shiny thing. Stupid."

"They're animals, Frank. Is that the problem with it?"

"Yeah." Frank cupped his hands behind his head.

"Then it's working all right? Why the hell did you put down that there was a problem?"

"Because there is. The squirrels. I kicked out seventeen dead squirrel bodies yesterday. Seventeen."

Joe dropped his pencil and rubbed his eyes. "Then it's not the beam, Frank. It's the squirrels."

"That's what I said."

"No, Frank. You wrote down the beam . . . All right. I'm not going to let this get to me. I'm just going to figure you had other things on your mind this morning when you wrote this."

"I did." Frank slumped down. "My wife was . . ."

"I don't wanna hear. Get over it. You have a job to do." Joe grabbed the pencil again. "I'm afraid to ask, but you have written here, a problem with the field fence. What's wrong there."

"Birds. They keep getting stuck . . ."

"Frank! Is our equipment working?"

"Yes."

"Then there isn't a problem. Clear your mind when you do this shit." He threw his pencil at him. "I'll have Dean mix up that poison we use on the rabbits and you can lace that area by the back gates. But as far as the birds go. There's nothing we can do. Just keep poking them off." Joe began to gather up his things. "That's all. I have to get out of here before I get a headache. And Frank . . ."

Frank looked up.

"Take care of that problem."

"I will. Soon." After his father left, Frank stood up. "No. I think . . . now." He moved to leave his office.

“Where’s Chester?” Ellen asked peering around her circle of survivors in the skills room.

Gene, one of the survivors stood up. “In the back. Want me to get him?”

“Could you?” Ellen asked. “I mean, this is your big day in the survivor sun. Your idea for an exercise.”

“My pleasure.” Gene turned to leave but stopped. “Looks like I don’t have to.”

“Excuse me!” Chester charged forth holding a blue clothing object in his hand. “Someone has taken my stuff.”

“Chester.” Ellen remained calm. “No one takes anyone’s stuff here.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” He leaned to her. “Look at my shirt.” He dangled it. It is completely unacceptable and I hold you responsible for placing it in the order in which it was when I arrived.” He shoved it into Ellen.

Ellen shoved it right back. “Sit down before you piss me off.”

“I will not. I am not finished with you yet.”

Gene tried to be a peacemaker at that moment, stepping in, placing his hand on Chester’s shoulder. “Now son, just take a seat . . .”

Chester swiped his hand away. “I will not sit with you animals. I am not one of you.”

Ellen stepped in his path, she stood between Chester and Gene. “You won’t come in here and start with these people. We have rules. You want out? Follow them. Sit!”

Chester was not letting the little woman with the big mouth get the best of him. “I refuse.” He moved her aside rather abruptly while pointing to Gene. “And I’ll go through you if I have to.” Chester watched Gene step back. In fact he saw everyone get up from their seats and step back. It amazed him, he was never so threatening in his entire life. Then it dawned on him, he wasn’t the reason they stepped back. It happened so fast, he felt himself being spun around, his shirt was grabbed and he saw Frank. The vision of Frank lasted only a second, it was followed by a tremendous amount of pain and numbness, right smack dab to his jaw.

Frank didn’t let Chester fall backwards like his body tried to. He held him for a second, waited for his eyes to stop rolling, and he tossed Chester back on to the floor. Barreling over to him, he lifted Chester’s head and placed his face close to his. “Touch my wife again and I’ll break your fuckin neck.” Frank dropped him then turned to Ellen. “I need to talk to you. Now!”

Ellen rolled her eyes as he rushed by her. After informing Gene to handle the class, she went to her office where Frank was waiting. “What is it, Frank?” She shut the door.

“What are you doing? You can’t step in between a confrontation.”

“There wasn’t any confrontation. End of *that* discussion. Next topic.”

“I came to talk to you about this morning.” He moved to her. “I’m calmer, we can talk.”

“You’re calmer?” Ellen laughed. “O.K., I’m game, discuss.”

Frank opened his mouth, thought about what she said, closed it tightly in frustration, then tried again. “I still think you were wrong for being out all night in your condition.”

“I was wrong for sneaking out. My reasons for going were right.” Ellen set herself in an argument mode. “What else is there to discuss? Oh wait, I know. How about the fact that you called us, the misfits of mystery. I resent that.”

“El, the two of you suck at it. You can’t do anything without looking obvious or getting caught. Now . . .” He placed his hands on her shoulders. “I have decided not to pull the plug.”

“Thank you, Frank.” Ellen hugged him. “You really surprise me.”

“For twenty-four hours.” As his head rested on hers, he felt her pull back. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean twenty-four hours? I really hope you aren’t giving me a time limit.”

“As a matter of fact . . . I am.” Frank nodded. “Twenty-four hours. I haven’t said shit to anyone, I’ve been good about that. But not now. Finish it up, you haven’t much time.”

“Or what?” Ellen crossed her arms.

“Or I tell my Dad.”

“What? You think that scares me? Do you think Joe scares me. Go ahead tell Joe. I’m not stopping in twenty-four hours.”

“O.K.” Frank shrugged and started to walk pass her.

“Stop.” Ellen grabbed the back of his shirt. If she could see the smug look on his face she would have been mad. “Be reasonable. We need more time. Seventy-two hours.”

“El.” Frank turned back to her. “This isn’t a bargaining thing. Twenty-four hours.”

“Come on Frank, some sort of compromise. Please?”

Frank saw the pleading, puppy-dog look in her eye. And being the reasonable man that he was, he knew he could eventually take advantage of that. “How’s this? Forty-eight hours, but no sneaking . . .” He watched Ellen nod. “No leaving walking range.” She nodded to him again. “No field house, the equipment in there is too dangerous. And Henry isn’t allowed to drag you into the tunnels.”

Ellen readied to complain, then stopped and smiled. “He can’t *drag* me in the tunnels?”

Frank shook his head. “Nope.”

“All right you have a deal. But you can’t forget the rules you just told me.”

“I won’t. See how nice I am?” Frank leaned down to kiss her.

“Ellen!” Henry came flying into her office plans in hand, feet sliding as he came to a halt at the two kissing. “I, uh.” They both turned to him, he stuck the plans behind his back. “I uh . . . I uh.”

Frank let go of Ellen, he was smiling. “It’s O.K. Henry.” He patted him on his back as he walked past him. “Talk away. Plan away. We’ve worked everything out.” Frank waved and winked at his wife as he left her office gloating.

Henry hurried and shut her door. Rushing, he made room on her desk and spread out the blueprints. “El.” He tilted his head. “I found them.”

^^^

Dean could smell it before he saw it set in front of him on the counter. A new tactic for Ellen, but a tactic none-the-less. Did she think he was stupid? It had to be big if she was parting with that cake. “What do you want.” He didn’t even turn around. He felt her move up closer to behind him. Hearing her warm, whispering words, ‘I need you’ in his ear, gave him a type of twinge he would be too embarrassed to mention. “Ellen.” He turned his stool to her. “What?”

Ellen tilted her head. “I have this small favor to ask you.”

“It’s not small. I can tell. What is it?” Dean was curious now.

“I need you to cover for me with Frank. During tonight’s monthly meeting, when you’re telling everyone about the plague being cured, I’m gonna sneak out with Henry.”

“No. Absolutely not.” Dean shook his head violently. “I will not cover for something like that. Haven’t you learned you lesson? In fact. I’m going to Frank about this.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “What is it with the men in the community being such snitches? Frank will know I’m with Henry. He’s just not going to know where.”

“Is it dangerous? Cause if it’s dangerous . . .” He saw the ‘yeah, yeah, move on with it’ expression on her face. “I’m serious, I can’t allow you to put yourself in any situation that could be potentially dangerous . . .”

“Dean!” Ellen calmed herself. “It’s not. It’s only damp, and I’ll wear a jacket. Please. It is so important. You know I wouldn’t ask you to do something if it wasn’t important.”

“Yes you would. You always do. All right, what do you need me to do?”

“You are so great.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. I need you to stop Frank from following us. He won’t leave before you’re done with your speech because he’ll be watching the twins. But afterwards, occupy him, talk to him.”

“You want me to converse with Frank. About what? We have nothing in common.”

“You’ll think of something.” Ellen glanced down at her watch. “Thank you. I have to get the twins. I owe you Dean.”

Dean shook his head as he heard her bolt out. "You always owe me, Ellen." He returned to his work as he spoke to himself. "Like I'm ever getting paid back." He slowed before he started working. "Talk to Frank?"

^ ^ ^ ^

What was their reaction going to be? Dean kept thinking to himself as he approached the front of the social hall to speak to everyone in Beginnings that had gathered for the monthly meeting. Joe gave his introduction, saying that he didn't know what Dean was going to say, but he was sure it was important and Dean would keep it short so as not to bore everyone into an early sleep. The thought of speaking in front of everyone made Dean squirm. He hated it. The information he was about to share with them, he felt, was big. But to everyone in that room, the plague was dead and buried. Had been for six years. So would they care? George did, that was because he knew about it. But even George didn't know how far Dean had gone with it in the past few weeks.

Nervously, hands in pockets, brow sweating just a tad, Dean cleared his throat and pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper. "I'd really like to have everyone's full attention when I say this. It's really important." He glanced up as the whispers ceased. He stared around at the faces before continuing. They shuffled in their seats. He caught glimpse of Ellen whispering something in Frank's ear before she moved to Henry. "I have it written down what I want to say, but I think I'll shoot straight from the hip." The room was so silent. He wanted to speak, but couldn't until he saw Ellen and Henry safely sneak out. Just when they did and just wanted to start, he watched George, oddly stand from his seat and followed them out. He stalled long enough, it was time to begin. "We have all come to the realistic approach that this virus, this plague, will be with us forever. Just because you and I can live with this, there are others who don't stand a chance." He let his mind drift to Sarah's baby. "When the plague first started, and I was brought to work on it, no one told me how deadly, or how fast it moved. It took from you and me, everything about this world we loved most. I hated the virus, it was an enemy that frightened me. I didn't know it. To beat your enemy . . ." Dean took a deep breath. "You have to know it. This virus beat me. And I promised myself that if it took everything I had, everything I was, I would not let this take another life." He clenched his fist tightly. "But it did. It came back. A lot of you don't know this." His eyes sought Sarah out in the crowd. "An innocent child, not born with the immunity gene we took for granted, was taken from his mother. Here in this community. This fall. And when that happened, it drove me. It drove me to where I am now. That's why I stand here. And yes . . . I can say, I stand proud. Because I can look at you." He turned to his friends. "I can stand here and I can *promise* you with everything I am, that it will *never* happen again. The virus will *never* take another one of us. Not your child. Not mine, not any of ours. Because Ellen and I . . . we beat it. It *is* stoppable now. The nightmare is over. We've finally won."

The three or four seconds of silence in the room seemed like an eternity. It seemed to tell Dean they could care less. His heart dropped. All his hard work--did no one care? His thoughts ceased when a loud eruption of cheers filled the room with an energy of which he had never felt before. Pummeled immediately with proud arms around him, Joe embraced Dean. He took Dean's face in his hands and looked upon him like a proud father.

"You son of a bitch." Joe embraced him again, tossing Dean's small body about. "Son of a bitch am, I proud of you."

Dean was engulfed. Questions, hugs, pride. Smacks to the arm also for not divulging how close he was. The he stood among the congratulating people. He couldn't enjoy it too long, he had a promise to keep. Frank to contend with. And he noticed through the commotion, George had just returned and was making his way over to Frank.

"Frank, you have a minute?" George touched his hand upon Frank's folded arms.

Frank still looked at everyone's excitement. He too was proud. Proud because his wife was part of the reason for everyone's celebration. "What's up George. Isn't this great?"

"Yeah it is." George tried to stand in front of him. "Frank this is important." He grew nervous. "I

didn't want to say anything. But I feel now it's time. This is serious."

"What's up?" Frank asked

Dean could hear the conversation beginning as he made his approach. Slowly he crept over listening, ready to interrupt if necessary.

"Frank . . . I know I shouldn't say anything, but Henry confessed his true feelings to me about Ellen." George explained.

That caught Frank's attention. "True feelings. Why is this the first I'm hearing this."

George lifted his hand in surrender. "I should have said something sooner. But it's out of control. They just snuck off again, I followed. Henry told me, and his exact words were 'I *need* to be close to her'. I didn't think much of it, but now . . . they took a blanket with them."

Frank's nostrils flared, his face turned red. "Where did they go?"

"To the tunnels." George stepped back. "Sorry."

"Son of a bitch." Frank huffed loudly and began to storm out. He stopped on Dean's call.

"Frank!" Dean chased him. "I need to speak to you."

"Not now, Dean." Frank shook his hand.

"Frank, stop." Dean grabbed his arm then quickly let go when Frank glared at him. "I heard what George said. He's wrong. There's nothing going on between Ellen and Henry. Nothing. And they aren't in the tunnels, I gave her something to do for me."

"You're covering for her." Frank pointed. "You don't know how to lie."

"Why would I do that? And think . . ." Dean held his hands up. "She's pregnant." He snickered. "I mean who would want to have sex with a woman pregnant with another man's child."

Frank raised his one eyebrow at Dean.

"You didn't?"

Frank smiled gloatingly.

"Oh . . . you slept with Ellen while she was pregnant with my twins? Not when she was big I hope."

"Let's just say, I was there when her water broke."

Dean cringed loudly and audibly in disgust, turning his back. He was so caught up in shuddering over the fact that Frank had invaded his children's home *before* they were born, that by the time he returned to look at Frank, he was gone.

^^^

Henry looked down to the blanket spread out on the floor on the tunnel. Various types of tools laying upon it. He scratched his head while looking from the blanket to the wall. "The plans say they are behind this wall Ellen."

"I know that Henry." Ellen tapped on the wall with a small hammer. "But I can't find out how to open it. There has to be a crease or a nock that we're miss . . ."

"What's wrong?" Henry looked at her.

"Shh." Ellen held her finger to her mouth. "Listen . . . do you hear that?"

"Shit, footsteps." He grabbed the hammer from her hand and cover the tools with the blanket. Shaking, he looked up at Ellen. "What do we do?"

"Can we go out the other way?"

"It's ten miles to the . . ."

The footsteps drew closer. They were steady, heavy and loud.

"I know." Without her permission, Henry grabbed hold of Ellen, backed her into the wall, pressed his body against hers and began to kiss her.

"What the hell's going on here?!" Frank bellowed out. "Henry, I know you're gonna give me a damn good reason why you're kissing my wife!"

Henry pulled from Ellen. "Oh Frank it's only you." Both his and Ellen's bodies sighed in relief. "We just thought it was someone else."

Frank, huffing, pulled Ellen toward him. "Is this something you two do for others?"

"No." Ellen laughed. "We were covering up. Some people in the community think Henry's attracted to me. We just didn't want them to find out what we were working on."

Frank wanted to scream at them both, but stayed under control. "I don't care what it is you're working on. But Ellen you agreed to my terms. You are not to be down here."

"That's not what you said. You said Henry couldn't drag me here. He didn't. I walked."

"UH!" Controlled Frank was gone. "I can't fuckin believe you're playing word games with me. Let's go."

"No, Frank." Ellen pulled her arm away. "Please. Look we have these blue prints."

Frank saw them on the floor. "Henry, where did these come from?"

"El and I sort of borrowed them from Chester."

"Borrowed? You mean you stole them. I can't believe you robbed a survivor." Frank began to pace around. "You broke the rules. What am I suppose to do? Huh?"

Innocently, Ellen looked up to him. "Give us just a little more time. If nothing. We end it. Please."

A long thinking breath escaped Frank. He hated what he was about to do. "Eleven O'clock. You have two hours or I spill my guts about the blue prints. I'll meet you in the social hall."

"Thank you." She kissed him on the cheek. "You know I love you."

"Yeah, yeah." He kissed her apprehensively then stepped back. "Eleven." He tapped his watch. "Be up by then or I sing." He pointed at them and started to walk. "And Henry. No more kissing my wife!"

After jumping and shrieking excitedly like kids, Ellen and Henry returned to tapping that wall.

^^^^

Frank stormed into the social hall, he walked around for a little before returning so he could cool down, it didn't work. The social hall was near empty, except for a few people including Joe and Dean who mingled. Some had gotten themselves a drink. The one thing that Frank needed. He walked up to the bar, grabbed a glass, and a bottle of homemade whiskey and took them both to a table and sat down, slamming them both very loudly. He poured himself a shots worth, downed it, then poured another. This one he would savor, nurse it. He did want just a relaxing drink.

^^^^

"Ellen I think I have it." Henry's hands moved about forcefully and with a snap, his chisel cracked. "Shit." He rubbed his head. With in seconds a loud clank occurred followed by a rumble. Henry jumped back pulling Ellen with him. "Oh, shit. What did we do?"

They both watched together as the wall slowly moved.

At first it sounded like thunder in the social hall. Then quickly the glasses began to rattle and the floor shook. The loud deep rumbling noise grew stronger.

Frank jumped from his chair, knocking it over. "What the hell is that?"

Joe looked around. "It sounds like an earth quake. It's coming from below."

"Shit! Ellen!" Frank took off, charging out of the social hall, out into the streets to the tunnels.

"El!" Frank called out as he entered the tunnels. He dreaded with his heart that something had happened. "El!" He found them standing, staring, not moving. Frank too stood quietly in amazement as he gazed upon what they saw.

Joe arrived with Dean moments later. His mouth dropped open. "Holy mother of God."

The five of them stood, staring at where a long concrete wall used to be. Instead of gray, they looked upon a glass wall. Clear, showing behind it the full sterile looking laboratory. But the most shocking factor of it all, the thing that took away their breath, was what set with in the lab. Set deep, but not too deep that they could not see it for where they stood was another glass wall. Behind that window was not a lab. Hanging suspended, inches apart, spread out in a long line . . . were people. Motionless, eyes closed, with wires protruding from them.

^^^

Joe rested his hand on Dean's shoulder as he sat in a chair center lab. "What do you make of it?"

"Joe I'm clueless. I haven't an inkling about cryogenics." He flipped through the pages of a black binder. "This is just handwritten stuff, who they are, not what they are. And physical statistics prior to their freezing. It's funny. The date they were frozen isn't mentioned." Dean closed the book and stood up. "They have equipment I have never seen. Six computers." He wandered around. "And look at this." He pointed. "Boxes and boxes of back up tapes and disks. It's gonna take months for me to even grasp a little on what this shit is."

Joe looked upon the stuff. "You think Chester knows?"

Dean shrugged. "Don't know. Assuming now he's telling the truth, the ones that knew this stuff, died of our plague."

"Why did they do it, Dean? Why did they freeze them?" Joe questioned.

"A safeguard." Dean guessed. "To have the top minds around to start the world again."

"How did they get them together so fast?" Joe continued in his asking.

"I guess our answers lay somewhere in all this information, and Chester." Dean noticed a large white case he moved to it. "What the hell?" He stared at it, then moved his attention to Ellen who was knocking on the glass in front of the frozen people. "El, don't do that."

Ellen laugh. "Why, will I wake them?" She ran her hand against the smooth surface. "It doesn't feel cold. I count fifty-three. It's really stupid, if these people are suppose to start the world over why are there are only two women. And they're old and not very attractive I may add . . . Hey Dean, why do all these men seem to have erections?"

Frank quickly covered her eyes. "El!"

"Frank, stop." She removed his hand. "It's not like I've never seen one before. And think, six years with one." She continued to stare. "Imagine how stupid they may be with the lack of blood to their brain."

Joe moved to her and Frank, Henry kind of stood off to the side still shocked. "Ellen, how did you and Henry find these people. How did you open the wall?"

Ellen, proud, answered. "We looked at the blue prints that Chester brought."

Joe was stunned by her answer. "Blue prints. You two had blue prints that Chester gave you and you failed to tell me?"

"Oh, no." Ellen waved at him nonchalantly. "Chester didn't give them to us. We borrowed them."

"You what!" Joe spoke loudly. "You two not only withheld vital information from this community, but you took it, I mean stole it? What the hell is the matter with you?"

Henry rushed over. "Joe, we're sorry. It's just that . . . that." he spun to Ellen. "It was all her idea."

"Oh my God!" Ellen shrieked. "How dare you. You got us into this."

"Me?" Henry argued. "Who was the one who wanted to sneak into storage and go through his things?"

"But there was no way I could have gotten in there, was there? You unlocked storage. You were also the one who made me come down here because you were so obsessed with the wall."

"Oh that is totally untrue and you know it. Who volunteered to help me out."

Ellen crossed her arms. "Who kept me out all night making me fight with my husband?"

"You fell asleep on my table."

“That’s because you were so boring. And . . . then you make me break my promise to my husband by dragging me here.” She faced Frank who looked like his head was spinning. “He dragged me here, Frank. He made me come down here.”

“I did no such thing. I swear to God Ellen, I don’t know why I ever decided to work with you in the first place. You drive me nuts.”

Joe couldn’t take it anymore. Besides the fact he was getting a headache, his neck began to hurt from turning it back and forth so fast. He whistled loudly and shrill to shut them up. “Enough you two! Frank . . . do something with her.”

Frank put his arm around Ellen moving her. “Let’s go, El.”

“No.” Ellen tried to pull away. “It’s my discovery.”

“My discovery!” Henry yelled.

“Knock it off!” Frank blasted.

From across the lab, with a loud hiss, Dean called out. “Whoa!” He lifted the lid to the six foot case and out emerged a white steam. “What have we here?” Dean whistled as his hands reached in, he shook his head. “I have an answer to that question you asked, Ellen.”

“Which one?” She said. “The one about the erections?”

“El!” Frank cringed. “Enough.”

Dean looked up, he had a half smile on his face. “No, the one about how they were gonna start the world again. Here’s your answer.”

Joe moved in to take a look. “What is it, Dean?”

“Embryos.” Dean’s hand moved about. “And as near as I can count, at least two hundred and fifty frozen embryos. Looks like twenty-five units and each hold ten.”

Ellen’s face dropped. “What would they do with them? Grow them in the lab?”

Dean shut the lid to the case. “I doubt it. My guess is farming.”

They all looked to him with a audible, confusing, ‘what?’

Dean chuckled. “I don’t think they were growing them in a special box. I think they planned on implanting them. Knowing that there were bound to be survivors, and bound to be women, they would find them and implant them.”

“Dean.” Joe spoke as he moved closer to the glass to look at the people. “I need you to work on this as much as you can.”

“Like I said Joe, it may take weeks or months just to sort it out.”

“However long. These people are in no hurry, and neither are we for that matter.” His hand touched the glass. “With all this equipment, all of this shit. It makes you wonder.” He faced everyone in the room. “How long have they been preparing for this?”

A RUDE AWAKENING

CHAPTER TEN

April 4

No matter how many times a week he had done it for the past four, it still was weird to Joe. Walking down to the tunnels to check on the progress that Dean was making in the new lab. The technology of it, its huge clean appearance, reminded Joe of a world that long before had disappeared. A world he and everyone in Beginnings wanted to put far behind them.

The lab's windows were blackened out. They had to be, the sight of the frozen people, dangling like puppets from invisible strings, were considered frightening. Joe pressed his security code into the keypad just outside the underground lab door. The new security system put in by John Matoose to ensure the safety of the lab, and access to only those who were trusted in there. However, part-time lab worker, Chester hadn't gained that status yet.

"Morning, Dean." Joe stepped in holding a cup of coffee and wiping the splash of it from his shirt. "Where is everyone?"

"Chester opted for a day off and . . ." Dean gathered up his papers then pulled up a chair for Joe and one for himself. He sat down. "And the other two, unfortunately, will be here shortly."

"How's it going with them?"

"About as good as it's going with the hundreds of disks. Henry and Ellen still will not speak directly to each other. Can't you step in."

"Sorry." Joe said. "They aren't annoying me yet.

"You don't work with them four days a week down here."

"You mentioned, the disks. Still nothing?"

"I can't figure it out, Joe." Dean's hand dropped to his stack of papers. "They leave all this paper, printers, cartridges and other boxes of supplies we didn't get to. All these disk and tapes, only numbered. I'm thinking, they planned on printing it up. Logical, right?"

"Haven't found one yet that makes sense."

"Oh, sure we have a few."

"Great." Joe smiled.

"Then about a quarter way through the data, it get's screwy. Jumbled words Formulas I have never seen. Nothing makes sense. Just like the other disks."

"Do you think it's the computer programs?" Joe asked. "Maybe they went bad."

"Who knows. I do know when we finally figure out how to retrieve the information, if we can. Man is there gonna be a ton to print up."

"Nothing on the defrosting?"

Dean shook his head. "But I still believe it's in the disks and tapes. Somewhere. They would have had to have a back up plan for coming out of stasis. I know as a scientist, I personally, even though I wasn't chosen as a top mind, would have insisted on it, just incase something happened to the Cleveland facility."

"So, these papers." Joe reached out and touched the stack. "Really have no vital info."

"Just the start of a few disks. Oh!" Dean shuffled through the stacks. I want to retrieve the information on the disk numbered, one-ten." he handed a sheet to Joe. "Look. It's on our embryos. It starts out saying about 'enhancement' of the embryos for different levels."

"So their genetically enhanced?" Joe reviewed. "Different levels, meaning. High intelligence. Average . . ."

"Grunts." Dean raised his eyebrows. "Someone has to do hard labor and my guess is they were ensuring the world still had its different classes of people."

"Now the question is, who is they?"

"Call me Henry. But I have a theory. See if you can figure out where I came up with this from. Back in the eighties, when nuclear threat was biggest, this group began. They were around for as long as I can

remember. A private group. They were called the Caceres Society. They all paid dues, they had money. Top minds? I don't know. But they deemed themselves the ones that would come up with a plan to start the world over, should it end. They put things in motion, had meetings, and hypothetically they built their contingency plan. I think maybe . . . this was the contingency plan. Everything preset, stocked up, and when someone yelled go. They came here or Cleveland."

"Wait a second. I did my home work. Wasn't the name of man who designed the Garfield Project . . ."

"Dr. Forrest Caceres. Yes." Dean nodded. "Totally designed, and planned the conceptual community thing."

"The Garfield project was a government project, and if it was, then why doesn't George know about this."

"He wouldn't. The Caceres Society actually borrowed the name." Dean held up two fingers. "Separate issues. I, as a top scientist knew of the Caceres society. I wasn't invited to join because I was military, I was government. The Garfield project was barren for so long. Maybe a scientific part of the government gave these members access to this land to build their lab. Who knows?"

"You think we can get Chester to confirm this?"

"Chester won't confirm the time of day." Dean stated. "He's awful to work with down here."

Joe stood up. "So what now?"

"Now we figure out how to release them."

"Do you think they'll be all right?"

Hem-hawing in his answer, Dean bobbed his head from side to side. "There's a chance that the freezing slash defrosting process could've kill their brains cells, leaving us with fifty-three idiots. But if that's the case we'll have ourselves fifty-three field workers."

"I like that thought." Joe laughed then when he heard the buzz at the door, he turned his head. The door didn't open.

"That'll be Ellen."

"How do you know?"

"She never makes it in on her first attempt. Listen . . . now she'll kick the door." Dean tilted his head to the two thumps. "Now she'll get it. She thinks that's the magic touch."

The buzz of the door brought Ellen in and she quickly shut it. "Morning."

Dean rose. "Ellen, why did you push that door shut? It's automatic."

"What's his name was behind me." Smiling she walked to Joe and kissed him on the cheek.

"Morning Joe."

"Morning, Ellen." Joe glanced oddly over the kiss. "You're in a good mood."

Ellen set her mug of coffee she brought with her on the counter. "It's called sleep."

"You always sleep." Shaking his head, Dean faced her. "So Chester decided to come?"

"Not that I know of."

"But you said 'what's his name'." Dean waited for an answer, then got one.

With another buzz of the door Henry bolted in. "Ellen, why didn't you just hold this door for me? You saw me coming."

Ellen turned her back to him. "Dean, could you please tell Henry that I will not be responsible for letting anyone else in here under my security code."

"Tell him yourself." Dean replied.

Henry approached Ellen. "This is ridiculous. I can hear you."

Ellen folded her arms and rolled her eyes. "Dean, could you please tell Henry that I still am not speaking to him. Nor will I ever speak to him again."

Henry tried Joe. "You're dad. Tell her this is ridiculous."

Joe threw his hands in the air. "Can't. I'm out of here. Church, you know." Joe walked to the door, stopped and snapped his finger. "Before I forget. I have six getting out of containment today. Henry, that means you have to have their housing ready by eleven-thirty. Make sure it's done." Joe reached out for

the door.

“Joe, I can’t.” Henry shook his head. “I have multitudes of repairs scheduled in the morning. I have to work here in the afternoon with Johnny. I haven’t time to do housing too. I’d have to get up at three in the morning. Joe I’m only one man.”

“That you are.” Joe nodded. “But you’re also Henry. And you’re also a thief. You’re still paying for my silence.”

“But Ellen was just as much a part of it as I was . . .”

“Ellen is six months pregnant.” Joe said.

Ellen shook her head and held her hands out to an ignoring Dean. “And that man wonders why I stopped speaking to him. He’s still trying to get me in trouble.”

Joe finally opened the door. “I’ll see you at dinner tonight, Ellen. Dean bring my twins?” Getting agreement, Joe left.

Henry stared upon the closed door. “How come I never get invited to Joe’s house for Sunday dinner? Dean does, he’s not family.”

Ellen gasped at his comment. “Dean, tell Henry that you are the father of my twins. And you’ve always come to Sunday dinner . . .”

“Ellen!” Dean shouted at her. “Will you knock it off. I’m busy!”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open with a loud exclamation. “I can’t believe you just yelled at me like that. Fine.” She snatched the stack of paper from his hand. “I’ll just go sit in a corner somewhere. And work by myself.”

Dean looked up to the ceiling and in his own mind spoke the words, *‘Thank God.’* Perhaps there would be silence in the lab. Silence always worked best for him when he was trying to read.

^^^

Ellen could hear the sound of children laughing as she approached her front door later that afternoon. How odd it sounded. The last she knew the twins were over Andrea’s until Dean made it home. Expecting to be pummeled with the hugs of her children, Ellen open the door to a different sight. She could see Frank’s back as he sat on the couch. He leaned forward watching a tape that played in the unit set upon the coffee table. The scene he watched was dim, yet happy. She heard familiar voices.

‘Hi Daddy. I miss you. I wish you were here.’

‘Daddy I’m this many years old today.’

‘Frank, don’t worry, I’m filling in for you bro. I hope I don’t get stuck with the bill.’

Then Ellen shuddered when she heard her own. *‘Frank, you’re an asshole.’*

Ellen remembered that party, and that day. Frank was in Germany for a whole year back then. It was something Ellen really didn’t want to see. Calmly she shut the door and walked into her house, trying to swallow the lump that formed in her throat. She ran her hand lightly across Frank’s back. “What’s going on? Why the tape today?” She asked quietly.

Frank shrugged. “Amber’s birthday today. She would have been thirteen. Thirteen, El.” He picked up the remote control and fast forwarded over a scene with Kelly.

Kelly. How long had it been since Ellen really thought of her. She understood Frank’s not wanting to see Kelly. With all the years that passed, Frank never got better with the fact that she had killed his daughters, he grew worse. Reaching the point where rationalizing her actions, or forgiving them would never happen.

“Better.” He pressed play when he saw a child’s face. “You want to watch with me?”

“I don’t . . .” Ellen heard her own voice on the tape, her own voice laughing and coughing, saying, *‘Taylor look at your face honey. Robbie, get a shot of this for Frank.’* Before Ellen watched the camera swing to her daughter who would have been three at the time, the daughter who had stuck her entire face in the pizza that day, Ellen jumped back and walked away. “I don’t want to see this.” She covered her ears and held back any emotions.

Frank stopped the tape. Eerily the image of Ellen kissing her daughter freeze framed. He stood from the couch, and tried to speak to her with reason, pulling down her hands. "El, that's your daughter. You can't even look at your own daughter?"

"You deal with it your way, I'll deal with it mine."

"You can't avoid their memories and pretend they never existed. You have to be able to look at her."

Ellen coldly faced him. "I can't look at her *or* Josh anymore, Frank. Everyday I think of them. It still hurts. I can't look at that beautiful little face without remembering how I held her in my arms, how I watched her die. I put it behind me, Frank, that's how I live now." She stepped back.

"El, please." Frank spoke soothingly to her. "Share this with me. Sit with me like we used to. Right after it all happened." He wrapped his arms tightly around her from behind. "We'd watch for hours and hours. And we'd laugh, cry. Come on." He pressed his cheek close to hers.

"What's the point, that was a different Ellen. I don't want to be like that ever again."

"But don't the twins deserve for you to be like that again?"

"What are you saying?"

"Look at the screen, El." He placed his hand on her face and felt her resistance. "I want you to take a look at yourself." He led her face to the television. "Open your eyes and look at who you were. Look at you smiling and kissing her. You loved those children more than life itself. You love the twins the same. But because someone took your babies from you, you won't allow yourself to be with them like you were with Josh and Taylor. I just . . ." He laid his hand on her cheek. "I just want you to be able to think of them and smile. Watch them with me. Life gives and life takes. Let's watch the gift that life once gave us."

Softly Ellen's eyes closed. "Frank." She whispered out. "I would love to do that. But . . . unfortunately, I can't. That was a lifetime ago. A lifetime I buried. You may be able to bask in the memories, but I, Frank . . . I drown." Sadly, Ellen turned and walked up the stairs.

^^^

Always on time Dean was, and he didn't know why he did that. No one else ever was. He sat on the couch in Joe's house, feet tapping, waiting, dreading. He hated when Frank walked in because from that moment on he lost his children to the giant play thing. And as it happened he cringed. The front door opened with a blasting growl from Frank followed by shrieks of enjoyment from his twins. Dean couldn't comprehend what the point of all the thumping and noise was. But he dreaded one other thing. Ellen's entrance.

"What is *he* doing here?" No Hello, just yelling as Ellen entered nodding her head Henry's way as he sat in the couch.

Henry answered for himself, he stood up in a subconscious gentleman fashion. "Joe invited me, Ellen. He thought . . ."

"Joe!" Ellen called into the kitchen. "Why is *he* here?"

Joe, busy, just answered without coming out. "I invited him."

"Ellen." Henry tailed the pacing around Ellen like a puppy. "You can't avoid me forever."

"Frank, tell Henry please, that I'm not avoiding him." She faced her husband. "I just won't speak to him."

Frank looked past her to Henry. "She says to tell you she's not avoiding . . ."

"I heard her, Frank. Ellen, we have to talk about this. You can't put all the blame on me. You were in on it too."

Ellen grew angry at that comment. "Frank, tell him please that he's not helping matters by trying to pass it off on me."

"Henry, Ellen says you aren't . . ."

"Frank!" Henry interrupted. "I heard her." Deciding at that moment to give the appearance that he could care less, he too turned his back. "Fine Frank, you know what? Tell her I could care less if she ever

speaks to me again.”

“El, Henry said to tell you that he could care less. Henry, keep in mind.” Frank looked disturbed. “I won’t yell at my wife for you.”

Dean, having heard just about enough, stood up from the couch with his hands slapping in his thighs. “Joe!” He called for help. “Do something here. The intelligent conversation in this room is way too much for me.”

Joe came from the kitchen drying his hands on the dish towel that hung over his shoulder. “I hope to God that someone isn’t ruining my family dinner . . . *Henry?*”

Henry defended himself. “Joe, I just want to work things out with her.”

Ellen stepped forward. “Joe, tell Henry that I feel he’s ungrateful. He forgets that I was the only one that didn’t make fun at him over that wall. I stood by him and fought Frank.”

“Joe.” Henry interrupted. “Tell Ellen she’s right. Tell her I’m sorry.”

Dean couldn’t believe it. “No Henry she’s not right. Don’t you do it, too. Don’t you become another Ellen sap. Aren’t Frank and I . . .” Dean slowed his words when he saw Ellen stepping closer to him, glaring at him. “. . . enough. I think I better shut up.”

Ellen dropped her glare and faced Henry. “Thank you, an apology is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“That’s all?” Henry asked. “Well why didn’t you just say so?”

“I wasn’t speaking to you remember?” She rolled her head as if to say ‘didn’t you pay attention?’.

Joe cleared his throat loudly. “Now that this whole things over with, I’ll put dinner on the table and we can sit down civilized.”

Frank who still held Alexandra in his arms, approached Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m glad you are speaking to my friend now. I hated being the entire conversation.”

“Uncle Frank?” Alexandra’s spoke in a whisper as she pulled on his short goatee.

“Yes, honey?” He tried playfully to catch her tiny fingers with his mouth.

“I can I sleep at your house tonight?”

“Sure.” He smiled brightly. “You want to be with Mommy?”

“Nope.” She placed her small hands on his face and kissed him. “I want to be with you.”

Frank was stunned, his mouth dropped opened and he looked to Ellen who gasped in offense. With such a clueless look, Frank just shook his head, but when he turned from Ellen, he kissed Alexandra and grinned.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

April 27

What was this formula that he was looking at? Dean pondered as he stared at the computer screen in the cryo-lab. What exactly were they trying to build. They still had over two hundred disks and tapes to go through. This disk obviously contained the formula for some sort of agent, and Dean hadn't a clue what it was. He didn't even have the ingredients anymore to make it. But that wasn't what he was supposed to be looking for. Looking around, almost as if he were sneaking, he waited for the disk to copy to the tape drive. When it had finished, he labeled the disk and stuck it in a box. The box Dean had set aside for things he himself would examine at a later time. Dean grabbed the next one that he had. He was the final one to view the disks. In fact Dean liked when everyone worked together in the lab. Ellen and Johnny would view them, if they knew what they were, they printed it, if they didn't it went to Chester or Dean. Dean always had the final look. He still didn't trust Chester, no one did. And Henry, he checked out the equipment, just to figure out the mechanical aspects of it.

"Dean." Henry's voice called to him.

Dean lifted his eyes and immediately was startled by the bright, sudden burst of light in his face. He shrieked and rubbed his eyes. "Henry, what the hell did you just do to me?"

"I took your picture. Here." A smiling Henry handed him an instant photo. "Check this out Dean. A camera, there's a ton of photo stuff. I found a locked case and broke it open."

"Henry . . ." Dean tried to rub away the green spots that floated in front of him. "We weren't suppose to look at their supplies yet." He checked out his picture. "Oh great, the first picture taken in Beginnings and I look like a idiot." He tossed it aside.

"Dean." Henry leaned on the counter holding the camera. "Since this is your domain. Could I be in charge of the camera stuff. Can I be the picture taker?"

"Yes, but I want it to be used sparingly. Pictures of special events. Stuff like that. And no self portraits. Got it?"

"Got it. Thanks." He turned. "Hey Ellen, smile." He snapped a picture.

Ellen screamed. "Henry, no. God that was the best part of society being gone. No more pictures. Don't show me, I don't want to see."

Henry shook and blew the picture. "All right. I'll give it to Frank." He shoved it in his pocket. "Hey Chester . . ." He saw Chester's grin and Henry turned away. "Never mind."

"Sparingly." Dean called, shaking his head and tapping the keys.

With a crash of his stool, and scuffling of things next to him, Johnny jumped to his feet. "Dean!" He cried out. "I found something. I think."

Dean rushed over and looked at the screen. "Yes, you did." He ran his hand over Johnny's head, messing his hair. "This is the beginning. What disk is this?"

"Two-seventy-two."

"Yes." Dean said excited. "The cryogenics process. Good job, Johnny." He faced everyone that has gathered. "All right. All we have to do is check the later numbers, hopefully find the information about this equipment and reversal process, then . . ." Dean smiled. "We're on our way."

^^^

Frank hated spring. Especially mornings, it always stirred up his allergies. Allergies he never had until he came to Beginnings and started walking perimeters at six in the morning. But usually, around eight, they really acted up. His head would start to pound with pressure, his eyes would water and he'd swear out loud every time he'd sneeze. The thing he hated most about them was the fact that he eventually had to break down and go to Dean for some relief.

Sniffing like the fool he felt like, Frank moved up the small grade to the back fence. He could see

three squirrels as he approached, dead, as usual, carcasses half blown apart. He dreaded having to toss them back out, but they couldn't just lay there.

Frank neared the fence and squatted down to the bodies. "Felt the heat huh?" He spoke to them in a taunting manner. "Didn't look . . ." A snap took Frank's attention, followed by an overwhelming stench. From the top of Frank's eyes he caught the vision of beat up shoes. Very beat up, feat half hanging out. He raised his vision and stood up as he did. Even through his stuffed head, he could smell the young man standing before him. His clothes, Beginnings issued, torn and tattered. He looked a little older, his blonde hair hung past his shoulders. He still had a baby face, not a sign of facial hair. Covering his nose with the back of his hand, Frank moved back from the gate. He didn't know what to say, he didn't know how to feel. Complete shock took over him.

"Home." The distant eyed young man spoke. A young man probably not even sixteen yet. "Home." Trembling he reached out his hand.

"NO!" Frank shouted. "Don't touch the fence!"

"Home." He reached out.

"I said NO!" Frank used his loudest and strongest tone.

The young man's hand withdrew.

"Fuck." Frank ran his hand over his face. "What am I suppose to do with you?" He breathed heavily.

"Home." The voice was soft and sad.

"Yeah wait, give me a second." Frank brought the mouth piece to his headset up. "Down the back gate, I have one." He looked to the boy. "Don't touch the fence." He held up one finger. "Wait." Frank waited for the sound that the perimeter was shut down and he reached for his keys. "I'm gonna be a dead man when my dad gets hold of me." He unlocked the fence. "You hear me? Dead man." He opened the fence for the skinny boy.

"Home." He stepped through.

"So you've said." Frank shut and locked the gate. He spoke in his radio. "Turn her on. I'm done." He reached to grabbed hold of the boy's arm but stopped. "Just follow me, I'm not touching you." Frank began to lead him to the receiving center.

^^^

Joe received Frank's call about the survivor who wandered to the gate. He questioned why Frank didn't call Ellen, but Joe figured he had his reason. Knowing George and Henry would be behind shortly, Joe arrived at his office and walked in. "Frank, I hope . . . holy shit! What's that smell."

Frank leaned against Joe's desk. "It stops burning your nose after a while."

"Open a window or something." Joe covered his nose.

"I did." Frank crossed his arms.

"Christ my eyes are watering. What's up?" Joe apprehensively, trying not to breath, sat.

"This." Frank reached his arm into the examining room and pulled out the boy.

Joe immediately sprung up. "What is this shit, Frank? You know the rules."

"I know." He pulled him in closer. "But our rules have changed in the past year."

"He was ousted. Take him back out." Joe didn't want to hear or see him.

"Yeah but he was ousted for something others are allowed to stay over now." Frank argued. "Dad, Ellen loved this kid. It broke her heart when we ousted him."

"Ellen loved him because he reminded her of her son that died. And Christ Frank, she changed his name and started calling him Josh. No, Frank. Get him out."

"He's a kid, Dad." Frank pulled him in the room. "Look at him, look at Josh."

"Jason." Joe corrected. "And I don't give a shit."

Josh lowered his head, then tilted it to Joe. "Home?"

Frank leaned whispered to the kid. "I told you not to speak."

The door to the office opened and George and Henry burst through with the universal comment.

“What is that smell?”

Henry covered his face then noticed Josh in the room. “Joe, is that?”

Joe nodded. “This is why Frank wants us here. Seems Josh slash Jason, found his way back. Frank wants to keep him here. I told him take him back out.”

Frank held up his hands, he try to hide his frustration. “Look, before you two agree with my Dad. Just listen to me. My wife loved this kid. We all felt bad when we ousted him. He’s what? Sixteen? He’s a kid. I’m asking you to let him stay. I’ll take full responsibility for him. I’ll work with him. He can walk a beat with me from sun up till sun down.”

Henry had to be logical. “Frank, you’re intentions are good, but Josh has been out there almost another year. He’s not going to be better, he’ll be worse. Then what’s Ellen going to say when we oust him again?”

Frank agreed, but still tried his best. “How about this? We won’t tell Ellen he’s here. We’ll keep him by himself in holding when he’s not with me. I’ll work out my rounds so I’ll stay out of the general population with him. Just give me three weeks. If in three weeks he’s not ready to go into containment with Ellen, then I’ll send him out myself.”

Joe saw the determination on Frank’s face. He knew why he son wanted to do this. It wasn’t only for Ellen, it was for himself. And Joe had to think too. If they could just save Josh, it would be one less kid lost to the world again. Turning to Henry and George, Joe knew the looks on their faces, they were in agreement with him. “All right Frank. I’ll give you your three weeks. I want you to bring me this kid every once and a while to let me see your progress. I won’t say anything to Ellen, but if she finds out, it’s your ass, not ours.”

Head back in relief, Frank smiled. “Thank you. And Henry will help me, right Henry, you don’t have a life.”

Henry waved his hand. “Yeah, I’ll help you Frank.”

Glad the issue was settled, Joe immediately ran to his door and opened it, taking in the better smelling air. “Well we’ll leave you, Frank. I suggest you clean him up, give him some clothes and enjoy your new pal.” Not long after Joe darted out for fresh air freedom, George and Henry followed.

Frank stood alone in the office with Josh, he cased him over a few times. “Josh, it’s you and me. Ready to work pal?”

Josh tilted his head.

“First thing is we clean your ass up, shave that head and make you look like a person.” Frank reached to touch him again, but again stopped. “Follow me.”

Josh, silently, and with fright, followed the man that, to him, was big and scary.

^^^^

Her one eye partially closed while her lid fluttered in a cringe and Ellen held her ear shut as she walked to the one printer in the cryo-lab. “God, you have to love dot Matrix.” she said sarcastically. “Tell me you can’t tell they planned this restart the world thing before laser printers went big.”

Chester’s gasp was loud as he sat before a computer. “Can you possibly complain anymore.”

Ellen looked over at Johnny who snickered. “Sure.” She shrugged. “Johnny, did I tell you what your father did last . . .”

“Spare us.” Dean interrupted as he rushed to her. “Are these the shorts?” Dean grabbed for the papers that she ripped the edges off.

“No.” Ellen answered. “These are the readouts. *These*.” She grabbed her clothing. “Are the shorts.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I’m out of here. Please. Please. Please work to have everything ready for the meeting tonight. I’m taking these short . . . I mean, preliminary readouts to Joe.” He moved across the lab rapidly and grabbed a disk. “These disks have to be overseen when they print out.” He held them up.

“I handle that, Doctor.” Chester said.

“Um . . .” Dean hunched. “Nah.” He hurried to Ellen. “Here. You oversee.”

“Oh, yes. I’m in charge.” Ellen gloated.

“Gotta go.” Dean hurried to the door.

Ellen snickered. “Isn’t he cute the way he darts his little body in and out.” She giggled “Kind of reminds me when we used to sleep together.”

The loud squeak in the tunnel caught all of their attention. Dean popped his head back in the open door. “I heard that.”

Laughing, Ellen tossed her head to the side and when she did, she saw Chester reaching into a disk box. Hurrying over, she snatched his wrist, stopping him. “These are Dean’s.”

“I was just . . .”

“Touch only what you’re allowed to.” Ellen gave a cold stare, took Dean’s box and brought it with her to the printer.

Johnny, nodded with a closed mouth. “I’m impressed.”

“What can I say.” Ellen exhaled loudly. “The power of being in charge.”

^^^^

Joe looked with seriousness upon everything that Dean had brought him to the clinic lab to view. He felt the tension from Dean, as Dean must have felt his. “So this is it.”

“All the information we need to revive them. Everything we need to know is there.”

“I didn’t think it would be.” Joe rested his elbow on the counter and his head on his hand.

“I didn’t want it to be. I don’t like it, Joe. I don’t like the dilemma we’re faced with. As long as we didn’t know this, we didn’t have to attempt to revive them. But now that we do. Do we not have a moral obligation to their lives to do so?”

“In a sense we do.” Joe stood up and began to pace. “We’ll decide tonight.”

“Thanks.” Dean glanced down at his watch. “I’d better get my stuff together, I told your son I’d meet him in an hour. Do you know what’s up with this survivor he found today? Why doesn’t he just bring him to containment for me to look at?”

“I think you’d better see that one for yourself.” Joe began to leave. “Oh, by the way. You didn’t mention it to Ellen did you? You know, that you were meeting with Frank about a survivor?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “I didn’t . . . please don’t tell me we’re keeping something from Ellen. I hate doing that. She blames me every time we get busted.”

Joe laughed. “Dean, this one’s on Frank. Trust me. All Frank. You’ll see.”

Even with Joe’s reassurance, a part of Dean was still afraid to breach the Frank territory.

^^^^

The morning for Frank went a lot faster than usual. Of course an entire hour was spent showering Josh, then showering him again. And leaving no dirty stone unturned, Frank shaved him nearly to the scalp.

As he approached his office, Frank held a clipboard in one hand, keys dangling in the other. Josh kept up behind him, shoulders hunching and knees bending in exhaustion as he walked. Not once on the entire rounds did Frank allow for him to stop. Every time Josh plopped himself on the grass, Frank would drag him right back up to his feet.

“We’ll take a break now, Josh. O.K.?” Frank told him as they stepped into his office. “Come on in, and don’t touch anything.”

Josh stepped in looking around, taking it all in.

Frank shut the door. “I have to fill out the stupid reports for my dad.” He showed Josh the clipboard. “Can you say stupid?”

“Stupid.”

“Hey, very good. Hang around me I’ll teach you to talk. Frank-style.” Frank walked behind his desk

and sat. "I'll just finish . . ." He noticed Josh picking up the football that sat on top of the file cabinet. "You like that?". He smiled and started to write.

"Ball." Josh held it in his arms.

"Good." Frank lifted the top sheet of paper from the clipboard. As his pencil touched down, the ball slammed down across his desk. "Not right now, Josh." He tossed it back. "Sit down."

Josh didn't catch the ball, it bounced off of him and on to the floor. He picked it up again and again, tossed it at Frank.

"Josh!" Frank slammed the ball down. "Sit!" He gruffly yelled.

Josh plopped on the ground.

"See, now you look normal. Of course you could have sat in the chair." Frank continued his paper work, lifting his eyes every so often to see Josh. "Josh, don't pick things up from the floor."

Josh ignored him and looked at the scrap of paper he had retrieved. He held it high, opened his mouth and ate it.

"Josh, no. Don't eat that." Frank noticed it was too late. "Oh well. Did it taste good?" He looked up to the like tapping on the door. He knew it had to be Dean. "Come in."

"What did you want?" Dean stuck his head in.

"I need to talk to you, come on in." Frank waved at him.

"All right." Dean shut the door, not seeing Josh hidden on the other side of the cabinet. He walked to the desk and sat across from Frank. "What is it? I know sitting there you're on some power trip."

"Shut the fuck up Dean. I have a favor to ask."

"No."

"I didn't even ask you yet." Frank grew angry.

"I don't care. If it's not medical I don't do anything for you."

"Fine." Frank held his hands up in surrender as he leaned back in his chair. "I'll just get someone else to keep my wife busy for the next few weeks."

Dean leaned his body to one side of the chair and smirked at Frank. "Right. I'm not buying that for one second. You want someone to keep Ellen busy for a few weeks?"

Frank snapped forward resting his elbows on his desk. "You're the only one that can keep Ellen occupied. You have this frozen people project your working on. And if you call for her help at certain times of the day or night, she won't notice I'm gone. See, there's a survivor. He's not ready for general population or containment. Ellen can't know about him until I try to break him first. I have to work with this survivor, it's important."

"And what is so important about this survivor that makes you feel the need to reach out?"

"See for yourself." Frank pointed a pencil at Josh.

"What am I looking at?" Dean saw Frank was still pointing and turned his body in the chair to that direction. "Shit!" Dean sprang up. "Is that?"

"Yep. He found us." Frank stood. "Came to the back gate saying, 'home'."

"Frank." Dean tried to speak rationally. "We couldn't make this kid right last year, do you really think you can make him right now?"

"I'm gonna try." Frank stood side by side with Dean. "Josh get up. Stand up." Frank snapped at him. "Say hello to Dean. Do you remember Dean?"

Josh slid against the wall to his feet. He kept his stare on Dean. "Dean."

Frank smiled. "Good, Josh. Now don't hit him again." He turned to Dean. "See, I thought I'd try a rougher approach to him this time. It can't hurt and he's not gonna nail *me*."

"What do you need me to do?" Dean apprehensively asked.

"Just keep her busy and don't let her find out about Josh."

"Busy won't be a problem. Because . . ." Dean said looking at Josh. "If after the meeting tonight, we decide to reverse the cryo process. Ellen will be busier than ever."

“It’s not a simple push of a button.” Dean explained to those chosen to attend the meeting. Only the longstanding and original residents of Beginnings were privileged to be there to decide. “It’s a process. A long one. It takes thirty-two days. Henry would be needed to set up the panel that is used to record their vital signs. Round the clock monitoring. Plus, like in Cleveland, when the air hits them, they’re gonna feel our plague. We have to manufacture more serum, be ready to administer it and . . . we’re gonna have to have a place to put these people. Because no matter how fast we give them the serum, anyone that gets hit will still have symptoms to deal with. “ Dean waited before finishing up. “I know how a lot of you feel. We don’t want, or need the knowledge they have in the minds But . . .there are fifty-three people alive down there, or at least waiting for us to get them to that point. Morally, I believe we have an obligation.”

“Bullshit.” Frank spoke up as he rocked in his chair on the hind legs. “These people went into their deep sleep with an empty community above their heads. They needed this land for something right? They have a plan, we’re not a part of it. Mark my words when they wake up, that’s exactly what their attitude will be. I mean, look at Chester. His attitude should be proof enough.”

Joe agreed in a sense. “Frank has a valid point and I have heard each side of the argument. So, council and I decided to take the apprehensive approach with their awakening. This land is ours. Not theirs. All the data, computers, disks, supplies and such. Property of Beginnings. They will have no access. They brought two freezers. One with embryos. The other with fifty-two vials. We haven’t a clue what’s in those vials. Until we do and until we know what to do with those embryos, both cases will be hidden away. The whereabouts will be known to only Dean and I. If these people awake and prove to be no threat, and prove that they only want to live the life we do. They will be thought of as newcomers and go through the same trust process for privileges everyone else had to go through. If they prove to be a struggle with us. Simply . . . they go. But . . .” Joe lifted his hands as he sat down. “My whole speech on the apprehensive approach may be moot, if you people decide to just let them die. The choice is yours.” Joe took a moment to look amongst the faces in the social hall. “Cast your vote.”

Twenty-nine people were selected to be in the social hall. Twenty-nine people voted. And with the final count of the anonymous vote being twenty-eight to one, Beginnings prepared to reverse the cryogenics process.

^^^

Taking the back of his left index finger, Dean lightly tapped the three square inch digital display on the fifty-third monitor. “Come on.” He tapped again. “Nothing. How about you?”

“Nothing.” Ellen moved next to him and squatted also. “My other two look just like this. Blank. Do you think it’s a malfunction?”

“I don’t know.” Dean stood up running his hands through his hair. “The information says that on day seven we should start to receive life signals. It’s day seven. These were blank this afternoon. Now only three of them are. We’ll just have to wait and see. I’ll tell you Ellen, I’ve never seen vitals so low. Heartbeat, three beats a minute.” Dean shook his head. “Extremely low blood and body temp. These people are basically dead.” He smiled oddly looking down to her. “El, why are you still squatting on the floor? You can get up now.”

“No, Dean, I can’t. I’m nearly eight months pregnant and basically . . . I squatted down here and now I’m stuck.”

“Sorry.” Dean laughed as he braced her under her arms and helped her to her feet. She lost her balance some and fell back into him. “You all right?” He moved toward the computer.

“Fine.” She pulled herself from him. “I don’t understand, I feel it, but I’m not big.”

“No you’re not. But, the baby’s fine so we’ll leave it at that.”

“Thank you.” Ellen followed him. “I’m really tired of hearing it from everyone. Jenny Matoose included. She’s due three weeks before me, and just because she’s as huge as . . .”

“Ellen.” Dean shook his head at her insensitivity and stopped before his hands set upon the

keyboard. "It's nearly three a.m., let's run the twelve hour vitals on these people, read them and go home."

"O.K., go ahead, I'm not stopping you. How come Dean, when we knew we had to run reports every twelve hours after the process began, we didn't start the process at let's say, eight or nine? But we began it at three so every night we have to be down here?"

"I don't know." His finger's clicked and the sound of an old squealing printer began. "Go wait by the printer for those."

"Dean what if this baby comes out with blonde hair and blue eyes." She walked to the printer subconsciously following his demand. "I mean, Taylor had blonde hair and blue eyes, and my dead husband Pete was very dark like Frank. What if Frank doesn't think this baby is his." She just stood next to the paper coming out. "Speaking of Frank."

"Please don't." Dean hurried over to her at the printer. "Pay attention to the paper." Failing to see Ellen rolling her eyes at him, Dean began to straighten the mess of paper that just landed in a mound on the floor. "Are you sure you want to come down here at three in the morning everyday?"

"Oh, sure. I've hit that energetic insomnia phase early. I feel good." She crossed her arms. "Anyway. Frank's been strange lately. He's not chasing me around. Checking up on me. He doesn't even care that I'm with you. Why do you suppose he's been different lately?"

Dean couldn't. He paused before ripping the paper from the printer and figured--yeah he could. "Maybe Ellen, you should worry. Maybe there is someone else that has Frank's attention."

"Right." Ellen chased behind him to the counter. "Frank and another woman? Please. There are no other women."

"Maybe it's not another woman." He raised his left eyebrow.

Ellen shrieked in laughter as her hands crashed down upon her stack. "That's good, Dean. I needed a laugh before I went to sleep." She started to step from the printer.. "Frank and another man. Who?" She laughed again. "Oh wait . . . Henry." She couldn't stop laughing. "Night, Dean."

"El . . ."

"Wait until I tell Frank you said he's having an affair with Henry." She moved to the door. "He'll get a kick out of it. Night."

"No he won't . . . El!" Dean raised his hand and let it drop on his stack of just printed papers. "And she leaves." He shook his head. "I'm a dead man."

CHAPTER TWELVE

May 7

Frank gave a throaty moan as he leaned to Ellen in bed and pressed his lips to her cheek. "I'm leaving. Be good. I'll try to stop by and see you today."

Ellen's eyes opened--*try?* Frank never had to try before. "Frank." She rolled over and turned on the light. "Dean said the strangest thing."

"What's that?"

"He said the reason you haven't been around as much, is because you're having a love affair with Henry."

"He said . . ."

"A intense one too. Long standing."

"El, Dean is . . ."

"Not that I mind. I, too, find Henry attractive. But I just want you to be . . . excuse the pun . . . straight with me." Ellen giggled and turned off the light.

Frank's jaws twitched in his bedroom. He debated on telling Ellen the truth, but he left the bedroom at that moment because he opted for killing Dean later in the day.

^^^

Dean brought his coffee to his lips. He hoped as he took his drink that this would be the sip that did it. The sip that would awaken him from that dead to the world feeling he had. He recalled that not even six hours earlier, he and Ellen were in the lab. He was there again retrieving materials to bring to the clinic lab so he could review them while he did his other work. He just wanted to hurry and get done down there, but the clanking and scuffling noises that Chester caused across the room grew even more disturbing to him. "Chester, finish looking for what you looking for." Dean set down his mug. "Miguel won't wait forever for you."

"I do not understand this field work I have to do. These life signs need monitored . . ."

"That's why I have Melissa down here now to do that. You are needed in the fields."

"All right. Enough playing games." Chester with determination, raced to Dean's side. "Where are the embryos?"

"Oh." Dean removed his glasses. "We had a power malfunction last night. Sorry Chester, they went bad."

"You're lying."

"Excuse me?" Dean shook his head and gathered his stuff. "I really don't have time for this. I have a clinic to work at and you have fields."

"I know that there was some debate on whether or not to reverse this process. Tell me Dr. Hayes, why do these people frighten you so much. Why aren't you and your Beginnings people welcoming the knowledge that they bring for you."

"Because Chester, we don't want it. We're fine the way we are. Now if you'll excuse me." He walked over to the door and opened it. "Let's go."

Chester met him at the door. "You and I are not finished discussing this."

"Yes we are Chester. And if you insist on giving attitude, I'll have to insist you do not work around this project anymore."

"You can't do that. Are you forgetting this is my project also. And you people seemed to have taken some sort of squatters rights over it."

"Because it just so happens that your project is setting in the middle of our home." Dean pulled the door closed bringing Chester with it.

"You're home happens to be the Garfield Project."

Dean laughed at him. “No Chester, this place ceased being the Garfield project the minute we set foot here and began to make it into something.” Dean wasn’t wanting to argue, he was tired and miserable. But there was a bright spot to his morning as he began to walk from the tunnels, Chester pestering behind. Miguel was making his move towards them and he didn’t look to happy to be having to search Chester out.

^^^

“Now walk straight.” Frank commanded to Josh as they made their way to the line of utility buildings to Joe’s office. “It’s important, it’s a progress day with my dad.”

“Joe.” Josh spoke softly.

“That’s right. And you’ve done real good today. Wait until I tell him how you were up and waiting by the door this morning for me. I didn’t even have to tug on your ear.”

Josh placed his hand to the side of his head. “Ow.”

“That’s right.” Frank stopped before they walked in. “Now stand up straight.” Frank placed his hands on Josh’s shoulder’s and arched the boy’s back. “Just like that. And remember what I taught you?” Frank didn’t get a response. “Josh? Remember what I taught you?”

“Yes.” Josh slowly brought up his hand and gave Frank a thumbs up.

“Ha, ha. Good boy.” Frank smacked him on the back.

“Ow.” Josh complained.

“Ow.” Frank reached for the door knob and opened the door. He saw his father merely lift his head to them as they walked in. “We’re here for our progress report. And you will be impressed. Temperament is good.” Frank closed the door. “And, no violent tendencies.”

“Good to know.” Joe nodded. “Have you gotten him to speak yet?”

“Oh, yeah. Check this out.” Frank stared close to Josh’s face. “Josh, tell him what I taught you. What did I teach you?”

Josh’s face lit up and a proud grin hit him, he stood taller. “Frank’s cool.”

Frank held out his palm in a showing manner. “There you have it.”

Joe’s head plopped loudly on the desk. “Anything else?”

“Oh sure. Josh, tell my Dad. What’s Joe?”

“Mean.”

“No!” Frank corrected, then whispered. “The other one.”

“Joe’s fair.”

Frank smiled at Josh like a trained seal. “See.”

“Frank.” Joe lifted his head up sliding his hands across the desk. “He hasn’t a clue what he’s saying. Does he say anything involuntarily?”

“Sure. Watch.” Frank gave a slight tug to Josh’s ear, which immediately brought another ‘ow’. “See Dad.”

Joe’s head plopped down again. “Why did I let you do this? Are you teaching him anything valuable besides Frank praising comments?”

“I’ve given him a job, and he’s good at it. He even knows what it is. Josh, tell my Dad what your job is every day.”

Josh moved closer. “Fuckin squirrels.”

Joe grunted loudly. “That’s it. I’ve seen enough. You’ve made progress. I think he should be ready for containment soon, as long as he has no more violent episodes. You hear?”

“Got it.” Frank stood up and gave Josh a thumbs up. “Good job buddy. What is Frank again?”

“Frank’s cool.”

“Yes.” Biting his bottom lip, Frank nodded to Joe with an arrogant grin. “Who’s the man?”

Joe leaned back in his chair, covered his face with his hands and let out a long, dramatic whine.

^^^

It wasn't as hot as the beating sun made it feel. Miguel figured it had to do with the tension he was feeling. He hoped as he stood outside the main field house that George and his unexpected visit would lessen the burden he carried with his new worker. Chester was not only aggravating Miguel, but every other fieldworker out there. The complaints ranged from, Chester moved too slow, to he dug like a girl. Miguel was getting tired of hearing it. He had enough on his mind personally without being cornered by one of his men concerning Chester even while at the social hall.

Miguel watched, intermittently wiping the sweat from his brow, as George stood in the thick of it all. Out in the field with Chester. The conversation between the two men was long, and it ended with a polite smile from George. Miguel waited. He had to know.

"Spoke to him." George stated as he walked to Miguel.

"And?"

"Hopefully he got my message. Don't you worry about it." George gave a friendly pat on the arm to Miguel as he began to leave.

"Mr. Hadly. You did mention to him I was not an illegal alien."

George gave a thumbs up and moved on.

Sighing and smiling in relief, also holding high hope for a better work day, Miguel turned. When he did he got the scouring glance from Chester. Eyes shifting from Chester to a leaving George, Miguel realized that perhaps, all of the former president's effort were, like everyone else's, in vain.

^^^

Frank stood outside the lab in the hallway of the clinic. He peered in through the windows watching Dean sitting at the counter, microscope in front of him, notes off to the side. He had debated all day on what would be the best approach. Though walking and nailing Dean would be fast, feel good and get across his message, it would be more like a sexual quickie. Something for the moment. Frank wanted more of a fulfilling sensation. So on that, he quietly moved into the lab, then blasted with everything he had . . . vocally. "Dean!"

With a jump start of his heart, Dean nearly knocked over his microscope when Frank shouted his name. "What is it, Frank?" He tried to remain cool and calm.

"So I hear I'm gay." Frank's hands slammed down on the counter in which Dean sat down at.

Dean immediately jumped up. He knew right where that was coming from. "Frank look, before you . . . I'm gonna kill Ellen . . . before you say anything." He could see the flare in Frank's eyes. "You know, Frank, if you stop to think about it, it's pretty funny how it all came about." Dean tried to smile and make light of the situation. Of course he stayed on the other side of the counter as a precaution. Like the counter was actually an invisible force field.

"Funny? Explain to me how it's funny that my wife accuses me of cheating on her with another man?" Frank saw Dean trying to move away. "Let alone Henry. Henry? I don't even find him good looking."

In the midst of his avoidance of Frank, Dean had to control his laugh. "Be . . . be that as it may. You said to distract her."

"That I did." Frank said calmly. "And as a fair man. I'm giving you three seconds."

"Or what?" Dean snapped sarcastically.

Frank pulled out his revolver, then lowered his aim at Dean. "You're a eunuch. One . . ."

Dean took off.

"Two-three." Frank sped out of the lab in pursuit,

Thinking, 'shit he counted fast'. Dean plowed through the double glass doors of the clinic and leaped off the steps.

Dean was a blur to Joe, but Frank wasn't. Bodily Frank almost plowed him over.

“Excuse me, Dad.” Frank shifted his body and raced after Dean.

“Boys!” Joe shouted, trying half-assed to stop them, then waving out his hand he faced the clinic. Andrea was coming out.

“Joe.” She smiled. “Glad I caught you.”

“Can’t right now, Andrea, have to chase those two idiots.” Joe tried to make his escape, but Andrea grabbed hold of his arm.

“Let them be.” She walked to him then descended the steps with Joe. “Stroll with me.”

“Stroll. But Frank is chasing Dean and . . .”

“Joe, you’re being ridiculous.” Andrea chuckled. “They do this all the time. What’s Frank gonna do when he catches Dean. Kill him.”

Both of them stopped when the firing of a single gunshot was heard in the distance. Looking at each other and shaking their heads at the same time with a ‘nah’, Joe and Andrea continued walking.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

May 12

“There it is.” Ellen spoke excitedly as she watched the monitor in the lab. “The last one, Ralph has reached ten beats a minute.” She imitated a roaring crowd. “Hey, Henry. I’m glad you came down with us tonight. Dean is so dull.”

“Please El, it’s Dean. You know these scientist type.” Henry pulled the paper from the printer.

Dean shook his head. “You know instead of insulting me again, for what? The fiftieth time. Why don’t you finish up the report so we can go home.”

“Someone’s pissy.” Ellen walked over to the counter. “Maybe he’s jealous of your affair with Frank.”

Henry put the reports before them. “You know El, it’s tough being a fantasy.”

“Guys!” Dean shuddered. “Please. Just . . . just no talking. Finish.”

“Miserable.” Ellen divided the stack. “Here Henry do Phoebe through Oscar.”

“Thanks, El.” He began to flip the pages. “Fine . . . fine . . .” Henry shook his head. “Uh oh. Looks like we aren’t getting a response from Springstein either. Dead.”

“Yeah, So is Harris.” Ellen gave a quick look of sympathy. “Oh, well.” She shrugged. “Hey, Henry check this out. Melvin’s brain activity hasn’t increased. I wonder if this is the beginning to the makings of a field worker.” She continued reading. “And neither has Clint’s for . . .” The papers snatched from her hand. “Dean, what are you doing?”

Dean reviewed them. “I can’t make heads or tails out of what you two are saying. Who’s brain activity isn’t normal?”

“Yours . . . no just kidding. Melvin’s and Clint’s.” She felt his daggers. “Oh, that’s right. Numbers twenty-two and twenty-five.” She pointed. “Turning into idiots. With my luck one of them is probably the hairdresser.” She stared to laugh and Henry joined her.

Dean was fed up. “Will you two knock it off. God.” He grabbed his head. “You’re giving me a headache. This is serious. According to this we have three who are probably dead already. And four who lost normal brain functions.”

“Dean.” Ellen snatched the papers from him. “Go back to what you were doing. And what is your problem today?”

“You want to know what my problem is? I haven’t been to bed since the last three in the morning check.” His voice roared at her, if it could blow back her hair it would. “I deal with Chester and his holier than thou attitude. Demanding to know about the embryos. Telling me this is his project. And then I have you two, giving names to fifty-three scientific subjects. They aren’t even good names, they’re stupid names. And I have to listen to you two call them the names while I sit and try to decipher material I am clueless about.” He stormed over to his work space.

Ellen took a step forward, speaking softly. “Dean, I understand your frustration . . .”

“Disks, tons of them with formulas I’ve never seen before.” Dean’s hand slammed down. “Either I forgot what they were or I never learned them and if that’s the case, I’m pretty stupid. I’ve had it! I’m out of my league here. And you Ellen, this is all a big game to you! A big ‘how can I irritate Dean’ Game!”

“Dean, I’m sorry, I just . . .” Ellen couldn’t get a word in edge wise. Dean was busting lose.

“I don’t want to hear it. The worst thing I did was ask you to continue assisting me. Either I have to be the lamest person in the world, or the biggest masochist!”

Ellen blinked slowly, staring at him very serious. “Are we finished taking a temper tantrum?” she waited for his glare. “Good.” she giggled. “You’re so funny, when you’re mad.”

Dean grunted.

Henry, raising his hand like a school boy, tried to get Dean’s attention. “Dean, can I say something without you biting my head off? Did you stop to think that perhaps the reason you are having so much trouble figuring out those disks is because they aren’t real.”

Dean's head shuddered. "What?"

"O.K., this is just a theory, but . . . you have this idea that these people are up to something. That they have this genius master plan right? Well, if that is true, theoretically speaking, why would they just leave the information of their plan laying around available for anyone to find. I can see them leaving the defrosting process there, but valuable information. Something about this bothers me. Like . . . here." He walked over to the computer. "On this monstrous system down here, there are four loaded programs, right? Well, I checked their size, they aren't that big. So where is all the memory to the hard drive going? I think. Hidden files. And . . ."

"Wait!" Dean stopped him. "Why would they go through all the trouble to leave all these disks and tapes if they were bogus?"

"I have a theory on that one too. Perhaps the formulas are backwards or coded. It just doesn't fit. You're a smart man, Dean. Do you really think you'd have this much trouble comprehending scientific formulas, if something wasn't amiss about them?"

"Henry, this is really good.." Dean said amazed. "I didn't think of that. What's your theory on how I'm suppose to figure them out?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't get that far yet. Let me work on it."

Dean wanted to scream at him. But he stopped himself. He really couldn't get mad. Henry had given him something to not only think about, but work on as well.

^^^^

It was a repeated thing. An annoying thump caused a slight pain between his shoulder blades, every few feet that Frank walked that late morning. He ignored it, he was tough. He had dealt with worse. Bending down to check the eye of the perimeters, at the far end of the back gate, it struck him again, only worse. He stood up, brushed himself off and kept moving. Frank glanced at his watch, then noted the time on his stupid report that he had to fill out. All was well--again--at the back gate.

Frank, noticing it was near eleven, wanted to hurry along. He was pushing the time frame of his normal routine rounds, because he wanted to check on Ellen time. Besides seeing her, it took him back in town. Something he missed doing in his rounds. Something he would go back to doing as soon as he was done with the personal project that he had taken on.

Knowing he was near finished, he had one more thing to check before heading to his father's office to drop off the reports. Picking up the pace, just a bit, the thumping pain hit him again, this time it had moved. It struck smack at the base of his skull, jolting his head a bit, making him stop, and annoying him more than ever. Frank had taken enough. With his sternest look he spun backwards. "Josh, knock it off. Put the football away!"

Josh picked it up from the ground, waited for Frank to move on then threw it at his back again.

"Josh!" Frank pointed the clipboard at him.

Josh folded his hands and looked up to the sky.

"I can't play now. Not now. See the utility buildings. That means we're almost done. After we get there we'll play." Frank began to walk again. He could hear Josh run up behind him, and he quickly turned around. "Don't!" The football sailed into his chest and Frank caught it. Wanting to yell at the teenager, Frank restrained when he realized that Josh had worked hard all morning too. Dropping the clipboard to the ground, Frank smiled and took a quarterback's stance. "Go long."

^^^^

"Plain and simple." Joe stated as if on trial, sitting in Andrea's office. "A dog. Always have been, probably always will. Ask anyone." He lifted his hand. "Ask . . . ask Frank."

"I did." Andrea said..

"And what did he say?"

“A dog.”

“There you have it.” Joe stared to stand.

“Joe Slagel, sit.” Andrea snapped her finger and pointed to the chair.

Joe tilted his head and looked around the room. He tugged on his ear. “I’m sorry. I could have sworn I heard someone *snap* at me.”

“You are a dog.”

Closing his eyes with a chuckle, Joe sat down. “You got me. Now, Andrea I would love to sit . . .”

“Joe.” She folded her hands and leaned into the desk. “What is the problem with this. I have been suggesting a relationship for months. Don’t you feel it between us.”

“Quiet frankly . . . no.” He held up his hand and when she gasped. “You want honesty. I’ll give it to you. I won’t let myself feel it. I like Miguel. He’s a good guy Andrea. A good guy who you just dumped.”

“He didn’t help me through my grief. You did.”

“You never gave him a chance.” Joe pointed. “Give him the chance. Try to make it work with him. If you find it doesn’t then maybe . . .” Before Joe could say anymore, his radio crackled and Miguel’s voice came over.

“Mr. Slagel? We have a problem in the field.”

“Speak of the devil.” Joe lifted the radio. “What’s up?”

“I can’t find Chester. He is gone.”

“All right, we’ll locate him. Thanks.” Standing up, Joe switched the radio channel. “George. George come in. George.” He held the radio away and waited. “George.”

“Must have it off.” Andrea suggested.

“Must. Hell, I’ll find Chester myself.” Joe walked to the door.

“Try the bakery. I here he’s been trying to seduce Josephine into making him some of her baked goods.”

“Seducing Josephine. Now there’s a task that’s not too difficult for him.”

“Joe.” Andrea gasped. “She is not the elderly slut everyone makes her out to be.”

“Now did I say that? No. I didn’t say that.” Joe winked. “Talk to you later Andrea.”

Arms folded watching Joe walk down the corridor to the main doors, Andrea saw something that made her dash into her office . . . Frank.

^^^

Ellen embraced her phlebotomy tray in her arms as if it were a baby as she walked almost backwards into the lab. “Sorry I took . . .” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “. . . long.” She set the tray down next to Johnny then tipped toed across the room to Dean who had his head on the empty counter space. His cheek flush to the counter, his arms dangled off to his side. His eyes tightly closed. She softly walked back across the lab to Johnny trying to contain her giggle. “Is he sleeping or dead.” She spoke quietly.

“Sleeping.” Johnny turned on his stool from the microscope. “Don’t wake him.”

“I won’t.” She tilted her head. “Do I look that stupid when I fall asleep on the counter?”

“Nah.” Johnny waved. “You at least have your arms up.”

“How long has he been out?”

“Twenty minutes or so, and is he crashed.”

“But . . .” Ellen placed her hand on her hip. “Who’s gonna do my blood counts and urine samples?”

“I will.” Johnny pulled the tray to him. “I’ve been learning this stuff for a year now. Besides, Dean says I’m better than you anyhow.”

“I’d get mad at that comment, however I’m glad I don’t have to do the samples. I was beginning to get scared that I might.”

“El!” Frank yelled to her as he bolted heavily into the lab.

Johnny and Ellen both turned at the same time with a “Shh!”

Frank slowed down, and held his hands up trying to be quiet. “Why am I being shushed?”

They both pointed to Dean.

“Oh, who cares.” He placed his hands on Ellen’s face and kissed her with a moan. “I’ve missed you.” He smiled. “Let’s go.” He began to tug her out.

“Frank wait. Where are we going?”

“Let’s just take a walk or something. Please. I feel like I haven’t seen you.”

“All right.” Ellen clenched Frank’s hand. “Johnny? Do you mind.”

“No, go on.” Johnny turned to his work.

Just before they left the lab, Frank slowed down with a slide. “One second.” He released Ellen’s hand and moved close to Dean. “Pitiful.” With his forefinger and thumb Frank flicked Dean in the side of his head. “Dean.”

Dean didn’t budge.

“Dean.” Frank flicked him again.

No response.

Placing his mouth close to Dean, Frank spoke loud. “DEAN!”

Dean sprang straight up.

“You are so lazy.” Frank, satisfied, reclaimed Ellen’s hand and walked from the lab.

Dean rubbed his eyes, then dropped his arms to his side and his head plopped to the counter.

Groggily, he commented to Johnny. “Your father’s an asshole.” He closed his eyes again and went to sleep.

A slight smile escaped Ellen as she raised her face to the warm sky. “I forget how cold it is in the clinic. Between you and Dean liking it . . .”

“El, please. Don’t compare mean to Dean.” Frank let go of her hand and faced her at the bottom of the clinic steps. “Let’s just take a . . . hold up.” He lifted an index finger, stepped back and held the ear piece to his headset. “What’s up.”

Ellen saw it, a look of mad. She waited and she knew it was coming.

“Fuck.” Frank stomped. “Tell him to go away. Why?” He shook his head. “Well, if he’s trouble back there shoot him.” He lifted his hand in aggravation. “I’m on my way.” He lowered the microphone. “El . . .”

“Say no more.” Ellen said. “Problem with a survivor at the gate.”

“Man, you’re good.” Frank kissed her quickly. “I have a surprise for you later. Meet you at containment?”

“A surprise. What’s the occasion? Did I . . .” She was silenced by Frank’s hand. Muffled she spoke for her release.

“Later. It’s a surprise.” he kissed her again. “Be good.” Returning to the back gate and being pulled from Ellen was not something Frank wanted to do. So just to ensure he took care of things as quickly as he could, he pulled his revolver out en route.

Alone again and Ellen decided whether to go back to the clinic or hide out. Seeing how hiding out would be more relaxing she began to do that moving from the clinic. Not far into her walk she saw Melissa walking toward her. It baffled her. She hurriedly approached her. “Melissa. Aren’t you suppose to be down in the tunnel watching the Cryo-wall till three?”

“Suppose to be, but then Dean sent Chester down to relieve me.” She spoke nonchalantly running her hands through her red hair.

“Dean did no such thing. Chester’s down in the tunnel lab now?”

“Sure, he said . . .”

“Let’s go. I need you with me.” Walking as fast as her pregnant body would carry her, Ellen headed to the main entrance to the tunnels.

With the buzz of the door, on the first try, Ellen bolted into the lab. “Chester!” She yelled to him as he stood near the edge of the cryo-wall holding a clipboard.

Chester wasn't the least bit startled or intimidated by her. “Hello Ellen.” He flipped a page.

“What the hell are you doing down here? You know damn well you are not allowed down here without authorization.” She stormed closer to him.

“Really.” He took a deep breath slowly lifting the next page. “I am getting tired of you people telling me what I can or cannot do with *my* project.”

“Our project, Chester. Now I suggest to you, you leave now on your own before I have security throw you out. And I will make mention of this to Dean.” Ellen reached for the clipboard Chester held and grasped it tightly. “Let go.”

“No you let go.” Chester pulled at it fighting her resistance.

“Chester let go of the information, now!” With all of her might Ellen forcefully pulled the clipboard from his grip. However she did not realize that the edge of the wall was only inches from her, and as her hand sailed back with the board the back of her wrist smacked into the edge. Pain radiated immediately up her arm. She felt upon the connection to the wall, a crack, yet her face would not give into showing her pain. “Leave.” Ellen's face was cold.

“Did you hurt yourself, Ellen?” Chester tried not to laugh.

“Melissa grab the radio, get security down here. Wait, better yet. Call Frank. Tell him his wife needs him.” She raised her eyebrows to Chester.

Hiding behind a wall of laxity, Chester lifted his chin and snobbishly walked away from Ellen. “Don't bother Melissa. I'm leaving.” He gave one more arrogant look before leaving.

Ellen waited a few seconds then ran to the door and looked out. Certain he was gone, she held on to her wrist and shrieked loudly.

^^^

“Dean.” Ellen's voice was calm as she held her wrist and walked into the lab. “Hi Johnny.” She lifted her head to him. “Dean.”

Dean, who was awake, turned his stool from his computer to Ellen. “Why are you here? Isn't this Ellen nap time?”

“I broke my wrist.” She rested her arm on the counter in front of him.

“You what?” He peered down at the already bruising and swelling wrist. “Shit. This is broke.”

“No kidding.” Her voice began to creep up. “Could you set it for me please?”

“Absolutely. How did this happen? Another survivor incident?” Dean asked.

“You could say so. You see I saw Melissa walking toward the . . .”

“Melissa?” Dean interrupted. “She's suppose to be in the tunnels.”

“Exactly, so I asked her why she wasn't. It appears Chester told her he was her relief.”

Dean could feel his temper began to rise. “Chester was in the lab? You told him to leave. Right?”

“Of course. Demanded him to leave, threatened him with security and *you*. Didn't work. I got mad, grabbed the clipboard he had. We struggled over it. I won. But . . . I pulled the clipboard too hard and smacked my wrist off the wall.”

Dean stood up immediately. “Where is he?” He asked harshly.

“Oh, he went back to the fields. I finally frightened him. So can you . . .”

“Johnny.” Dean set down his glasses, took off his lab coat and flung it across the room. “Take Ellen, double lead shield her front and back. X-ray that arm, show Andrea, and prep a room. I'll set it when I get back.”

Johnny moved to Ellen. “Sure Dean, where are you going?”

“To deal with Chester.” Without another word, Dean stormed from the lab.

Johnny stood amazed, he had never seen Dean that angry. Nodding his head approvingly he began to escort Ellen. “Go Dean.”

Dean huffed his way from the clinic. As he stepped on to the street he could see Henry's maintenance jeep a few feet up. Without saying anything, without asking for its loan, Dean jumped in and started it, driving off with a screech.

He was so unlike his mild mannered self as he drove to the edge of the fields. Chester had overstepped his last boundary. Seeing Chester walking from Miguel sparked an outrage in him he hadn't felt in a long time. Dean halted the jeep and jumped from it.

He merely lifted his eyes to Miguel who was reading off a clipboard as he stormed by him. Just about three feet or so past Miguel, Dean stopped, backed up and pulled the clipboard from Miguel's hands. "Thanks." He muttered, and continued his march toward the field workers. "Chester!" He called out to him.

Chester knew what it was about. He laid back down the tools he was picking up and began to meet Dean. He was armed and ready with his verbal defense for being in the tunnel lab. "Yes, Doctor?" He spoke snidely.

"Were you down in the tunnel lab?" Dean asked with demand.

"I was." Chester crossed his arms.

"And were you struggling with Ellen over a clipboard?"

"I was."

"That's all I wanted to know." With both hands grasping tightly to the clipboard, Dean revved back with all of his strength and swung forth at Chester crashing and breaking the board off the side of his head. The force of the blow and the pain, sent Chester to the ground. Dean took the half of the clipboard he held in his hand and tossed it onto Chester. No more needed to be said. He immediately left the field, jumped back into the jeep, and headed toward center town.

"Good picture Johnny took." Dean spoke calmly as he walked directly into the examining room, past Ellen and to the x-ray on the light. He placed on his glasses that he had stopped to retrieve, and let out a silent breath as he looked. "Broke. Clean though." Dean flicked off the light board.

"Looks like it. Johnny has everything ready for you." Ellen pampered her wrist and swung her legs back and forth as she sat on the table. "So what happened with Chester?"

"Not much." Dean moved the prepared tray closer to the table and sat down on the stool before her looking up to her. "I took care of him. He won't be in the lab anymore."

"Do you think he'll listen to you?" She asked as she laid her arm more accessibly to Dean.

"I guess." Dean wrapped the sock like cloth over her arm.

Ellen felt the heavy dampness of the first wet plaster strip. "So what exactly did . . ."

Miguel cleared his throat and tapped on the examining room door. "Dr. Hayes?" He and another field worker held up a very bloody Chester. "What should we do with him?"

"Um . . ." Dean only lifted his eyes while he continued setting Ellen's arm. "Take him in the other room, then tell Andrea . . . no wait, tell Johnny to stitch him. It'll be good practice."

Miguel smiled. "Got it." He and the other worker dragged Chester away.

Ellen snickered in a sneaky manner. "Wow, Dean." She lowered her head closer to him. "Did you come to my rescue?"

"Ellen." Almost embarrassed, Dean paused in his work, lifted his eyes, then smiled with a shake of his head. After a brief moment of eye contact he finished with her arm.

^^^

Frank straightened up Josh's appearance as they stood in the hallway just outside of Ellen's office. He placed his finger to his own lips as a quiet sign to Josh and spoke in his lowest voice. "Stay right here

until I pull you in.” He waited for Josh’s nod, then gave him the thumbs up. Excited and nervous he peeked his head into Ellen’s office. “Hey.”

Ellen lifted her head from her work with a smile. “Oh! My Surprise.”

“I hope . . . what the hell happened to your arm?” Frank noticed the obvious white cast. Concerned, he walked to her.

“I banged it off a wall. Long story, I’ll tell you at home. My surprise?”

“Did it hurt?” Frank asked as he lifted her cast.

“Yes! Frank! My Surprise.” She snatched her arm back.

“And why is Dean’s name written so big across it?”

“He wanted to be the first to sign it. Another long story. My surprise?”

“All right. All right.” Frank fiddled nervously with his goatee. “Ready?” He stepped to the door.

Ellen dropped her pencil and stood, afraid to ask the question. “It’s not like an animal or something, is it?” Ellen watched him reach to the hall. “I don’t want . . .” Her mouth dropped open when she saw. “Oh my God.” She moved slowly to Josh, breathing in almost with a tremble as she reached her hand to him. “Oh my God.”

Josh smiled brightly at her. “Ellen.”

Frank was proud of the moment. “Tell her Josh.” He smacked Josh’s arm.

“Frank’s cool.”

“No not that.” Frank smacked him again. “Tell her, you know the other thing.” He tilted his head to him.

Josh cleared his throat. “I’m home.”

Ellen gasped loudly with laughter, she turned to Frank. “Where did you? What . . .”

“Go on, El.” Frank motioned his head. “Give him a hug. I told him you were gonna give him a big hug when you saw him.”

“Will he let me?” She asked.

Josh didn’t let Frank answer, he answered for himself by reaching out to Ellen and touching her.

Ellen immediately threw her arms around him, holding him tightly, rocking him. “Look at you.” She stepped back reaching out her hands and cupping his face. “You’re so different. And I know Frank’s had a hold of you. You have no hair.” She rubbed his buzzed head.

“Josh and I have been hanging, huh Josh? We’re pals.”

“Frank’s cool.” Josh commented.

“See El.” Frank nodded.

Ellen smiled widely. “Frank’s cool. Frank *is* cool.” She stepped back from Josh and turned toward her husband. “How did this come about? I’m speechless.”

“He came to the back gate. Smelled really bad too. I let him in. We didn’t know what he’d be like or I would have told you earlier. My dad said I could work with him and I did. He’s different now. There’s some details that are special from other survivors, but I’ll talk to you about that later.”

“You did this for me? You went against everything you preach about survivors, and worked with him?” Ellen moved closer to him.

“He’s a kid, El. And he was a special kid to you.” He ran his hand down her face.

“Do you know how much I love you Frank?”

“Oh, yeah.” He closed his eyes as he felt her lips on his cheek.

“Well.” Joe spoke upbeat as he walked in the office. “I see Ellen likes her surprise.” He laid his hand on Josh’s shoulder.

Ellen stepped forward kissing Joe on the cheek. “Ellen loves it. Thank you for letting him back in.”

“It was all Frank.” Joe said complimentary. “But before he boggles you with the new details. I wanted to talk to you about this incident with Chester you had.”

Ellen cringed holding up her hands, she knew what was coming.

“What incident?” Frank spoke sternly.

“Ellen’s arm. How it got broke.” Joe saw his son flare up. “She didn’t tell you?”

“He broke my wife’s arm?” Frank took a deep breath and began to bolt from the office. Joe bodily blocked him.

“Frank. Stop.” Joe told him calmly. “It’s already been dealt with. Dean took care of it.”

“Ha!” Frank laughed still trying to get by his father. “What did he do quiz him to death?”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “He smashed him upside the head with a clipboard. Johnny had to put, what was it? Thirty stitches. Dealt with.”

Frank stepped back, his mouth opened. “Dean did that?” He nodded. “I’m impressed.”

Ellen had to interrupt. “But, you and Dean have to keep in mind, he didn’t break my arm. I was struggling with him and I whacked it off a wall.”

Frank didn’t want to hear it. “Same difference.”

“I believe so too.” Joe interjected. “And that’s the reason I’m here. *He* won’t . . .” Joe motioned his head to Josh. “Say anything, will he? Josh?”

Josh looked up and smiled. “Frank’s cool.”

“Just checking.” Joe nodded and continued. “Now, Dean came to me an hour ago and put in a request to council for Chester’s immediate ousting. As much as we’d like that, we believe Chester is up to something. So we decided not to oust him . . .yet.” He held up his hand. “We’re gonna stick him in holding until cryo process is complete. Keep him locked up. We may need information from him and we can’t chance that info being lost in the wilderness. So . . . just until then, he stays.”

Ellen had to voice her concerns. “What if he doesn’t give us any info we before hand?”

“My son.” Joe held out his palm pointing to Frank. “We know Chester knows something. So the last day, we tell Chester, if he doesn’t talk . . . then we lock Frank in a room with him. Hopefully with the fear that Frank can use any and all means to get him to spill his guts, Chester will sing.”

Finally a smile crossed Frank’s face. He liked that plan. To him there was something strangely and dementedly satisfying about being the human equivalent to sodium Pentothal.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

May 31

Dean had some cultures he wanted to check on back in the clinic lab. He hated having to do it, especially with needing to be down in the cryo-lab for the final meeting later on that night. He wanted to get rest. That was something he had been getting most of his from laying on the counter.

It struck him odd the sound of music softly seeping from the lab. No one was supposed to be there. But what struck him more was the song that played. It was something he hadn't heard in years. Since right after the plague in Ashtonville.

Tuning into the lab, Dean stopped. The music played slowly and he saw Ellen moving about the lab lit on by the fluorescent light above the sink. She moved slow as well, humming lightly as she prepared something at the back counter. He leaned, shoulder on the archway, arms folded, watching her for longer than he should. Listening to the song, the words, drawing up on sensations that the old melody brought forth. He cleared his throat slightly so as not to scare her.

It didn't work. With a slight peep, Ellen spun around. "Dean." She grabbed her chest.

"What are you doing here?" He asked walking in. He saw her reaching to turn off the cassette. "No, leave it on."

"You like it too?" Ellen asked.

"We used to listen to that tape . . ."

"Doc Breyer's office." Ellen let out a sad sigh. "When we were working on a cure for Taylor."

"You used to . . ." Dean stepped to the counter. "You used to have a CD of this. And keep the repeat button on for this song."

"Yeah." Ellen finished her supplies. "Can't do it now. If I want to hear the song I have to rewind. Too much work."

Dean smiled. "Without sounding corny. I always deemed this song . . ."

"Ours." Ellen finished the sentence. "Me, too." She folded her arms and looked at him. "Well." She stepped back. "I'd better go. We have that meeting in a few hours."

"What are you doing here?" Dean asked.

"One of my survivors is sick. And I wanted to do a throat culture tonight. You?"

"Me? Checking my petri dishes." He moved her tray to her. "You better go. Get some rest. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Yeah it is." Ellen grabbed her supplies and took a step away. She looked over her shoulder to Dean who watched her. "Night."

"Night, El." He smiled gently. "Oh, gloves. Wear them. Get into the habit."

Walking backwards, Ellen looked at him curiously. "That's a weird comment."

"Let's just say I'm getting concerned again. New people. Old germs. Germs we got rid of a while ago. Gloves. O.K.? You're carrying . . . you're pregnant."

Ellen hesitated, then she smiled. Quickly she moved to the center counter, opened the drawer and pulled out a pair of gloves. She held them up. "Night."

"Night." Dean waited until she left then faced the tape player. His hand reached up to shut off the deck when the slow song ended. But instead of his finger pressing 'stop' Dean hit 'rewind' and listened to it again.

^^^

The holding room had become his home for nineteen days. A bed, small bathroom, dresser and a light. The four walls were metal looking and not a window to let the sun shine through. Chester bided his time. He felt it was only a matter of time before his release. Not that Beginnings would release him, but his colleagues. The ones who were less than twenty-four hours away from awakening. They would be as

outraged as he at the thought of one of them being held, as if he were a prisoner.

Chester spent most of his time pacing, reading and thinking. He engaged in little conversation, no one wanted to speak to him. They merely opened the door at meal time and slid him in his food. The thinking part drove him crazy. Maybe it was the isolation of it, but his thoughts brought to him guilt. Guilt of what he knew. Guilt over what he could not tell.

He hadn't a clue what time it was. He assumed it was late evening because it had been awhile since his third meal. That's why it struck him as odd when he heard the key in the door.

George opened the door, stepped in with hesitation, then closed it behind him. "I need to talk to you Chester."

Chester swallowed. George made him nervous. Though the others in Beginnings just saw him as one of them, Chester saw him as the president. Because to Chester there were no years that had passed in his mind. He said nothing to George, he just sat on his bed and gave him his attention.

George jingled his keys in his hand as he slowly paced at the foot of the bed. "I'm sure you've kept track of days, Chester. And because of that, I'm sure that you're aware of the fact that in a short time those people will awaken." George stopped pacing. "And Chester I'm sure you are fully aware of what tomorrow will bring also. You see, because of your attitude, because of your sneaking and lying, Beginnings is led to believe that you know something you don't want them to know. In fact, it's totally obvious that you do. Now you can deny it all you want. But actions speak louder than words. Actions *always* speak louder than words." George jingled the keys even more. "Tomorrow, before the people awaken, Beginnings expects to find out what you know. Tomorrow Frank will open up this door and come in here to get the truth." He stormed closer to Chester with a fierce look on his face. "You know what that means don't you? Frank will get the truth out of you. Let me tell you how it will go. If he can't scare it out of you." George lowered his voice to a frightening whisper. "He will beat it out of you. Frank is cold, mean, and heartless." George stood straight and stepped back with confidence. "The truth will come out. You will fold to the truth whether you intend to or not. So save yourself Chester. Save yourself." George backed to the door and opened it. "If the truth is going to come out, why go through all that torture. Do the right thing. You know what that is." Shutting the door, with no more to say, George left. He hoped that his warning to Chester would be heeded. George locked the door once more, placed his keys in his pocket, and faced a waiting Joe. "I talked to him."

"Do you think it'll work?" Joe asked.

"Positive."

"Good." Joe walked with him. "Whether Frank is looking forward to kicking his ass or not, I'd hate to see him beat the truth out of him."

"Me too Joe." George patted him on the back. "Me too."

^^^

After the 3:00 a.m. check, like they were his pupils. Ellen, Henry, and Johnny sat on stools, backs leaning against the counter, watching a very serious scientist. Dean paced a little before them, his eyes tired, his body moving in slow motion. "Everything seems to be in order. Melissa is going to double check the make-shift hospital in the morning. Johnny will be on site, down here from eight on. Henry, you'll stay until then. Now . . . I have a surprise for you. I've prepared a little something." He turned from them and walked across the room.

Ellen squirmed with excitement and leaned to Henry, whispering. "Like a reward. He makes the best sugar cookies."

An extended hand, Dean's hand, holding a homemade booklet, reached out to Ellen. "You're not in kindergarten, Ellen. This is not a treat." Dean handed one to Henry and Johnny also. "I made an agenda slash pamphlet for all of you."

Ellen flipped through the spiral bound pages. "Look how anal he is Henry. He bound them with that contraption they had down here."

Dean shut her pamphlet for her. “Ellen, pay attention. There will be a quiz today following the afternoon check.”

Ellen laughed loudly. “A quiz.” She leaned over to her other side to Johnny, whispering . “He’s not serious is he?”

Johnny rolled his eyes and nodded his head. “He loves giving quizzes. But don’t worry, they’re usually multiple choice.”

Dean held his book up. “I want all of you to go through this book today every chance you get. We’re gonna take a few minutes right now and go over it. Turn to page one.” He waited for the sequential sound of flipping pages. “We know it’s going to happen. My guess, and by the data we have, it’s going to be late afternoon, early evening sometime. We’ve all noticed the changes. Near normal vitals, some of our subjects are experiencing REM, and a few have had body twitches.”

Ellen snickered as she tried to read ahead. “And the men have lost their erections.”

All three males in the room snapped at her in unison. “El!”

Ellen hunched. “Like you didn’t notice.” She lifted her head. “I’m sorry Dean, continue.”

“Thank you. I’m going to go through this fast so keep up. Now we’ve already prepared the anti-dote. Fifty syringes ready to go. You’ve all been assigned numbers. No hesitation, just injections. Through the clothing and as quickly as you can. Listed on page one is our equipment. Page two.” Dean flipped. “The awakening. Henry has installed that new lock on the outside so they can’t get out once they wake. We have to be the ones that go in there. Assuming they awake when we aren’t here, the oxygen feed should allow them to have enough air. Expect pandemonium. Expect these people to be confused, expect . . .” He noticed Ellen’s hand waving about. “Yes, Ellen?”

“What about going to the bathroom?”

“You’ll have time to go to the bathroom.”

“No not me, them. They’ve been asleep for six years. They’re really gonna have to go bad when they get up. I mean after four hours of sleep, I . . .”

“Ellen.” Dean tried to remain calm, even though Henry and Johnny giggled like ten year olds. “They are just gonna have to wait until we get them to the hospital.”

“But that’s a quarter of a mile trudge out of the tunnel to the bus. I know I can barely make it down the steps to brew the coffee first and . . .”

“Ellen.” Dean snapped. “They’ll deal with it. They’ll have to hold it.”

“Fine.” Ellen sat back.

“Continuing. Page three. Transporting.” He raised his eyes to Ellen. “Some of these people will be sick. We’ve all seen the plague. You know what to expect. It’ll be better once we get them to the hospital. I have volunteers lined up. If the ones that are well ask, their belongings, if that’s what’s in the numbered boxes, will be distributed at Joe’s discretion. Frank’s promised us round the clock security out there for our safety incase some of them are insane. The only problem I foresee is that the hospital was placed so far out. Joe is issuing a jeep to our team for the five mile hike.” He noticed Ellen’s hand waving again. “Yes Ellen, what now?”

“Why did Miguel and his men build it so far away. Do you and Joe really think they’re that much of a physical threat?”

“No. That pre-fab structure was intended to be a sort of jail. The location is where supposed to be set up. Besides, we don’t trust these people yet. We want them far away from the general population. And let’s remember to thank Miguel and his crew for erecting it so fast.” His eyes lifted and he sighed. “Yes El, again. We’d like to get out of here before dawn.”

“What if I go into labor out there?”

“We’ll drive you back . . . now, page four . . . What Ellen?!” Dean hand began to crinkle his fresh pamphlet.

“What if say, Henry has the jeep and we have to wait until he gets back, then that’s . . .”

“You’ll make it. Don’t worry.” Dean’s patience was wearing thin.

“Fine. You know how fast I deliver. I just don’t want to have to pull of to the side of the road to drop

this . . .”

“Ellen!” Dean took the three steps necessary to stand directly in front of her. “Please, please, please.” He leaned his face into her and placed his index finger softly on her lips. “Shh.” He smiled when he saw her agree. “Thank you. Page four. Getting them settled. Now once . . .” He saw Ellen stand up. “Where are you going?”

“Home.” She kissed Johnny on the cheek. “Fill me in.” She told him.

Dean extended his arm blocking her. “Why?”

“Dean, it’s late and you are taking way too long with this. I need my rest. I’m pregnant you know.”

“You can’t go, Ellen. I won’t allow it.”

“Yes I can.” She moved his arm. “What are you going to do? Kick me off the team? I know this stuff, Dean. We’ve been over it a million times. You’re being boring.” Tapping him on the cheek with a smile she moved and stood by the door.

Dean, in frustration slammed his hands against his thighs. “Anyone else bored? Anyone else want to leave. By all means if you are, be my guest, be like Ellen. I’m sure this can wait.” He spoke with sarcasm holding his pamphlet holding hand to the door.

“Thanks, Dean.” Henry stood up and walked by him. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Dean.” Johnny walked by him too.

With a buzz all three walked out. Not only did Dean lose his team in the middle of a very important review session, but Henry who was supposed to monitor the subjects until eight was gone too, and Dean was stuck there even longer.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

June 1

Joe tossed his just finished cigarette to the ground and sipped his coffee before blowing out the last of his smoke. He ignored Dean's drastic coughs, as they stood side by side outside of the holding center waiting for Frank. Glancing down at his watch, then back up, Joe smiled when he saw his son's figure making his way over the crest. "Here he comes."

"It's about time." Dean commented. "He looks pissed."

Frank coughed and sneezed as he made his approach. He rubbed his hand on the back of his nose, sniffed again then spit. "Fuckin allergies. Morning Dad."

"Dean can give you something for that, Frank."

"I'll live. Ready?" He reached for the door knob. "And why is he here?" Frank asked.

"Two reasons." Joe answered. "One, to annoy you and keep you mad. And two, if Chester starts spilling his guts, do you really think you'll understand what he's saying." Joe snuck ahead and opened the door to holding. "And Dean did nail him, so there may be some fear of him also."

Dean decided to use the moment to gloat. "Yep. Someone had to come to Ellen's rescue."

Frank snarled at his comment. "You know what you did really wouldn't bother me if I didn't have to stare at your name on her cast every day."

"She wanted my autograph Frank, what can I say. She was very grateful."

"Right Dean." Frank headed to the hall leading to Chester's room.

Joe hurried between the two men halting any further arguments as he did. "All right, you guys know what to do." Reaching for his keys, Joe unlocked the door, folded his arms and leaned against the wall motioning his hand to the door for Frank. "All yours."

Frank knocked once on the closed door. "Chet, it's time." He waited for Dean, opened the door, and they both walked in.

Joe looked at his watch as he saw them enter, he wondered how long it would take.

"Fuck!" Frank's deep voice yelled from the room. "Dad!" He poked his head out, startling Joe.

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"He's dead." Frank bolted back in the room.

"What?" Joe raced into Chester's room, his heart pounded in anger at the vision in front of him. "Son of a bitch."

Frank held tightly to Chester's legs which swayed two feet above the floor, mid-room. He lifted the heavy body up so as Dean could free Chester from the electrical cord in which he used to hang himself.

"Dean, you got it?"

Dean stood on a chair, reaching as high as he could. "One second, Frank. Ready . . ." He loosened the cord from the beam in which it was tied to. "He's gonna fall . . . Now!"

Chester's body tumbled down to Frank, the weight of his lifeless body nearly knocked Frank over.

"I can't believe he hung himself." Frank laid Chester on the floor and immediately pulled the brown cord from him, which seemed to have embedded itself in Chester's flesh. He felt for a pulse. "I can't feel anything. You?" He slid out of the way for Dean.

Dean dropped to his knees and felt. "No. But his color's still good and his body is warm."

"Can we save him?"

"Let's try. You do compressions, I'll do the breaths . . . Joe." Dean looked up. "In the examining room at receiving is oxygen. Can you . . ."

"On my way." Joe hurried from the room.

"Frank, you ready?" Dean positioned himself.

"Ready." Frank cupped his hands over Chester chest.

Dean placed his fingers on Chester's nose and tilted back his head. Leaning to his mouth, he stopped.

"Dean, what's wrong?" Frank was prepared. "Now's not the time to be timid."

“It’s useless, Frank.” Dean gently released his hold on Chester. “His neck is broken.”

“Broke?” Frank questioned as he stood.

“The force of the jolt had to do it. Common.” Slowly, Dean rose.

“So what information was so . . .” Frank paused. His eyes widened. “Fuck! No! Why now?” After spinning turn of his body, he drove his fist into the aluminum wall causing a thunderous rumble.

“O.K.” Dean stepped back, weirded out by his reaction. Just as he was about to try to calm Frank he heard Frank say ‘when’ and Dean tossed his hands up. “You’re talking into that stupid headset. I hate when you do that without warning.”

“Get the doomsday team ready.” Frank flung off his headset and faced Dean. “Your sleepyheads are getting up early. The countdown has begun.”

“Shit. No. Now?” Dean looked at his watch. “It’s not supposed to happen yet. No one’s ready.”

“They better get ready.”

“Ellen is . . .”

“Probably still asleep. Time frame?” Frank asked.

“Twenty minutes until full awakening.”

“We’d better move. I’ll get El.”

“Drive me to town?” Dean asked as they stepped over Chester.

“You got it.” Frank moved behind Dean to the door.

Joe sidestepped out of the way of Dean who raced through the door. “Whoa. What’s going . . .”

“They’re awakening.” Dean said as he flew by. “Have to go.”

Joe turned in his questioning. “What about . . .”

“Dead.” Frank answered as he too walked through the door. “Handle it. Thanks.”

“O.K.” Holding the oxygen, Joe was alone in holding. With the exception of Chester’s corpse. Setting down the tank, he walked to the body and squatted down. He looked over the paling body-- lifeless, peaceful, staring close to the green eyes that were still open. Joe shook his head slowly. “What was it that you didn’t want to tell us Chester?” He paused and took a deep breath, closing Chester’s eyes. “What did you know?”

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“Ellen.” Dean rushed over to her as she entered the lab. “What took you so long. One minute left. I know you don’t want to miss this.”

“I had to get a quick shower, Dean.” She hurried to position. Henry and Johnny sat before the glass gawking like they were getting ready to watch a peep show. “I don’t want them to wake up and see me messy.”

“Only you.” Dean smiled as he led her to the glass. “Look . . . It’s happening.”

They watched wide eyed, without moving, barely breathing, as the process began. A low level humming happened followed by a click, and the thin almost see through wires that suspended the fifty-three people began to lower, gently dropping them to the floor. The humming noise turned into a hissing and the area behind the glass wall began to fill with a white steam. The same type of white steam which emerged from the cryo-case with the embryos. No one knew for certain whether it was suppose to happen or if a malfunction had occurred. They had to wait, and they had to watch.

“Dean.” Frank’s voice came over the radio. “We’re in position.”

Dean merely picked up the radio and spoke softly. “Hold on.” His eyes never leaving the chamber.

With a loud vacuuming sound, the smoke began to clear from the room, with it brought this vision of people. They stirred about slowly, not realizing what had happened. As if it was rehearsed they began to remove the white hooded suits they wore, letting them drop off, stepping out of them and wearing only flesh colored body suits underneath.

Within seconds of their undressing, some of them began to tremble, their bodies shook, then two, five, eight, dropped to the ground.

Number forty-three pounded on the glass as he tried to call. His words were muffled. "What's happening?" His face frantic.

Dean scurried to give everyone their syringes. "They can't be experiencing the virus. They can't. The chamber is . . ." He paused as he gave Ellen hers. "Shit, they weren't in a cryo-chamber." He ran to the door. "Henry hurry with the keys. It's the suits. They're wearing cryo-suits. And breathing our air."

Henry fumbled between his box of syringes and keys to open the door.

Dean upon hearing the unlocking, flung open the door. "Now, everyone."

Each of them had lost their bearings as they bolted in. They no longer had the people lined up like they expected, they now had a room filled with dropping bodies, shaking, convulsing.

Number forty-three seemed to be the only one in control. His mind raced with confusion. "What is happening?" He grabbed hold of Henry's shoulders. "What's going on?"

"The plague. We have to give them the anti-serum." Henry dropped to the floor and injected a shaking woman.

Without hesitation, number forty-three grabbed a handful of syringes from the box to help the four people who desperately tried to inject the people who seemed to be fighting them.

A woman's hand reached up claspng Ellen's hair, pulling it, her other hand swung freely at her while her body thrashed. "Some one help." Ellen tried to shield her stomach from the painful tantrum being thrown at her. She was at a loss, Dean, Henry, Johnny, and number forty-three, seemed to be experiencing the same chaos. Feeling the hard cold stinging of a palm across her face, nearly knocking the syringe from which she gripped between her teeth, Ellen in angry reaction, clenched her fist, and struck down at the woman, rendering her unconscious and enabling her to inject her. She scooted to the next person, grabbed a syringe, placed it in her mouth and uncapped it.

"El." Dean reached out and grabbed it from her mouth. "What the hell are you doing? Precaution." He immediately injected the man whom Ellen knelt over. "Don't be stupid again." He tossed the syringe in box.

The bodies still shook despite the anti-serum, as Dean knew would happen. They would have to experience some of the plague before they got well. The entire chamber room was in total disarray with the suffering, even though the numbers left to inject began to dwindle. Recognizing it was time, Dean grabbed his radio, and called out. "Frank we need your guys in here, these people aren't walking to the tunnels."

Ellen had used her last syringe, and it was at the same time as Johnny. Breathing deeply and feeling like she had just been in a wrestling match. She lifted her hand for him to help her to her feet. She stood, staggering, and walked from the cryo-wall. She found a chair and sat down.

Seeing it, Number forty-three ran out after her. "Are you all right?" He knelt down before her immediately grabbing her wrist. "Your pulse is very rapid right now." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "Breathe slowly through your nose before you hyperventilate."

"I'll be all right." Ellen's breaths were short as she stared at the man that she'd only seen with his eyes closed. He looked different to her, she didn't think his hair would be that gray for as young as he looked. "I'll be all right, Juan."

"Juan?" He smiled then placed his hand on her stomach. "You aren't having any pains right? What are you five or six months along?"

"Almost nine."

Dean stepped from the wall and rushed over to Ellen. "What's wrong?" He saw the man's hand on her and abruptly Dean removed it. "If you don't mind." He bodily moved number forty-three from her way. "El?" He placed his hands on her flush face. "What's wrong?"

"Dean, I'm fine. I'm just hyperventilating." She spoke with huffs. "The excitement."

"Calm down." He placed his face close to her. "Breathe through your nose."

Number forty-three stepped closer. "Sir, I am a doctor, if you'd like, I . . ."

"So am I!" Dean snapped still holding Ellen's face. His eyes lifted when Frank stormed in. "Frank." Frank knew when he saw Ellen's bouncing shoulders, that something was amiss. "El . . . Dean what

happened to my wife?”

Ellen began to grow annoyed with the attention. She mustered up enough air to shout. “I’m fine! I . . . just . . . can’t . . . catch . . . my . . . breath.”

“Fuck.” Frank bent closer to Ellen. “I knew something was going to happen. “

Number forty-three tried to inject. “She’ll be all right. But sir, you’re wife should not have been in there in her condition.”

Frank nodded. “Who are you?”

“Sorry, I’m Doctor . . .”

“Juan.” Ellen lifted herself up to stand before Frank. “His name is . . .” With rolling eyes and a wobbly head, Ellen fell forward into Frank, and passed out.

^ ^ ^ ^

“All right Josh.” Joe tossed a box to him. “Help me pull his stuff out.” Joe began to unzip Chester’s duffel bag. “Not like you understand me, but we’re just gonna go through and pull out his viable stuff. You know, shit we can use in circulation in the community.” He turned his head to Josh who was opening the box. “Just take the stuff out.” Joe unloaded the duffel bag. “Good . . . good.” He tossed the underwear to the side and noticed that Josh had something. “What’s that you got?”

Josh held up the thick blue book.

“Let’s see.” Joe took it. “Fun with Bio-physics. By Chester Arnold Nelson.” He noticed Josh’s hand reach to it. “You want this?” He smiled and gave it to him. “All yours. Maybe you’ll get real smart and learn something. Be that Bio-physicist that the community desperately needs.”

Josh hugged the book and scooted off to a corner with it, forgetting about the chore Joe had given him to do. To him he had found a new toy.

Joe continued in his work less his helper. He made the mistake of giving the book to Josh. Now he was stuck finishing the minor detail on his own.

^ ^ ^ ^

She stood in the middle of the fields in her dream. Ellen’s hands spread outward, face feeling the warmth of the sun. It would have been the perfect dream had it of not had been for those pestering rain drops. Trickling on her face as she stared at the bright blue sky. Annoying would be the word. Ellen tried wiping them from her face and as she did she began to awaken. Her first vision standing above her in the well lit clinic was Frank. He held a glass of water in his hands. His huge hand dipping in the glass.

Frank noticed her eyes open before he splashed her again. “Hey Andrea! She’s awake now. El.” He set the water down.

Ellen lifted her self to a sitting position. “I can’t believe you were throwing water on me.” She ran her hand down her face.

“Andrea said to wake you up. And I figured since you fainted.” He leaned forward and kissed her. She didn’t respond. “What’s wrong?”

Ellen sat up. “How long was I out.”

“Andrea said to give you an hour then wake . . .”

“An hour!?” Ellen swung her legs off of the examining table. “I’m missing everything.”

“Hold it.” Frank stopped it. “You’re just gonna have to miss it. You passed out. You’re pregnant. You’ve been doing too much.”

“So what.” Ellen tried again to get off the table, but again Frank stopped her. “Frank.”

“No. El. Strict orders.” He laid his hands on her knees. “Andrea says no. Dean doesn’t need you there. He said so. You just go home and rest.”

Sideways went Ellen’s mouth in a pout before she let her head drop.

“El?”

She swayed her head slowly from side to side. "I worked so hard for this moment."

"I know. But you can't risk it. Home. O.K.?"

She nodded apprehensively, then sighed. "All right. It's not like I'll be doing anything. Just vital signs. I just . . . I just wanted to bet here. I worked so hard. So . . . so hard." She seeped forth a snuffle.

Frank whined quietly and tossed his head back. "Andrea will have a fit. All right. Let's go. I'll drive you."

"Yes." Ellen slid from the table and immediately hugged Frank. "You're the best."

"I'm also an asshole for letting you go up there with those people." Frank laid his hands on her shoulders and brought her to the door. "But who can stop you?"

"You. You can. You can make me do anything."

"El." Frank halted in their walking. "I'm driving you. You could have stopped with the snuffle. Right now you're laying it on too thick."

"I mean every word, though." Ellen started to walk again.

"Yeah, I bet." Frank hooked his arm around her, tugged her to him, kissed her and led Ellen from the clinic.

^^^

Ellen wasn't expecting the make-shift hospital to look like it did when she entered. She had seen it empty, beds lined up and down the long building. But the beds were full, and it was eerie. It had been a long time since she saw that many patients at one time. Ellen knew she missed the excitement of bringing them in. The volunteers of the evening were on their way out when she walked in. She felt a little like she had failed, like she didn't see it through. But she found comfort in the old saying 'better late than never'. She wanted to walk through and see them all. The room was silent. Johnny and Dean were at bedsides doing blood work, Henry appeared to be trying to do vitals. Ellen supposed she could help there, that wouldn't be too strenuous.

Three patients down, she made her way to Henry. "Hi." She folded her hands behind her back looking over his shoulder. "Need help?"

"El." He smiled. "How do you do this blood pressure thing? I've been making up the numbers on the charts, but now that you're here." He stepped back. "Hey, how do you feel?"

"I feel fine." She took the blood pressure cuff and wrapped it around the sleeping patient's arm. As she lifted the stethoscope, she noticed the bandages up and down the man's forearm. "Henry what happened to him?"

"Oh." Henry blushed. "I was trying to do an IV and every time I got the needle in there, Dean said it was wrong and I had to do it again."

Ellen counted the sticks. "You poked him nine times?"

"I don't know what I'm doing. I can fix almost anything. But this, this takes skill."

Ellen tilted her head and smiled at him. "It doesn't take skill Henry, it takes practice. And by the looks of this man's arm, you've earned a degree." She returned to doing the blood pressure. No sooner did she finish and stand up straight, Ellen felt the tap on her shoulder. She removed the stethoscope from her ears and turned around. "Dean?"

"Someone snuck in." He laid his hand on her cheek. "You feel cool. How are you?"

"Fine. My feelings are hurt." She blindly handed the equipment back to Henry. "I heard you didn't need me."

"Who me? I was worried about you. But never, never do I not need you." Dean smiled.

Ellen smiled in return. "O.K., so, explain to me how we're set up, since I slept through it all."

"Allow me to give you the grand tour." He placed his arm around her and walked slowly. "Fifty survived, as you know. Right now they are all zonked. I can't say whether it's my anti-serum, or a cryo-sleep. I'm betting it's the after effects of cryo, because our number forty-three is out like a light. All of our patients as you knew, were in the moderate to severe stages of the plague. They are under control."

Dean stopped and faced her. "It was the first real test of our serum." He smiled, giving a proud look. "And it worked."

"So what now?"

"Now, immediately-now. A lot of blood work to do. Then I thought I would let Johnny and Henry leave and I was going to monitor these people for the next few hours before I turn the hospital over to our volunteers again." He started to walk with her again, speaking softly as he did. "But, you showed up. Now you can hang around and monitor them with me. Henry brought a deck of cards. Wanna get a game of strip poker going while we monitor?"

Ellen paused and started to laugh. "Oh won't I be the sight with this body if I lose?"

"I'll tell you what. If you lose . . ." Dean nudged in to her. "You can owe me."

^ ^ ^ ^

The streets in the living section in town were silent and empty as Dean walked with Ellen to her home. He clutched her bright green knapsack that Ellen used for books and notes, in his hands in front of him, and it bounced against his legs as he walked.

"Dean, you didn't have to walk me home."

"I needed to. I just want to unwind before I go to sleep, and walking helps."

"It was long day." She kept her pace slow with his. "We all did good didn't we?"

"Yeah we did." Dean chuckled. "For a bunch of people who were out of their league, we pulled this one off."

"We drove you nuts though."

"That you did. Almost as nuts as Frank does. And speaking of him . . ." Dean motioned his head forward.

Ellen glanced up and stopped walking. Frank was sitting on the step to the house. He stared down at the ground. "I guess this is goodnight."

Dean handed her over her belongings. "You did good El, thanks for going out on the limb with us."

"It's what I had to do." She clutched her bag. "It's what I wanted to do."

"Even though you made me want to pull out my hair during this all, I'm glad you were a part of it." He stepped closer to her and lightly kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks." He placed his hand on her face. "Have a good night. He-man awaits."

"Goodnight Dean." Ellen moved slowly to her house carrying her not-so-heavy bag. Frank didn't look up at all, he kept his stare down. Ellen even wondered if perhaps he had fallen asleep like that. Just in case he did, she dropped her bag with a thump in front of him. "I'm home." She sat down on the step next to him with a grunt. "Happy?" She ran her hand up and down his arched back.

"Extremely." He turned his head to her smiling.

"So if we're so happy, why are we moping on the step?"

"I was just giving a lot of thought to these new people . . . and no smart comment." He felt her hand run down his arm to his hand, he gripped, he gripped it tight. "What's going to happen El? They wake up, what are they gonna want? What do they expect? These people, in a way I envy them for not having any memories of a dying world. But I also resent them for the same reason. Does that make any sense?"

"Wow." Ellen shuddered. "Talk about deep thought. We have to wait and see, that's all we can do. Actually I'm impressed with you, and I'm cold. Can we go in?"

"Sure." He stood up first and held his hands out to her, helping Ellen to her feet.

"Frank." Ellen spoke as she opened the door, She turned to face him as she paused on the steps. "I know you are thinking about this. But, try to let your mind be at ease. The baby's coming. And we can now put some time aside for ourselves." She laid her hand on his cheek. "I'm done with this cryogenics stuff. We can go back to being normal." She smiled and spoke to him with confidence. "It's over."

"No, El." He slid her hand to his lips, cupped it, and kissed it. "You're wrong. It's not over. Because I have a sickening feeling . . . It's only the beginning."

DIVIDED POSSESSION

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

June 7

Henry was nervous, his hands tapped continuously on his knees as he sat on a chair waiting on Dean who stood talking with Ellen across the lab. He was certain he was dying, or at the very least, he had some sort of cancer that would spread across his face and eventually kill him. He just wanted Dean's diagnosis to be over with. He wished they would hurry up.

"I wanted to do this when Frank wasn't around." Ellen whispered.

"Andrea must of forgot. I can do the exam."

"Dean." Ellen snickered. "It's not just an exam. It's . . . an exam."

Professionally looking Dean nodded. "And I can handle it. Room three. I'll be there in a moment."

"And I'll be . . ." Ellen winked. "Waiting." She took a step to the door giggling and looked back at Henry. "Oh, Henry, your lip. That cold sore will go away, Frank used to get them all the time. Don't worry."

"Thanks, El." Henry said. "But, no offense. I'll wait for Dean's prognosis of this thing. You're just a nurse."

Shrugging Ellen walked out.

Henry watched Dean staring at the door. "I'm telling."

"Telling what?" Dean walked over to him grabbing a glove and placing it on.

"On you and what you're gonna do to El. And what is on my lip?"

"Calm down Henry, it's a cold sore." Dean examined.

"But it's huge." His hand reached up to touch it, but quickly removed it. "Where did it come from? I've never had one before."

"I venture to guess our newest members of the community. A cold sore is caused by a virus, and they . . ."

"Oh my God!" He panicked. "I have the plague?"

"Henry no. Just some sort of bug they brought with them. They were bringing with them germs that we thought were long gone. They're back." Dean took off his gloves and tossed them, then walked over to the sink and washed his hands.

"But I wasn't kissing them. I swear."

"That's good to know. Now I have some ointment. It'll help dry it up." Dean walked to the counter to search for the medicine.

"Fast I hope." Henry stood up. "So. How are you going to do it."

"Do what?"

"Examine Ellen like . . . like that."

"Henry." Dean laughed and handed him the small jar. "I'm a doctor."

"Still, Dean. That takes a lot of control to be . . . there. You still love her. I couldn't have that much control doing that even if I didn't love the person."

"That's what separates us." Dean moved to the door. Frank stood there. "Frank."

"Where's my wife." Frank asked. "I know she was trying to sneak an appointment in without me knowing."

"She's in the exam room. I have to do the exam." Dean slipped by him. "Give us a couple minutes."

"O.K." Frank shrugged and walked in as Dean left. "I hate him touching her. But, it's only an exam. Right." He saw Henry turn his back. "Are you mad at me."

"No." Henry answered.

"Then look at me. Why am I staring at your back?"

Henry turned around.

Frank screamed. "Oh my god!" he overreacted. "What is on your lip?"

Henry, irritated, and nery, marched up to Frank, grabbed his cheeks and kissed him on the lips.

“The same thing that’s gonna be on your lip tomorrow.”

“Uh!” Frank wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. “Fuck. Fuck. No wonder Dean is telling my wife I’m gay.” He ran to the sink, turned the water on and washed his mouth. “You probably have a crush on me or something.”

^^^

Joe didn’t look pleased at all as he walked with Andrea to the make-shift hospital. His hands deep in his pockets as he jingled his keys he carried. “How long?”

“About an hour now.” Andrea stepped in perfect stride with him.

“Does Dean know?”

“I just sent word with Melissa. Him and Ellen are scheduled to be here shortly anyhow.”

“Demeanor?” Joe asked as he nodded to the guard and reached for the door.

“Well . . .” Andrea answered. “We really haven’t had a chance to capture their demeanor. They just began stirring. All except for him. He’s been awake for a few hours.”

“All right.” Joe paused before opening the door. “Let’s get them some food, until Dean and Ellen get here. I know they have this system of registration and examination planned for when they awake. Let’s let them get it ready and implement it. Until that process is complete, get the word out to all volunteers. No one is to say anything what so ever to these people about anything.”

“When do you plan on speaking to them.” Andrea asked as Joe opened the door for them. “After Dean and Ellen register them all?”

“Yes. Then I have an idea who I’m dealing with. I’ll read their reports. We’ve waited this long. I can wait another day.”

“Even before speaking to him.” Andrea pointed across the make shift hospital to Number Forty-Three who sat up in bed, reading and alert. “Something strikes me as different about him.”

Joe looked around to the antsy and stirring people in their beds, then to Number Forty-Three. “Yeah. You may be right. I just may make an exception.”

^^^

“It’s about time.” Frank griped as Dean opened the examining room door. “You look weird.”

“Um . . .” Dean stepped aside. “No, not at all.”

Frank’s eyes shifted from Dean to Ellen who laid on the table. “EI?”

“He was very gentle.” Ellen snickered.

“O.K.” Frank stated with lack of comprehension, even when Dean rolled his eyes. “Dean, how is she?”

“Fine.” Dean answered as he put the fetal monitor on Ellen’s stomach. The baby’s heartbeat rang out. “Listen how strong.” Dean smiled. “And she can go any day. I mean any day, Frank. She’s dilated two centimeters and fully effaced.” Dean waited for that mortified look to strike Frank when he realized what sort of check-up he gave Ellen. It didn’t happen, Frank looked pleased. And Dean knew why when Frank opened his mouth.

“Really? Wow, that is amazing Dean how you can tell that just by talking to her.”

Dean set down the instrument. “Right Frank. Ellen, see you at the hospital?”

“You got it.” She smiled and watched him leave. “Get my clothes for me Frank please, they’re on the chair.” She sat up.

“Sure.” He strutted over to the chair and his hand paused as he reached for them. “Why are you completely undressed? You’ve never . . .” He turned to her and gave the look that Dean had waited to see. “Oh my God!”

“Frank just hand me my clothes.”

“Please tell me Ellen, tell me it’s not true. Please tell me he guessed at that stuff right?” He set her

clothes on her lap.

“No Frank. He examined me.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” Frank paced in small circles then found a chair and plopped into it, he covered his face with his hands. “You let him too? Oh, this is just going to bug me all day.”

“You are overreacting about this, Frank. He examined me. That’s it.” She slid from the table walking to him. “Calm down. He’s a doctor and you shouldn’t let it bother you.”

“All right.” Frank slid his hands from his face. He was going to be man about it. “I’ll try.”

“Good,” Ellen began to dress, but paused. “Unless of course you look at it like, Dean knows me today a little bit better than you do. Then you can let it bother you.”

With a long whine and a grunt, Frank dropped his face into his hands again.

^ ^ ^ ^

“Jason Godrichson. Doctor.” Number Forty three extended his and to Joe.

“Joe Slagel. Leader.” Joe sat in the chair next to the bed. “I run the community here.”

“Nice to meet you. What can I help you with. The nice Asian man said you had to speak to me.”

Joe was a bit apprehensive, and possibly defensive since Chester had set precedence. “What can you tell me about these people?”

“I’m afraid not very much.”

“Is this your attitude.”

“No.” He answered calmly. “It’s my lack of knowledge. You see, I’m not really part of this.”

“But you defrosted with the rest of them.”

“I did. But I’m what you would call a stowaway.” Jason saw the confused look on Joe’s face “Let me explain. You see my father belonged to this organization. I don’t know much about it. But I do know he donated large sums of money to be a part of it. I thought perhaps he had gone eccentrically mad when he said he reserved his spot to be preserved when the world was faced with extinction. Well my father passed away and about six weeks later there’s a knock on my door. It’s these two men looking for Dr. Jason Godrichson. I said I was he, I am he, only I’m junior. They said it was time, checked my identification and I was whizzed off to this lab. I could have spoken up but I figured that I had no wife or children, what did I have to lose right? The world was obviously headed to destruction. No one was the wiser. I slipped right in during the commotion. But I owe you and your people an apology. You’re not getting the great chemist you would have gotten had my father been placed in cryogenics.”

Joe was at a loss. He listened to the man speak, and he felt his honesty. “So there’s nothing you can tell us about these people. Who they are, what their fields were?”

“No. But I can see what I can find out if you’d like.”

“I would like. You said you were a doctor. Can I ask your field?”

“Originally I was a physician, but then I turned my hobby into my life’s work. Quantum physics.”

“Oh brother.” Joe rolled his eyes. “A time guy. Can’t say we have a need for that.”

“Doesn’t look like you have a need for much. Of course, I haven’t seen very much of the place. From what I’ve seen, things are together nicely. How long was I out.”

“Six years.” Joe answered.

Calmly, Jason nodded. “Seems I missed a great deal. Can I ask where I’m at and what happened?”

“Plague. Wiped everything out. A group of us came here. Started things up, got things running. We began opening our doors to the outside not long ago, but only a select get in. It’s a jungle out there. We’re heavily secured because of it. I’m sure you saw the guards. Basically, if you live in Beginnings, you live safe.”

“A pull your weight, or leave society?” Jason asked.

“Without a doubt.” Joe stood up. “I’ll let you rest. And I’d appreciate anything you can find out for us.”

“Certainly.” Jason reached for his book. “Mr. Slagel, if I can, may I ask a favor?”

“Depends.”

“Could I have one of those cigarette in your pocket and . . . Possible, my clothes.” Jason lifted the gown he wore.

“Not a problem.” With a smile, Joe reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a cigarette. The clothes would have to wait just until he trusted Jason a little bit more.

^^^

Ellen looked at the anally prepared agenda Dean had given her for them. She would start, patient by patient. Vitals, name, and anything else she could get from them. She'd write it down on the chart, drop it on the foot of the bed, and Dean would trail behind her, doing his follow up questioning and checking on Ellen.

Ellen reached the third patient as Dean reached the second. Dean said nothing to the man who just stared. He just picked up his chart and shook his head. “El.” He marched over to her. “El.” He tugged her away as she made her approach to the dark haired older woman lying awake in the bed. “Look what you wrote down.” He showed her the chart.

Ellen looked and shrugged. “O.K., so?”

“So?” Dean read it. “*Skipped this one. Patient not viable?* Ellen, please, be a bit more sensitive. You didn't even do vitals on him.”

“Why?” She closed the chart and walked it back over to the bed. “Why Dean. What is our basic rule here? One must contribute. He's a walking vegetable. So why worry about him?”

“Ellen!” Dean was taken aback. “You can't. Never mind.” He would have argued with her, but he figured what would be the point. It wasn't worth going bald over. He returned to the man.

After doing vital statistics, Ellen picked up the chart from the third patient's bed, and flipped it open as she stood before the woman. She jotted her results. “I need your name.” Ellen held a pen.

The woman lifted herself slightly. “You don't know it?” She spoke with an English accent.

“Not unless I'm psychic.”

The woman closed her mouth tightly and laid her head back.

“Look.” Ellen tapped at her chart with her pen as she glanced upon the woman she found recognizable from the bruise on her face. “I don't have time for your games. You either give me your name, or I call you what we did in the lab, Ethel. Which is it?”

The woman slowly turned her head back to Ellen. “Joanna, Dr. Joanna Holmes. And you mentioned the lab. Though you do not know who I am, they permitted you in the lab?”

Becoming a sarcastic Ellen, she rested down the chart. “Oh sure. I am very trusted.”

Joanna did not pick up on her tone. “Who is it that places this trust in you?”

“The astounding Dr. Dean Hayes. How are you feeling? Any nausea, headache, dizziness?”

“None. Dr. Dean Hayes. I'm not familiar with the name.”

“Well he certainly would be pissed. He's the top, well was, the top in his field.”

“Only the top minds *would* be part of the original project. From Cleveland?”

“Yes. The man.” Ellen nodded. “Him and um, Dr. Joe Slagel.”

“So you've been in the lab?” Joanna spoke with a bit of excitement as she edged in a lean to Ellen. “You've seen it?”

“How do you think we got you out of there. Sure I've been there a lot. I told you I'm very trusted. You could say I'm Dr. Hayes' pet around here. He loves me. I often give myself to him as his sex slave just because it's an honor to work with him.”

“I need to know.” Joanna cleared her throat. “Are the embryos safe?”

Ellen smiled. “I can assure you one of them is.” She ran her hand across her stomach.

Joanna reached her hand out. “He must trust you with this to try an implantation without finalizing the research. How is the pregnancy going?”

“Fast. Should be any day now.”

“Which number was it. Did they tell you?”

“Let me think.” Ellen ran through numbers quickly. She wanted it to sound important so she grasped at one off the top of her head. “Number 169.”

Joanna opened her mouth to comment when she noticed the young doctor waltz up and snatch her nurse away.

“El.” Dean led her far way from the patients. “What are you doing?”

“Talking.”

“You know the rules. You are not to converse on a basis other than medical until Joe has sifted through them. You know that. I agree with that.”

“Oh stop whining, Dean. I’m just having fun with her.” She reached up to him, ignoring his anger and ran her fingers through the top of his hair to remove his bangs. “You need a hair cut.”

“What does my hair have to do with anything?”

“You can not pull off being one of the top minds in the project with hair . . .”

“Wait a second.” Dean stepped back. “Why would I . . . Oh, my God. What did you do?”

“I just told her you and Joe were like the tops in the project. Go along with it.”

“No, Ellen you can’t be telling these people stories.”

“Baby.”

Dean grunted loudly. “What else? What else did you tell her?”

Ellen began to laugh and started walking away.

“Ellen.” He snatched her back. “What?”

“O.K., it’s really funny when you think about it. I told her . . .” Ellen’s laughter interrupted her sentence. “She asked about the safety of the embryos.” She saw Dean’s eyes widen. “I told her that I was carrying one of them.”

“You what?!” His loud voice echoed in the room.

“I’m not going to talk to you if you’re going to yell at me.”

“Ellen.” Dean placed both hands on her face. He try to remain calm. He had too if he wanted her to see his point. But knowing Ellen, he could see in her eyes she wouldn’t.

“You’re gonna kiss me aren’t you?”

“What? No. No.” He released her face and stepped back, laid his hands on her shoulders and turned her. “Patients. And no more stories.” He shook his head at her pacifying thumbs up.

^^^

The last folder in the stack of twenty-two passed from Joe’s hand to the ‘finished’ pile. “Talk about lack of information.”

George gave an answerless look as he lifted his hands. “Look who was doing the questioning. You make medical people ask first, you get medical answers.”

“Not always.” Joe lifted a folder. “Ellen has ‘arrogant asshole’ written here.”

“But if you think about it, it really does tell us a lot.”

“Besides how much more we need to find out, what does it tell us.”

“Who we’re dealing with. What . . . we are dealing with.”

After rubbing his eyes Joe glanced at his watch. “It’s getting late, Dean and Ellen are back up there. What do you say, you and me head on up, see what we can find out. Stir things up.”

“Sounds good.” George stated. “Then maybe we can figure out what the hell we’re going to do with all these new people. We can’t leave them in the make-shift hospital forever.”

“No we can’t.” Joe stood up. “But by the looks of Ellen’s little comments here and there, I know of one thing I’m going to do with them.”

“What’s that?” George asked.

“Humble them.”

^^^

The one thing that bothered Dean about the makeshift hospital wasn't dealing with the obstinance of the patients, but rather dealing with the distance. Five miles was a long way. Especially when Ellen got hungry at night for something they didn't stock at the hospital. Every time Dean made the trip he grew more and more aware of the distance and feared how that would come into play when it came time for Ellen to deliver. Knowing how the exam went and seeing her small stomach drop further and further each day, Dean knew that birthing scenario wasn't that far off.

Returning to the hospital, chocolate cake in hand, wanting to get Ellen fed and just finish up for the evening, Dean was a little surprised at how empty the room looked. He set down the cake on the table by the door when he saw almost the entire population of recently defrosted scientist huddled in the back together. Were they having a meeting? Some sort of rehashing of their master plan. And then it hit him. Where was Ellen? Not really concerned that they killed her, Dean walked over to Jason Godrichson who laid on his bed, writing something and smoking a cigarette.

"Jason." Dean called his attention. "Have you seen Ellen?" He held his hand to nearly his height as if Jason wouldn't know who Ellen was.

Jason only lifted his pencil and pointed it to the large huddle group.

Exhaling Dean walked over. He could hear the whispers. Words eluded from them in the form of comments. Small. Exciting. Perfect timing. Amazing. And then Dean heard Ellen's giggle. He knew she was in there and she could be only one place. Edging his small body blindly in. He extended his hand, reached center, grabbed a limb and yanked out . . . Ellen.

"Hey." Ellen yelled.

Dean hear the eruption of objectionable moans from the group. He held up his hand and gave a cold stare pulling Ellen from them. "El, what the hell are you doing?"

"They were touching my belly. It was funny." She laughed. "They think . . ."

"I know what they think El." Dean kept his voice low. "I can't believe you're letting them believe that."

"Oh." Ellen waved him off. "It's fun."

"It's weird, El, the attraction to you."

"They love me."

"They love this." Dean poked her belly like the Pillsbury Dough boy and she snickered to imitate him. Dean rolled his eyes. "Please stay away form them. You know how nervous I am already about when this kid is born."

"You're really being silly about . . ."

It was a chain reaction. The 'boom' of the door opening. The shock gasps of the new people, Henry screaming out Ellen's name as he ran in, and then the second 'boom' that not only brought a growling Frank, but screams from the frightened newcomers as well.

"Ellen." Henry ran behind her. "Help me.."

Dean was confused. "Ellen, why is your husband chasing Henry?"

Ellen spoke through her giggles. "Seems Henry decided to share his cankerous lip condition with my husband." Ellen quickly darted in front of Henry as is some sort of body shield. "I'll protect you Henry. Stay behind me."

Frank stomped closer. "El. Step aside. Let me at him."

Ellen still protected Henry. "Frank let it go. It's not that bad."

"Seven years El." Frank pointed. "It's been at least seven years since I had one. All my life I got plagued with them. But then Henry has to go and kiss me and I end up with Henry disease eight hours later."

Dean enjoyed the occurring scene immensely. "Let me see, Frank. It's not that bad."

"Guaranteed tomorrow my whole lip will be fucked up."

"Just stop by my lab tomorrow, what I gave Henry." He head swung back and forth between and

outraged Frank and frightened Henry. “And Frank, no kissing Ellen until it dries up. We don’t want it spreading any further, understand.”

“No way.” Frank sternly shook his head. “She needs me to kiss her.”

Dean held his hands up. “I’ll tell you what. Being the generous man that I am. I’ll kiss your wife for you when you feel the need, how that?”

Frank smirked at him. “Right Dean.”

“Really, Frank. Not a problem. Watch.” Turning, Dean grabbed a hold of Ellen’s cheeks and quickly kissed her on the lips. He nonchalantly backed up from her to return to his patients who had calmed down. However, the loud stomp of Frank’s boot in his pre-pursuit, sent them frightened, screaming and running again.

Joe and George immediately walked inside in the midst of the amuck.

George viewed the disarray then looked to a perturbed Joe.. “What was that you said about coming here to stir things up?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

June 12

Joe had hoped that perhaps Jason had found something out. He hadn't. In fact he was starting to be treated in the make-shift hospital as the outcast he was. Treated no better than any of the community personnel that visited and worked there.

It was time, Joe felt, to move Jason out of there. Telling Jason he would be issued living quarters in one weeks time, and to chose a division to work in. Joe was surprised. He expected Jason to be asked to be placed in the clinic, or containment. Jason chose paper processing. Finding their way of recycling and creating their own paper fascinating to him. And since it was the least stocked job, Joe agreed to it one hundred percent.

The healing process was good for the new people. Their arrogance made Joe want to pull out his hair. His interrogations were going no where. But what frustrated Joe the most was the fact that he had forty-nine people sponging off of Beginnings and not doing a damn thing for it. All they did was complain. He had already heard enough from them about getting out of the prison style hospital. And with that in mind, Joe realized what he had to do. He wanted to humble them. And he would. He wanted information and he thought of a way to get it. An exchange. But first, he just had to get everything ready.

^^^

"I hate these people." Ellen slammed down a chart on the desk that Dean deemed his own in the corner of the make-shift hospital.

"I know. I hate them, too." Dean fiddled in his finger tips with a sun flower seed. "Not much longer."

Ellen looked at him oddly the way he seemed to politely de-shell the seed and toss it aside. "You know they're actually bitching to me that they . . ." She paused

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing." She waved at him and picked up a seed. "You eat these all wrong."

"How in the world do you eat sunflower seeds wrong?" He picked up another one and continued in his own eating habit of them.

"Please, you eat them like a pansy. You would think all those scars you acquired on your cute baby face would have at least gotten rid of some of those left over manners."

"All right, I'll bite. How miss manners, do you eat a sunflower seed?"

"It's an art." She noticed him nod at her. "It's all done within the mouth. It starts with the sucking off of the salt. Just watch me." She placed it in her mouth and cringed. "Dean." She spit the seed out like a bullet into the waste can. "These are gross, where's the salt?"

"You're pregnant, you don't need salt." He looked in the can. "And where did you learn to spit like that."

"I live with Frank remember?"

"Oh that's certainly a lady-like skill you picked up." He grabbed another seed.

"I'll leave you alone. I wanna finish and . . ." She took a deep breath. ". . . go home."

"Not until shift's over." He watched her shrug at him and walk away. Dean tilted his head. He wondered why Ellen was walking funny. She removed slower and leaned to her left. "Shit." He jumped from the chair knocking it over. "Ellen." He raced over to her.

Ellen jumped. "You scared me. Couldn't you get out of that chair any quieter."

Dean said nothing. He immediately placed his hand on her stomach feeling the solidness of it. "How long?"

"How long what?" She started walking again. This time pausing in her stride, then continuing.

"Ellen." He chased, growing more nervous by the second. "How long have you been getting

contractions?”

“Since six this morning. I’m fine, they aren’t that bad . . . yet.” She cringed.

“Shit.” Dean paced around in frantic circles. “It’s nine-thirty. You know how fast you deliver.”

“Calm down Dean, I figure I have at least another two hours, that is unless of course my water breaks, then we’re talking fifteen minutes. Besides Jenny Matoose is in labor and I want to wait until after she has hers.”

“Henry has the jeep. I knew this would happen. Damn it.”

“Dean, you can deliver it here if you want. Oh shit . . .”

“What?” He held back his hair and widened his eyes.

“My water just broke.”

“Oh my God.”

“Just kidding.” She laughed.

“This is not funny Ellen. I’m calling Frank.” He rushed to his desk for the radio.

Ellen tried to run to him to stop him, but couldn’t go fast enough. “Don’t he’ll panic. Just tell Henry to get back here.”

“No.” Dean pulled from her reaching hand for the radio. “Frank. Frank come in. I need you to come here.”

Frank answered his call, but with zero tolerance to him. “Is someone getting killed?”

Dean wanted to scream and call him one of these obscene words Frank always calls everyone else. But he opted for rationality. “No, it’s . . .”

“Tough Dean. Deal with it.”

“Fine.” Dean’s tone changed. “If you don’t want to be around when your baby arrives . . .” The door to the hospital crashed open. Frank stormed in with an entrance. Dean set down the radio with a slam.

“You were right outside the door?”

Frank ignored him and charged to his wife. “El. Is our baby coming now?”

Ellen began to answer but Dean interrupted.

“Frank, she’s having contractions. We have to get her to the clinic. Where is your jeep?”

“Right out front.”

“Let’s get her out of here.”

Ellen stepped back as Frank went to lift her. “He can’t drive me, Dean. The way he drives he’ll have to pull over because this baby will fall out.”

“I’ll drive easy.” Frank was ready, he lifted Ellen into his arms and began to carry her out.

Dean grabbed his jacket and chased them. “Wait, I’m coming with you.”

Ellen sat in the back of the very bouncy jeep, Dean next to her holding her in as they flew about.

“This is what you call easy driving?”

Frank ignored her and shifted the gears.

Dean tried his best to hold Ellen in. “I think you can slow down a bit.”

Frank kept driving.

Ellen balked in pain, grasping Dean and the jeep’s side. “Frank slow . . . shit. My water just broke.” She reached up and smacked him in the back of the head. “You made my water break you asshole.” She hit him again.

“El.” He swerved the jeep. “Knock it off.”

“Slow down.” She pulled at his ear.

Frank motioned his head away from her chalking her behavior up to extreme pain. “Dean do something with my wife.”

“I am Frank. I’m trying to keep her in this jeep.”

Ellen reached up and forcefully grabbed Dean’s shirt pulling him close to her face. “Dean, when we get to the clinic you have to give me something. You have to knock one of our asses out. Because he is

going to drive me nuts through this. Please.”

Wanting with everything he was to be sarcastic and say, ‘you asked to give him a baby’, Dean refrained, smiled and just kept Ellen from flying out of the wayward jeep.

In the clinic, Frank followed Dean’s running lead down the hallway to the birthing rooms. He carried Ellen, she seemed to flop in his arms with his every bouncy step.

Dean opened the third birthing room. “Frank get her in here, get her undressed. I’m getting Andrea.”

“We don’t need her, Dean.” Frank carried Ellen in and plopped her on the birthing bed.

Dean’s feet slid as he stopped mid-run. “You what?”

Frank waved at him. “I got it under control.”

“Right Frank.” Dean shut the door.

Frank rushed back over to Ellen’s bedside and began to reach for her clothes. Her waving hands swung at him. “El, you’re not making this easy for me.”

“Out. Get out of here, Frank.”

“You can’t deliver a baby with your shorts on.” He reached for them.

“Frank! I have no intention of power shooting this baby out through my clothes.” She slid from the bed and a contraction hit, her knees buckled and she almost hit the floor. “I can undress myself thank you.”

“El, let me.” He reached to her.

“Back off!” She stood up and held her hand out stopping his approach. “Back off or you’ll wait in the hall while this baby comes.”

Frank held his hands up and stepped back. He had plenty of time to play doctor.

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“Sorry.” Dean bolted into the room and headed to the sink. He glanced over to Ellen who was in the bed, gown on, and covered. “Andrea’s still with Jenny.” He began to wash his hands. “You’re stuck with me.”

Frank’s head swayed from Dean to Ellen. He saw Dean dry his hands and he blocked his path.

“Dean, I can do this.”

“Right, Frank.” He walked past him to Ellen’s bedside. “How far apart are they?”

Ellen gave a painful look and waded through the contraction before answering. “Close, one or two minutes. They’re strong too. I feel the pressure.”

“Good.” Dean smiled and sat on the foot of the bed. He began to lift the sheet. Frank’s hand came forth stopping him. “Frank, I . . .”

“What are you doing?”

“I have to examine her to see where we are.” Dean tried to lift again.

“We are here having a baby.”

“Yes I know.” Dean lifted sheet.

“Stop.” Frank halted him again. “You can’t examine her.”

“I have to examine her, Frank. How else are we going to find out how dilated she is. Now Andrea’s not here. You’re stuck with me.” He blocked Frank’s reach again.

“Fine, but don’t look at her.”

“What do you mean don’t look at her? I have to look at her.” Dean began to squat down.

Frank stopped him again. “How about I look and tell you what I see.”

“How about not. I’m the doctor!” Dean yelled in anger.

“And she’s my wife! I don’t want you looking at her.”

“Move away.”

“No!” Frank blocked him. “I’m doing this.”

“No you are not!” Dean argued back.

Ellen had enough. “Joe!” She cried out. “Joe help me, get them out . . .” Frank’s hand covered her mouth. Ellen bit it.

“Ow.” Frank whipped his hand away. “You bit me.”

Sounding possessed, Ellen glared at him breathing heavily. “Let him examine me now. Now!”

“Fine.” Frank covered his eyes with a pouting look as Dean lifted the sheet.

Dean raised his head with a smile. “You’re there. The baby’s crowned.”

Frank marched right over to him grabbing his arm. Leading him out. “Thank you very much. I can handle it from here.”

“There is no way I’m letting you in here alone with her.” Dean resisted his lead.

“Tough. I’m delivering my kid. I’ve read every single book Andrea has given me.” He nearly began to drag Dean. “I’ve learned them. Andrea said I can do it. I passed her fuckin’ test. Now no one is gonna see my kid before me. Got that?”

“All right.” Dean understood his point. “Can I least wash up?” Frank released his arm and Dean went to the sink. He ignored Ellen’s calls out for help, and for him not to leave Frank in there with her. But there was nothing Dean could do. Andrea told Frank he could deliver the baby.

Dean walked with reservation from the birthing room to the hall. He saw an empty chair next to Joe.

Joe stood up. “Is the baby born?”

“No.” Dean sat down. “Frank is delivering it.”

“Frank! Jesus Christ what is wrong with you?”

“You know Frank.” Dean rested his elbows on his knees and placed his face in his hands.

Andrea saw Joe and Dean in the hall. Figuring the exhausted Dean meant Ellen was done, she approached them. “Jenny had a girl. No plague signs. How’s Ellen and baby?” She smiled.

Dean merely lifted his head, dragging the bottom of his eyelids down with his fingers. “I haven’t the foggiest.” He stood up. “And where was your mind when you told hard headed Frank he could deliver his kid.”

“I didn’t mean it, I figured . . .”

“You didn’t mean it?” Dean snapped. “Guess what’s happening right now.”

“No.” Andrea shook her head. “I have to get in there.” She charged for the door and opened it, not even drawing attention to herself. She shut it quietly and sighed in relief when she leaned against the door taking in the vision before her.

Frank stood at the bottom of Ellen. His eyes were bright, a look of total awe was upon his face. He smiled widely and nervously, as he cradled the tiny new born in his arms. He looked down at him with pride. “Our son.” Frank tried to adjust his hold, his huge hands nearly burying the baby. “He’s so tiny.” Frank glanced up. “And slippery too.”

Andrea walked slowly to them. “Good job.” She laid a blanket on Ellen’s stomach. “Frank, I’ll finish up.” She took his spot. “Enjoy this moment with your wife.”

The baby’s soft whimpering cries could be heard as Frank wrapped him in the blanket then held him. He grasped Ellen’s hand with his free hand.

“Frank.” Ellen looked up at the bundled baby. “Can I see?”

Frank’s focus was on the tiny newborn lost in his arms. “Hey Brian.” he spoke softly, placing his face close to his. “I’m Dad.”

Andrea shook her head to Ellen who was trying desperately to see her son. “Frank, why don’t you weigh him for me?”

“Sure.” Frank, excited, took Brian and laid him on the scale. “Andrea, there’s something wrong with the scale. It’s broke.”

“It’s not broke, Frank.” Andrea continued finishing up Ellen.

“Oh there.” Frank nodded. “That’s better. Nine pounds.”

Andrea took a heavy breath and let it out as she watched him. “Take your hand off the scale Frank. How much does he weigh?”

Frank removed his hand. "Five pounds.." He picked Brian up. "That's O.K., you're just early." He spoke softly to the baby and waked around the room. "El, he's so perfect."

Ellen looked up to Frank who stood three feet away. Her words were snippy. "I'm sure he is perfect, if I could see him. Could I see our son, Frank?"

"Whoops, sorry." Frank walked to her bedside and kissed her on the cheek. "Call me Dr. Frank."

"Dr. Frank? Can I see the baby!"

"Oh, sorry." Frank leaned little Brian down to her. "See. Isn't he great?" He lifted him back up for only his view.

Ellen surrendered. She dropped back in exhaustion and held on to the hope, that soon Frank would be a big boy, and share his new toy.

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The door to Ellen's room opened and Johnny peeked his head in. "Andrea gave the O.K. signal." He stepped in, not shutting the door behind him smiling at his father who sat in a chair bedside, in his arms was a blanket and obviously the baby. "Hi El." He moved to Ellen and kissed her on her cheek, she laid on her side facing Frank. "Is this my brother?" Johnny squatted down to peek. "Can I hold him?" He smiled.

Frank cradled the baby tighter. "No. Just look." He lifted the blanket more.

"Check him out." Johnny reached his hand down. Frank moved back. "He's so tiny. John and Jenny's girl is an oaf."

Frank curled his lip at his eldest son. "Brian's just early that's all." He stared down at the baby. "You're just early."

Ellen rolled her eyes and plopped back. "Something is wrong with your father Johnny. Where's Pap?"

"He's coming." Johnny stuck his hands in his pockets.

A light tap on the open door brought Henry into the room also. "Hi El, Frank. How's it going?"

Ellen raised her hand to wave. "Good."

Henry smiled at them. "I have a surprise for you guys." He removed his hands from behind his back, showing the camera. "I want to take the first family shot. I'm glad you here John."

The camera caught Frank's attention. "Great. I get that picture though."

Henry moved closer to the bed. "Everyone gather around. But first let me see the baby." He leaned down trying to get his peek. "Check him out, El. Wow, is he small."

Frank was insulted, he pulled the baby from his view. "He's just early that's all. And don't ask to hold him."

Henry raised the camera and got everyone in view. He snapped the picture with the bright flash, causing that immediate eye rubbing reaction in everyone. He flapped the instant picture about and handed it to Ellen.

Ellen looked at the photo. "Swell." Frank was the only one in the picture who smiled as he held up Brian to face the camera. Disgusted by how bad she looked, she flipped it to Frank. "Here."

Frank looked at it, and immediately stuck it in his chest pocket.

With a loud clap, Joe walked in the room, rubbing his hands together with a look of pride on his face. "Where's that grandson of mine?" He spoke upbeat, stopping to kiss Ellen.

"Hey. Joe." Ellen said tired sounding. "Your grandson is with your neurotic son."

Joe laughed as he leaned to Frank. "Let me see the baby."

"See." Frank showed Brian to him.

"Let me hold him, Frank." Joe reached out his hands.

"I uh, don't think that's a good idea. He was just born, you know."

Joe breathed heavily with a grunt and looked at Ellen. "Has he been like this for the past hour?"

"Joe, I haven't even seen the baby for more than fifteen seconds." Ellen answered.

Shaking his head, Joe reached out again. "Give me my grandson, Frank. Now."

Pouting, Frank stood up. "All right." He apprehensively, and slowly handed Brian to Joe. "But don't drop him."

"Christ, you act like I never held a baby before. Now sit down." Joe pulled the baby closer to him to view him. "Look at you. Son of a bitch are you small. What did you do Frank, give him all your runt genes?"

"Quit picking on my kid." Frank hunched in the chair. "He's just early."

Joe removed the covering blanket. His eyes widened. "Holy Christ!" He held up the baby, looked quickly to Ellen then to Frank.

"What!" Frank blasted so offended. "He's small, so what. He's early."

"He also has blonde hair and fair skin. Where the hell did he get that from?"

Frank bit his nails in disgust. "He's early. He wasn't done cooking. He'll get there."

Joe ran his hand gently over the forehead of the tiny baby. "You know who this kid looks like don't you?" He looked upon the awaiting faces. "Robbie. Yes." Joe's voice softened as he spoke in that talking-like-an-idiot-to-a-baby voice. "Yes you do. You look like your uncle Robbie did when he was born." Joe shook his head. "Robbie was the runt, you remember Frank? He'll grow." The emotional memory of Robbie hit Joe and he began to hand Ellen the baby, Frank intervened snatching him back. Joe gave Ellen an apologetic look.

As if Henry, Joe, and Johnny weren't enough, Andrea stepped in to the small room. "I hate to interrupt, but mother and child need their rest." She walked over to the baby. "I need the baby."

"No." Frank pulled him away.

"Frank." She snapped her fingers. "Hand him over. Ellen needs to rest and so does he."

"No, Andrea. Ellen can sleep, I won't bother her. And I'll just hold him while he snoozes."

"Nope." Andrea quickly reached down and gently snatched Brian from his arms. "This little one has to go to the nursery, just for two hours. We want to check him out." She cuddled little Brian peering at him. "Aren't you just the tiniest thing."

Frank pouted. "He's early."

"Oh he's not that early. He's small." Andrea snapped back. "Get over it." Changing her demeanor, she drew the baby closer and carried him out.

Frank, looking and feeling like an empty soul, slid into his chair while everyone else gloated in Frank's misery over Andrea's baby-snatching moment.

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Dean noticed them immediately on his return from the make-shift hospital in his passing of the baby nursery. Two babies laying three feet apart in their little hospital cradles. One of the babies, Jenny and John's. The other, Frank and Ellen's. He hadn't had time to see the newest members. He wanted to. But most of all he wanted to see Ellen's baby. He could have waited around like the others to see, but he had work to do. The small sense of jealousy that pulled at him, also helped in keeping him away. But it was time to go in, and he did. Stepping in to the nursery, Dean glanced for a moment at Jenny's baby, then moved toward little Brian.

He pulled up a short stool crib side and glanced at the name tag reading it out loud. "Brian Michael Slagel." He closed his mouth tightly. "Slagel." Moving closer to the sleeping baby, Dean watched him. The tiny fair skin, so soft. The pouting look on the baby's face as he slept, his nostrils flaring with every short sleeping breath he took. Dean ran his fingers lightly down the side of Brian's face. With his other hand, he placed his index finger in the hand of Brian, the reflex of the baby gripped his finger. Dean smiled, resting his chin on the hand that Brian held. His face close to the newborn as he continued to run his fingers gently down him. Fingers that to anyone else looked small, but against Brian, they looked like Frank-hands.

Dean peered at him, thinking how much the small baby boy resembled Billy when he was born. His

mind drifted back to when the twins were babies. How much he enjoyed watching them sleep at opposite ends of the crib. Dean could have watched the twins for hours like that, in fact many of nights he did. As Dean rubbed his face and the memory away, the vision of very faded blue jeans on a huge body came into focus through the clear plastic of Brian's cradle. Dean looked up. "Frank."

"It's Brian." Frank's hand came down sliding across Brian's side. "Small huh?"

"Nah." Dean stood up. "He's just early that's all."

Frank smiled. "Thanks. Can I steal your seat?"

"Be my guest." Dean slid it to him. "Why aren't you with Ellen?"

"Andrea won't let me." Frank sat down. "And she said I can only watch Brian."

"Nothing wrong with watching." Dean stepped back and walked to the door. "I'll leave you alone." He headed out, then stopped while opening the door. "Oh, Frank?"

Frank turned his head around. "Yeah?"

"*Really* appreciate all this, because you're lucky. You got it all." He tapped his clenched fist on the archway, and stepped out into the hall speaking softly. "You got it all."

Dean headed back down toward the lab. He had work that got put on hold while he did his morning routine at the hospital. Taking the route down the hospital room hall, he walked into Ellen's room wanting to see how she was doing. Stepping inside he slid to a stop, she was laying on her side sleeping. He turned to walk out.

"Dean?" She lifted her head.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't sleeping." She sat and fiddled with the covers. "Did you need something?"

"No." Dean stepped back and ran his hand over his mouth. "Yes. I just . . . I just wanted to stop by and tell you . . . Brian's great."

"Thanks." She laid her head back down.

"I'm heading to the lab. I'll stop by later." He smiled, turned, and left the room. Dean didn't know what he was thinking just barging into Ellen's room like that. His instincts told him why he stopped by. He knew what he wanted to say, and what needed to be said. Perhaps there would be a better time, perhaps never. Shrugging with slight sadness at his thoughts, Dean continued on.

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The high pitched scratching and screeching of the wooden table legs across the floor, rang out as Joe shoved the table center room of the make-shift hospital. "Listen up!" He slammed down papers and such on the table. "I want all of you to listen and gather around. The time has come for all of you to stop sponging off Beginnings and treating this like this is your own private hotel. Now some of you have complained to my staff that you feel like prisoners in here, I have your solution." His hand tapped on the table and the rolls of papers that laid there. "You want to get out of here, you want to walk around. Welcome to Beginnings. I have your work assignment for you." He noticed almost half of them fold their arms and turn from him. Joe remained calm. "Fine, that's fine if you don't want to listen. Mind you, if you don't work, you do not get issued any food. No food, you starve. Please review what you will do and what needs to be done. Any question the guard will get me." Joe moved to the door.

"Wait." Joanna Holmes called out in her snobbish way. "These look like housing plans."

"They are. You want a place to stay, you'll build it."

"Build our own dwellings." Joanna scoffed. "A carpenter I am not."

"I don't believe I have you down as a carpenter. Check the assignments, toots." Joe winked with a point.

Joanna gasped. "Seamstress. I'll have you know, I am no seamstress my skills surpass that."

"Really? What skills are they. What field of specialty are you." Joe waited, he received no response from Joanna. "O.K. well, I assume you're a seamstress. Workday starts bright and early people. Have a good one." Joe, with such arrogance strutted from the room. He paused in the door to give a quick twitch

of his head and a gloating smile to himself, and then he left.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

June 24

The noise was unbearable. Ellen had closed every window in her house and it still didn't help. The hammering, drilling, sawing, and yelling, drove her crazy. She paced frantically around her house looking for another item she could possibly straighten up.

"Hello?" Joe called out as he stepped into her home.

"Joe!" Ellen ran from the diningroom to the livingroom where he stood.

"Hey El, I had a few minutes this afternoon, thought I'd see how you were doing?"

"How long is this construction going to go on for?" She asked demandingly.

Joe was surprised by her question. "Three more weeks about . . . Hey is that the baby crying?"

"Yes it is. He's always crying." She snapped.

"Are you gonna pick him up?"

"No!" Ellen yelled with frustration. "I am not picking him up. He's fed, he's changed and he's fine. He's just crying, he's always crying. He always wants picked up. I'm sick of it. I refuse to hold him just because he's crying. He's just gonna have to learn."

"Ellen, calm down." Joe moved closer to her. "He's just a baby."

"He's a Slagel." She shouted then calmed herself down and grabbed him. "Joe, let me go back to work."

"No Ellen, one more week." He shook his head.

"Please Joe, I can't take it." She clutched him. "You have to let me go back to work."

"Ellen, no. Andrea says she doesn't want Brian in the day care nursery until he's three weeks old. Now enjoy the break. Jenny is. She wants to take an even longer one."

"Oh Jenny is fuckin' super mom." She spoke with sarcasm.

"Ellen."

"No Joe, she's sick. And annoying. Do you know what she did? She came by yesterday and said to me, that since she has an abundance of breast milk, and I don't, she thought I'd like her to pump some for me so Brian can supplement the stuff Dean mixes for him. Can you believe her?"

"She was trying to be helpful."

"She was being a bitch." Ellen ran her hands through her hair. "Like I want my baby drinking *her* milk. The nerve of her."

"Ellen, enough." Joe cringed then looked at the stairs. "Go get the baby. He's crying."

"No."

"Then *I* will." Joe marched to the steps. "Frank would have a fit if he knew this baby was wailing like that."

"Oh, Frank can bite it." Ellen followed him up the steps.

Joe ignored her and picked up Brian, he immediately stopped crying. "It's all right Brian, Mommy's just neurotic."

"I am not neurotic, I'm just a prisoner. Let me go back to work."

"No, Ellen. Tough. Stay home and take care of your baby. You're the mother."

"That is such a male thing to say."

Joe had enough, he couldn't take it anymore. "You know, I came by for a nice father-daughter visit and I get bitched at. Here." He handed her Brian. "Hold your son. Hold him and don't put him back down or I'll send Frank home." He walked to the door. "Hold him, Ellen."

"I hold him all the time."

"Tough, hold him some more." Joe began to storm out. "What the hell else do you have to do all day?"

Ellen stared at her bright eyed son. He seemed content as she held him. "What is wrong with you Brian?" She waited until she heard the front door shut, and she laid him back down in the crib.

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“Ellen needs drugs.” Joe said as he walked into Dean’s lab.

“Ellen needs what?” Dean called out, sounding muffled and far away.

Joe looked around, placing his hands on his hips as he did. “Where the hell are you ? I hear you, but I can’t see you.”

“Sorry.” A thump was heard first, then Dean raised up from behind the counter rubbing his head and holding extension cord. “Is Ellen sick?”

“In the head. She has that . . . what ya call it? Post . . . post . . . something.”

“Ellen does not have postpartum psychosis.” Dean began running the cord across the lab.

“How in the hell do you know? When have you talked to her last?”

“Yesterday.” Dean bent down to the floor and laid down with a grunt. He reached under the table with his hand strenuously. “She seemed fine. Here hold this” He pulled out another cord and held it up to Joe. He took the other cord stuck it in and grabbed the one he handed to Joe. “Thanks.” Dean stood up and brushed himself off. “She’s just being Ellen.”

Joe bent down to see what Dean was doing. He followed the cord with his eyes. “How many extension cords do you have plugged into that one extension cord?”

Dean shrugged. “Lots I guess.”

“Well don’t do that, your gonna blow the place up.” Joe shook his head. “I’ll get Henry up here to put in another outlet or something. Anyway, back to Ellen. Dean she’s bad. She’s saying she’s a prisoner. She’s gone.”

Dean laughed as he plugged another electrical device into the power cord. “I’ll go check on her.”

“Thank you.” Joe began to leave. “Oh, and Dean. Remove some of that shit you don’t need from the power supply. You can over load it and start a fire.”

“Fine.” Dean followed the plugs seeing what they were connected to and pulled two out.

“Let me know about Ellen. I’ll be in containment.”

“Fine.” Dean scratched his head at his tangled mess.

“Dean, don’t blow me off. Are you blowing me off?” Joe stood in the doorway.

“No Joe I’m not.” Dean lifted up his mess then dropped it. “Can I borrow a jeep?”

“Mine’s out front. Dean?” Joe smacked his hand lightly on the archway, and pointed. “Ellen.”

“Ellen.” He murmured her name a few times while tapping his finger on the counter. “A reason, a reason.” He tapped more and his eyes caught glimpse of a large stack of papers on the counter. The lightbulb came on. “A reason.” He spoke assuredly, grabbed them, tucked them under his arm and took off.

^ ^ ^ ^

The grass was so high and thick, but they managed to find a semi-bald spot out in undeveloped section of the community. It set far off from the edge of the living section, nearly to the edge where the perimeter fence brushed against the deep dark woods. The sounds of construction so faint in the distance it almost wasn’t bothersome.

Dean sat, knees bent up to him, his elbows resting across his baggy Levi jeans. In his long fingers he played with a strand of brown grass. Bending it, staring at Ellen through the tops of his eyes.

Ellen smiled. She sat across from him Indian-style. Across her lap a wide open folder, papers on both sides of it’s opening. “Dean, what is all this?”

“Work. Double check for initials at the bottom.”

“Dean some of these are dated from four years ago.” She turned another page. “Four years ago? What brought this on?”

“I found them when I was looking for an extension cord.” He raised his eyebrow. “Know anything about them?”

“No, I haven’t . . . oh shit.” Ellen began to laugh. “I’m sorry. I remember I told you I’d clean the lab and I stuck a bunch of papers under the counter. I really had every intention of getting to them later.”

“Guess what El?” He pointed the brown grass at her.

Ellen closed the folder. “This is trivial stuff now.” She set the folder to her side and leaned her face up to the warm sun, she brought it down with a smile. “What are you doing?”

“El.” He scooted closer to her, bringing his one leg nearer to his body. “Whether you’d like to believe it or not, I think I know you pretty well.” He closed one eye to her. “I remember when the twins were born, nothing held you back. You were always one place or another. Setting up the clinic, working in the greenhouse, visiting . . . Frank.” He tossed the brown grass. “Any way.” He took a deep breath. “I know you’ve been cooped up in the house for two weeks. People visiting isn’t gonna do it for you. So I thought that, even if it’s just for a little bit, getting out would help.”

“It is helping.” Ellen breathed in the fresh air. “I feel better.”

“And . . . I know you’re suppose to be on maternity leave for another week, but I started thinking. If Frank could handle the twins and Brian for about two hours in the evening, you and me, and possibly Henry, can start breaking down all that data we put aside for awhile.”

Ellen perked up. “When?”

“We can start tonight, that is if you feel up to it.”

“Tonight would be great. And I know Frank will handle them.”

“Good, I’ll let Henry know.”

“Dean.” The smile half fell from Ellen’s face, she became serious. She laid her hand over his hand that dangled off his bent knee. “Thank you. Thank you very much.”

Dean closed his mouth and softly smiled. “No problem.” He took his other hand and brushed the back of his fingers down her face. “That’s what friends are for right?” With a short deep breath, Dean regained himself and leaned across to her for the folder that set perched in the grass. “Now Mrs. Slagel. What do you plan on doing about these four year old reports.”

Ellen took the folder and playfully smacked Dean on the top of the head. She opened it again and spread it across her lap. “Finish what I started?” She flipped a page and spoke softly to herself. “While you stare at me.”

^^^

Joanna Holmes stepped tiredly around to her bed in the make-shift hospital. Her hands ached and fingers were stiff for sewing for eight hours. She plopped down on her bed still staring down to her blistering palms. “I have had enough.” She turned to Jeffrey Barnett, a electrical engineer. “We have work to do, another lab that needs attending to.” She exhaled. “And we can’t get there without their help.”

“They won’t do that. We are their work horses now. Slaves.” Jeffrey pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket. “I’ve been giving this thought. We need to claim those tunnels. There are many ways to access the lab. They haven’t a clue how vital the information they have is.”

“And our snooping is the sure fire way to make them aware. No.” Joanna shook her head. “We are going about this all wrong. Instead of being hardheads, be easy going. Head to the other lab first. We know what’s down there, we know how that can help us. Start from there instead of here. And they’ll help us get there.”

Jeffery scoffed in laughter. “How? They just want to take from us. Our lab, land, information. Embryos. My God they implanted one, it was born two weeks ago.”

“Like everything else, we’ll get the embryos back. Born or not.”

“How do you propose we do that. How do you think we’ll get their help. They want to know our plan.”

“We’ll tell them something. They won’t know the difference. We’ll make them think we’re giving them what they want. We’ll be congenial, do their little assignments.” Joanna smiled snidely. “Trust me, Jeffrey. They’ll give us everything we want in return. Everything. And they won’t even be aware that

they're doing it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

July 7

“So what you’re telling me is, it isn’t Monday?” Joe poured a drink for Jason as he sat with him at the bar in the social hall.

“Nope. It’s Tuesday.” Jason took a sip of his drink.

“Then tomorrow is Wednesday, and yesterday was Monday?”

“That’s correct. You and your people have missed a leap year.”

“I’m supposed to go around telling everyone that Tuesday isn’t Tuesday, it’s Wednesday. I can’t do that. We have work schedules that we follow, different things for different days. If I go tell people that tomorrow is Wednesday then Tuesday’s work won’t get done.”

“Then just adjust your work schedule, shift everything ahead a day.”

“Can’t do that.” Joe finished his drink and poured another. “Then that would make Monday the non-work day and I can’t have that. Sunday is the non-work day for services.”

“Then give Monday, Saturday’s work.”

“Then they’ll be a day between Friday and Saturday’s work. It can’t work. We’ll just forget about it.”

“But you can’t do that. Fifty years from now this one mistake . . .”

“Fifty years from now? Christ I won’t be around, I don’t give a shit. Mr. Time.”

“I’ll have you know Mr. Slagel, Time has been my main focus for sixteen years. Not including the six I slept. And.” Jason grabbed the bottle and filled his glass. “I’m inches away from breaking the time barrier. Inches.”

“Breaking the time barrier?”

“Oh yeah, my experiment, near completion too. I have every intention of finishing it.”

“How are you going to finish your experiment from here?” Joe took a swig of his drink and grabbed a cigarette, lighting it. “Will you need lab space?”

“I will. Not much though, and it will be a spare time thing for me. I’ll have to go to North Dakota to get my experiment though. Perhaps we can work something out at a later time?”

“Oh sure. In fact Henry will make the trip with you, he loves doing that stuff.” He blew out his smoke. “What is this experiment you’re so close to finishing anyway.”

“A time machine.” Jason said proudly.

Joe began to choke on his own cigarette smoke. “A time machine?” He laughed. “Well if you do time travel, could you pick me up a pack of Camel Filters please. I miss them.”

“Go on laugh. Laugh.” Jason didn’t let Joe bother him in the least. “You’ll see. And when you . . .” The volume level in the room suddenly dropped. “Is everyone listening to me?”

Joe was shocked by the sudden silence. It never was quiet in the social hall during after work hours. He looked around, fearing that perhaps someone suddenly dropped over dead. His attention spun to the reason for the abrupt change in atmosphere. Joanna walked in, and she made her way directly to Joe.

“Mr. Slagel. I was told I could find you in here.” Joanna said.

“What do you want?” Joe took a drink.

“We need to talk.” She folded her arms. “It’s time that we did. Is there someone private we can go?”

Joe set down his drink. “Excuse us Jason.” He slid from his seat and adjusted his pants--knowing that he irked her--and he led Joanna from the social hall.

^^^

“Sorry I’m late El.” Dean stood in her doorway, his hand in his front pockets. He looked humbled.

“That’s all right, you’re only ten minutes.” She opened the door wider. “Come in . . . Alex, Billy,

Daddy's here." She called out as Dean stepped inside.

Alexandra ran down the stairs first. "Daddy!" She jumped in his arms and kissed him.

"Uh!" Dean felt the wet dampness of her shirt. "You're all wet."

"Uncle Frank was cleaning me. He said I was messy."

Dean pulled out her shirt, the huge wet spot ran all the way down it. "It looks like Uncle Frank is the messy one. Does Uncle Frank know to remove your shirt before he washes your body?"

The little girl giggled. "He was washing my face, Daddy." She kicked her legs some. "He likes to drown us when he does that. We laugh."

"Swell, Go get Billy." Dean looked to Ellen. "Frank is torturing them now?"

"Oh, Daddy?" Alexandra stopped on the steps. "Guess what we did? We beat Uncle Frank. Me and Billy. We finally beat him in wrestling. Brian didn't win. Uncle Frank pinned him." Smiling, Alex ran up the steps as fast as her little legs could carry her, yelling for her brother all the way.

Dean rubbed his face as he looked to a laughing Ellen. "He pinned Brian?" Shaking his head, he saw the cradle. "Can I see him?"

"Sure." Ellen folded her arms and followed him.

"Can I pick him up?" Dean waited for approval and lifted little Brian up. "He's great, El." He cupped him in his arms, close to his chest. "You're gonna laugh, but I think he looks a lot like Billy, don't you?"

"You can definitely tell they're related." She watched Dean. Little Brian's head jolted up when Frank's playful yelling from upstairs came carrying down. Ellen reached her hand out and stroke his nearly bald head. "I guess he knows his father's voice."

Dean tried to smile, only part of it showed. "Yeah." He spoke with solace. "I uh, I guess he does." He gently laid him back down. "I'd better gather up the kids. You guys are probably busy with moving and all."

"Yeah, how do you like that? Joe tells us we were selected for bigger housing. Pays to be related to the leader." She winked. "Anyhow, we haven't even started. It shouldn't be too hard. I still have a box in the basement I never unpacked from . . . it should be an easy move."

"Is Josh moving right in with you?" Dean asked.

"Yep. He's ready. I think. He is still strange with some people. But around Frank, he's good. He's improved quite . . ."

The sound of screaming children and Frank's loud mouth and heavy steps came barreling down. Frank yelled dramatically as he chased the twins. He immediately shut up, keeping his hands behind his back, when he saw Dean. "Hey, Dean. All cleaned up for you."

"I see." Dean cringed at his wet children. "Heck of a technique you have, Frank."

"You oughta try it. You can get them to say all sorts of great things about you when you have that wash cloth on them. Watch." Winking to the kids, Frank reached out, grabbed hold of Ellen, snatched her forward and pummeled her with the dripping wet wash cloth.

The twins laughed.

"Frank!" Ellen stepped back, her face and hair soaking wet. "You're an asshole"

Dean, finger over his top lip, hid his laughter as he opened the door. "Say goodnight to Mommy."

"Do it again!" Alexandra laughed.

Ellen backed up seeing Frank come to her. "No. Don't."

Frank looked over his shoulder at the twins. "Must give her an 'out' though. El?" He held the cloth near her face. "Who's the coolest?"

With a quick shift of her eyes, and a move of her body, Ellen smiled snidely. "Dean." Releasing a slight shriek, she dodged Frank's barreling wash-cloth holding hand and bolted up the steps. Frank flew up behind her.

Just as Dean started to leave, Billy and Alexandra followed in happy pursuit up the steps. "Guys!" He called out in vain. "This is not . . ." He heard them all shrieking and jumping above him. "A game. Swell." Tossing his hands up in defeat, Dean walked back into the livingroom and to the cradle where he

picked up Brian and stole another moment.

^^^

The library was the best place and the closest that Joe could think of for his talk with Joanna. Normally he wouldn't have jumped at her invitation, but he had been working her and her colleagues and a part of him thought for sure, she was ready to break. He was in part--correct. Sitting at the reference book table, Joe leaned back, one leg crossed over the other as he waited for something important to come from her mouth. He heard her spew out about who she was, and what she had done in her life before the plague hit. He heard her talk about who the others were. That bored him, he could care less what they did, what they wanted to do is what was foremost in his mind. "I've listened to you tell me a good resume, wanna tell me know why you drug me away from my happy hour?"

"You know and I know Mr. Slagel, that a coexistence in the community between your people and mine will be an impossibility. Tension is high, resentments are high. I think that we may be able to help each other."

"Really?" Joe spoke with apprehension. "How is that?"

"We have another sight. Mountain Springs Colorado. Are you familiar with it?"

"27 stories deep, yes." Joe nodded. "Another Cryogenics set up?"

"No. It is a facility that has the equipment to help us in our achievements. To rebuild this world again." Joanna leaned forward toward hm and folded her hands in front of her. "That's what our project was geared for. We didn't know when we awoke whether ten people would be left or ten million. We chanced it. We have a goal to meet, we have a responsibility Mr. Slagel, and we plan to follow it through. We need your help."

"In what way?" Joe's questioning was stern.

"We fully intend to leave, all of us, with in the next six weeks. We plan to finish your housing for you. We ask your help in getting a team of mine down to Colorado. Fifteen of us will head down, we hope in a few days, to get things started. The rest will follow. We will not bother you anymore, with the exception of your help getting us started. That's what the original plans for the Garfield project were. This was the place that would be a supplement for factory and food. Technology will be built in Colorado. We need supplies until we can get things started down there."

"You know, I'm sitting her listening to what you want, what exactly do we get in return."

"This place you call Beginnings."

"It's ours anyway."

"You seem to forget Joseph that this place was designed for the common good of the surviving world. Not for selfish use like you and your people have done."

"Selfish? Lady we planted this food, we grew it, we waded through bad crops, sick livestock, meningitis, tuberculosis. We struggled. We went out and got the basic equipment needed to start civilization here. Don't talk to me about selfish."

"I'm not wanting to get into an argument with you Mr. Slagel. I'm asking for your help. You know what we need. And, if it's possible, a few of your people to help us set up our own survivor runs as you call them. We don't know what's out there like your people do."

"And what do you expect to do with these survivors? Hide them in that installation?"

"No, we plan to teach them to rebuild correctly."

"There isn't anyone left." Joe stated.

"One percent."

Joe scoffed at her, waving his hand. "What's one percent? Nothing."

"One percent of the United States is four million people. Four million is a lot. Enough to begin this race again. Begin it right. It's time to give this dormant world a wake up call."

"Let me tell you what's out there. We only pick up what we call stragglers. Those who travel in groups of less than ten. There's bigger out there. Worse. They hunt down those who have rebuilt, they

burn what they have, feed off their kills, human or not. Savages. You don't see them often, but when you do." Joe whistled. "Watch out. Yeah, four million. But in a country this big, they're pretty scattered about. Hard to find."

"We'll try. All we ask is for your help. We'll give our complete honesty. But we need to start putting together our data. We have equipment we need to start working on."

Joe leaned back again. "So you want me to just let you walk around here."

"To work with our stuff. Possibly learn how you've been running this community so we can do the same."

Joe wanted to just place his face to her, breath out his whiskey breath at her with a loud 'Bull shit'. But he didn't. He wanted these people out and he could keep an eye on them while they prepared. "It has to be a joint cooperation. And your people have to follow our rules."

"Then you are agreeing?"

"Apprehensively. We'll get things ready to ship some of your people out in the next few days."

"Thank you." Joanna stood and extended her hand. "And what of possibly sending a few of your people down to help us out, perhaps for a week or so?"

Joe didn't want a single person of his to walk from the gate. But knew what better way to see what they were up to then to have watch first hand. "I'll give some thought to who I can spare."

"Thank you again. You're more agreeable than I expected."

"I just want the peace of my community back." Joe stood up. "And since your arrival. People have been on edge. So in essence, I want you gone."

"Trust me when I tell you, we don't want to live among you anymore than you with us." Joanna began to leave. "Now that we have that clear. We can get past it and move on. Then we can start first thing in the morning with our preparations?"

"Afternoon. I have to let everyone know." Joe watched her nod her arrogant head and waltz out. He knew he'd have to brace everyone for his decision. But he also knew what he had to do. He could control them and what they learned. It wouldn't be as easy getting information from Beginnings as they thought. Joe couldn't allow them to know everything. Because he knew they weren't telling him the whole truth either.

CHAPTER TWENTY

July 8

“No Joe.” Dean slammed down his fist onto Joe’s desk, his anger obvious, his voice stern.

“Dean take it easy.” Joe held out his hands, trying to remain calm as he told the news to Dean and his son who sat across from him. “It’s not what you think.”

“What I think?” Dean shook his head shouting. “You want me to let them into the Cryo lab? You want me to tell them about what I do?”

“Look.” Joe leaned forward. “We know what we can tell them and what we can’t.”

“And what about you sending a couple of Beginnings people with them?” Dean asked.

“Exactly what I said. There is no better way, and you know it, to find out what they are up to then to send a welcome spy.”

Dean turned to Frank. “Frank, you’re usually really cautious, what do you think?”

“I have to agree with you. I don’t think they should have cart blanc around here. But like my Dad is saying, they’ll only think they do. I’ll be watching, my men will be watching.” Frank sat with confidence as he rocked back on the hind legs of his chair. “Everyone just has to keep me posted if they suspect anything or see anything strange.”

“I don’t know.” Dean was so unsure. “I’ve cleared the Cryo lab of what they can’t see. But what if, what if they want to just reclaim their land. They stand a fighting chance . . .” He turned sharply to Frank who blew a huff. “I’m not kidding, Frank. We’re talking forty-two men. That’s almost as many as we have. Not even *you* can take on forty-two men.”

Frank waved him off. “Please, they’re like scientists. It’d be like taking on forty-two of you.” Frank chuckled. “Kinda of like a live video game. Clear each level of Dean-type scientists.”

Dean grew annoyed at Frank’s smugness as he rocked in his chair. “You tend to underestimate people.”

“Like who?” Frank asked.

“Like me.”

“Right.” Frank folded his arms. “You? You’re like . . .” Frank lowered his hand two feet from the ground. “You’re like this big.”

“Frank you are the most arrogant, egotistical . . .”

“Bite me.”

“Blow me.”

“Boys.” Joe warned then in defeat, plopped down to his desk.

“And . . . you don’t threaten me.” Frank re-folded his arms as he rocked. “See, cause I know you could never take me down.”

“You don’t think?”

Frank laughed as he turned his head to him. “I know you couldn’t.”

Without any warning, Dean swung his foot out sideways, kicked into the two chair legs that Frank balanced on, swept forward and sent Frank crashing back. “I just did.” Dean sprung up, possibly considering running at that moment as an option.

Joe lifted his head and stared at Frank and Dean, wondering to himself why in the world he asked those two to come together. Perhaps it was a momentary lapse of stupidity. Perhaps it was just the fact that subconsciously, Joe, was in the mood for a little nerve mutilation.

^^^

“Excuse me, are you Mr. Kusakari?” Jeffrey spoke peeking his head into back room of the bakery building.

Henry took the red handled screw driver from his mouth. “That’s me.” He replaced it in his mouth

and returned to working on opening the cover to the secondary breaker box.

“My name is Jeffrey Barnett, I was told you run the mechanical division here? Mr. Slagel said that, if you allow, I may observe.”

“I allow.”

Jeffrey stepped closer to him. “May I ask what your working on?”

“Aren’t you the electrical engineer?” Henry shook his head. “A circuit box, gees.”

Jeffrey laughed at Henry’s implication that he didn’t know a circuit box. “No, no. I know what it is, I was just curious about what exactly you’re doing.”

“O.K. The bakery has increased it’s demand. We have these ovens called Reven’s. They circulate, round and round. Anyhow, they demand a lot of power, and it seems whenever we run all three ovens at the same . . . Bam. Lights out.”

“I see.” Jeffrey looked. “You’re running a new line into your secondary power source.”

“Exactly. Like you said. Simple enough. Opening the lid to this box wasn’t. I never thought we have to use it.” Henry pulled from his supply bag, a long rolled up bunching of wires.

“Can I . . . make a suggestion?”

“Sure.” Henry shrugged.

“It’ll save you some time. Here.” He reached down and retrieved the tool from Henry’s box that he needed and began to fiddle with the wiring. “If you just do this.” Jeffrey pointed. “Move this here. Then that should work. There’s no need for a whole new line. That way you can conserve that wiring for later or another project.”

Henry smiled. “That does work, doesn’t it? Hey thanks.”

“No problem.”

“You know.” Henry brought his finger to his mouth and fiddled with his lip. “I have some ceiling lighting that needs worked on in the chapel. No matter how bright a bulb we put in, things are dim. Care to take a look?”

“Lead the way.”

“Excellent.” Henry gathered up his stuff. He’d lead Jeffrey to the chapel. It was a perfect set-up Henry thought, play dumb, act ignorant to everything, and get someone else to do the work.

^^^

Ellen expected someone to show up to her division, but she didn’t expect the enthusiasm that she received from Dr. William Gafsky, the Psychological behavioural specialist that made the walk through of containment with her. He towered over her as they paced slowly down the hall. He was a big man, a tad on the heavy side, something that she would have thought a frightening sight for a man who worked with mentally unbalanced individuals. But after finding out from him that he had done extensive work with serial killers, and homicidal maniacs, Ellen knew he needed that size. Dr. Gafsky informed her of the several books he had published on the subject. Ellen pretended to be impressed but really wasn’t. Chalking it up, that the books couldn’t have been all that good if she never heard of them.

Dr. Gafsky walked with a notepad in his hands as he listened with interest to everything that Ellen spoke of. “So in an essence, what you do here is what I am suppose to do with survivors. Work with them, make them civilized.”

“Correct. I am the problem solver around here. I also have the title community counselor.”

“It seems that you do quite a bit. I wanted to stop by this morning but they informed me you were working at the clinic?” Dr. Gafsky asked.

“That’s correct. I work at the clinic. I work here. Recently I’ve added more research time. And . . . we have social skills classes here in the evening.”

“Quite the busy lady.”

“Oh they work me like a dog. It’s disgusting. Taking advantage of my good nature.”

“And you just gave birth to that special child also.”

“Yeah he’s special all right.” She said with some sarcasm.

“How is he doing? Is he speaking yet?”

“Oh sure.” Ellen giggled. “It’s amazing. I think he just said da-da, at four weeks.”

“Amazing.” He wrote something on his notebook.

Ellen’s head snapped in surprise, she had to wonder what he wrote stopping. They stopped before the skills room. “Here we are. Observe away.”

Dr. Gafsky peeked in to the crowded room “I have to tell you. I’m impressed very much with this program you have set up.”

“Mine and Joe’s baby.” Ellen folded her arms and stepped back. “That’s why they call me, the survivor queen.” She began to leave. “I’m not joking about that either.” Laughing to herself, she left Dr. Gafsky alone while she tended to her own work load.

^^^

Andrea was the woman of the hour, or at least she felt that way. She walked tall as she paced with pride from room to room at the clinic, showing it off as if it was her own birth child. “And we have one patient scheduled for surgery tomorrow.”

Dr. Emery, a smaller, meeker gentlemen spoke up. “I’m a surgeon. What was your speciality Dr. Winters.”

“Mine. Mine was nursing. I was a nurse for over twenty years before I came here. They gave me the main doctor title because of that. Now Dr. Hayes, he’s an actual doctor. A scientist. However, his main focus is the lab.”

“Who is it that does your surgeries then?” Dr. Emery asked.

“I handle them mainly.”

“And how is it that you learned to perform such surgeries?”

“Some of them, from what I’ve learned hands on in New York. Others, text books.”

“And you do all types?” Dr. Emery continued in his questioning.

“Oh yes. Knock on wood . . .” Andrea knocked on the plaster wall. “We’ve been pretty successful.”

“I must say, you certainly have earned the right to call yourself Doctor Winters.” Dr. Emery complimented. “You are a remarkable woman.”

“Oh.” Andrea lowered her head and grabbed her chest. “You flatter me.” She lifted her head with a smile. “Shall I show you our lab?”

“Love to see it.” Dr. Emery followed her. “Dr. Winters. You mentioned you are performing surgery tomorrow. May I inquire what kind?”

“Of Course. It’s another first for me. We have a patient who appears to have a tumor on his pancreas. Tests show it’s benign but it’s been causing him great discomfort and it needs removed.”

“If it’s not too much to ask. I’d like to be present, possibly assist. I used to be quite adverse in pancreatic surgery.” Dr. Emery said.

Andrea stopped in her pace. “Dr. Emery I would be honored to have you perform the surgery and allow *me* to assist.”

“It would be my pleasure dear lady.” He took hold of her arm and walked with her. “And please, can you start calling me Preston?”

“Preston.” Andrea smiled touching the hand that held on to her. “Then I must insist you call me Andrea. And here we are. Our Lab. Dr. Hayes’ world.” She knocked on the archway to the open door. “Dr. Hayes?” She called in pleasantly. “May I show our visitors the lab?”

Dean looked up from his computer and turned his head. “No.” He returned his views to his computer.

Andrea was shocked, not to mention embarrassed. “Excuse me for a moment.” She stepped in the lab and closed the door. “What’s going on?”

“I’m working.” Dean answered.

“Dean, don’t you want to show off all that you’ve accomplished here.”

“Not to them I don’t.” He faced her. “I don’t want them in my lab. This is my lab.”

“Are you a little jealous perhaps. The smartest kid on the block has a little competition and now he won’t share his toys?” She asked motherly.

“Andrea . . . no.” Dean turned from her.

Andrea shook her head disapprovingly at him. “Fine Dean. Be a baby. I’m going to go show our visitors the X-ray facilities instead.” After dramatically tossing her head, Andrea walked to the door.

“And you mister, better grow up.” She slammed the door on her exit.

“Grow up?” Dean took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I just don’t want them in my lab.” He said to himself. Stopping to take a moment to sulk, Dean’s lab door opened again, this time it was Frank. Frank stuck his hand in and locked the door, then shut it. Dean’s curiosity was peaked. He rotated his stool to watch what Frank was doing.

Frank stood on the other side doing some weird routing. Stand up, hunch down, turn the knob, open the door, closed it, and shove on it with his shoulder. And then he repeated it, never saying anything to Dean. After about six times, Dean had enough.

“Frank!” Dean shouted at him. “What are you doing?”

“Oh.” Frank stepped inside. “I’m checking your doors and windows.”

“I can see that. Why?”

“I’m gonna install a keypad, like the one in the cryo-lab. I was just checking for secureness and tightness of your doors and windows.”

“You’re securing my lab?” Dean stood up. “I appreciate it. Thanks, Frank.”

“No problem, I . . .” Frank’s head tilted up. “Yeah?” He called into his headset. “El . . . El, calm down. Calm down.” Frank shook his head. “I’ll be there in ten seconds.”

“What’s wrong with Ellen?” Dean asked.

“It’s not Ellen. It’s Josh. She’s says she has a problem with him.” Frank took off.

Dean, curious also, chased after, shutting the door to his lab.

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“Frank!” An hysterical Ellen flew to him as he entered the containment hall.

“El, calm down.” He placed his headset around his neck and laid his hands on her shoulders. “What happened?”

“It’s happening again, Frank. I went into the skills room and there he was.”

Frank looked past her and dropped his hands. “He’s all right.” He walked by her toward the skills room.

Ellen ran to follow him, Dean next to her. “Wait till you see him Dean. It’s a flashback.”

Frank shook his head as he stopped mid-skills room. He saw Josh huddled in a corner. He clenched tightly to his big blue book, and Josh’s head twitched. He stormed over and stood above Josh. He looked down to the trembling boy with reproachful authority. “Josh.” Frank spoke mildly to him. “Josh.” He called and received no response. Frank rubbed his hand over his mouth and goatee, and deepened his call. “Josh! What the hell are you doing! Get up! Get your ass up now!”

Josh stood to his feet quickly, still cradling his book, looking at Frank.

“Josh! Stand up straight and look at me. Now!” Frank’s hand barreled down pointing at him. “Now what the hell is wrong with you acting like this?” He placed his face close to his, he spoke, soft, gruff and strong. “What is wrong with you? And you better answer me and answer me now!”

Josh stood straight and held up his possession. “Book. My Book. MY BOOK!” Josh grasped it tightly to his chest. “MY BOOK!”

“Did someone try to take it from you? Did someone try this?” Frank pretended to try to take it. Josh nodded. “Want me to handle them for you? Want me to make them stop?”

Josh smiled and nodded.

“Fine.” Frank placed his hands on his hips and turned to the eleven other survivors who seemed to gather in fear together. “None of you people touch his fuckin stuff. Is that clear? Clear.” They nodded at him. “Good . . . now Josh . . .” He re-faced Josh only to see him pointing. Frank’s eyes followed the direction. They led to Dr. Gafsky standing at the opposite end of the room. Frank moved only his eyes to Josh. “Was he the one who tried to take your book?”

Josh nodded.

Pissed off, Frank stormed over to him. “Don’t touch him or his stuff again, do you hear?”

Dr. Gafsky a man as large as Frank did not back away in fear from him. “I believe that boy has something that belongs to us. That book belongs to our people.”

Dean stepped in. “That book has been part of our collection since we got here. In fact it’s mine. Physics is my pastime.”

Dr. Gafsky rolled his eyes. “I think you might be confused on that point. Now if you won’t get it, I will. A simple request is all I ask.” He tried to get past Frank, but Frank, palm against Gafsky’s chest, pushed him back.

“Look pal. Don’t touch my kid. And don’t touch my kid’s stuff?”

“Your kid?” Dr. Gafsky gave an arrogant chuckle. “Well then that explains his behavior.”

“What is that suppose to mean?” Frank asked, hand rested in intimidation on his hips.

“It means, it figures he behaves as such, being created from the genes of a sociopath inarticulate simian being like yourself.”

Frank with confused eyes, shifted them to Dean.

Dean leaned into Frank and whispered. “He just insulted you Frank.”

Frank tilted his head to Dean. “Was it bad?”

“If I were you, I’d deck him.”

“Thanks, Dean.” With a Frank fistful blow, he nailed Dr. Gafsky and sent him to the floor.

Ellen shrieked. “Oh my God Frank.” She ran to Dr. Gafsky’s side and knelt next to him.

“El he insulted me.”

“Don’t you think you’re over reacting? What the hell is the matter with you?” She looked at a stunned Dr. Gafsky. “I’m so sorry for this. Are you all right?”

Dr. Gafsky held his jaw and slowly nodded his head. With Ellen’s little help, he stood.

Frank couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “El, what are you doing helping this man?”

“Frank!” Ellen, face red peered at him. “Go away. Just go away. I can’t believe you.” She held Dr. Gafsky’s arm and started to walk. Scoffing at Frank and Dean, and swearing under her breath, Ellen helped Dr. Gafsky to the other room for ice.

Frank raised his hands and dropped them with a slap. “Dean, was I wrong?”

“Not in the least, Frank. And you know me, I’m not a violent man.”

“Thank you. And what’s wrong with my wife?”

“The same thing that’s wrong with every other woman in the community. They’re being targeted. They can’t get information out of use, so they butter up the women to get it.”

“Sweet talk them. Make them feel special. Get them to spill their guts?” Frank questioned.

“Exactly.” Dean nodded.

“Will they?” Frank started to walk down the hall with Dean.

“Spill their guts? Oh. Absolutely. But the question should be, can they spill anything valuable.” Closed mouth and assuredly, Dean shook his head.

“They can’t?”

“No way.” Dean said. “The women in this community really aren’t told anything valuable.”

“That’s awfully smart of us.”

“No.” Dean paused in his waling to motion his head in a point to where Ellen took the newcomer. “It was awfully foreseeing of us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

July 18

To everyone else in Beginnings they were a small number. Eleven men and one woman. But to Dean, the group was large. It was a large sense of burden lifted from his shoulders. They were in Colorado, they had arrived there. And the two Beginnings' men who had taken them just arrived back safe. The safety of those two men was the number one concern on everyone's mind. But they brought with them the bus like Joe had requested, to take the rest of the newcomers when their time came. And their time could not come too soon for Dean. Though they had only been roaming around the community for a short time, their presence was known at each and every corner one turned. They spent a magnitude of time in the cryo lab going over their data. Data that Dean had copied before handing it to them. He did this as his own safeguard, just incase.

And with a small group gone, Dean felt confident he could complete his newest project and have it ready to present to Joe. But the radio call from the nursery interrupted that. Dean hoped only briefly.

He didn't have to ask what child at the nursery was sick. He knew. It was Jenny's baby. It would be the third trip in one week to the nursery for the Matoose child. Stomach ailments. Breathing problems. And the present Jenny compliant--fever. The trips to the nursery weren't including all the times Andrea had to check the infant out. Jenny was being overboard and Dean was starting to get annoyed over it. Dean was beginning to feel like Ellen, mind-bitching about Jenny all the way to the nursery.

"Hi Raz." Dean waved to the older gentleman. "How's the Matoose baby?"

Raz placed down the book he read. "Fine as usual. It's the mother that needs examined. Coming in here and checking on us eight times a day. Anyway, the visitors checked her out, said she was fine."

Dean stopped mid stride. "The visitors? You let them with the babies?"

"Well . . . uh, yeah. Was I wrong?" He stood up. "They're doctors."

"Shit." Dean flew into the next room, the first vision he saw was six of them gathered around one cradle. He could hear them murmur, but couldn't make out the words through the baby's cries. "Excuse me." Dean marched right up to them moving them one at a time. "Away from . . ." He saw which baby they were touching and observing. "Brian." Dean barreled his way through and scooped up the crying baby, outrage filled his eyes and he held Brian close to his chest. "I want you people out of the nursery. And away from this baby. Now."

One of the doctors snubbed that suggestion. "We have a right to examine that . . ."

"The hell you do!" Dean shouted, his hand holding the little head. Comforting him. "Leave now or I'll call security."

They showed no fear of security being called, but in order to avoid confrontation, they backed up and left.

"It's all right Brian. Shh." Dean placed his lips to the now infant. "It's all right. Why do these scientist want to . . ." Then it hit him why. "Oh God Ellen, what did you do?" Dean knew what had to be done, he had to find Frank. Frank was the one who could ensure this child's safety. After checking Brian thoroughly to make sure they did nothing to him, Dean raced immediately--baby in his arms--to find Frank.

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"And finally . . ." Frank held Ellen's hands as he walked backwards leading her into their new bedroom in their new home. "Our room. What do you think?"

"I hate it. It's too small."

"It is not, this bedroom is the same size as our other one, the uh, the bed's just bigger."

"No it's not Frank." Ellen pulled her hands from his and stood center of her bedroom. "I hate this house. I hate this room. I don't want to live here."

“El, all our stuff is here. We have three bedrooms now.” Frank kissed her quickly. “You have to get used to it.”

“I know.” Ellen’s shoulders slumped.

“You know what El?” Frank took her hands again and led her. “It’s a new bed.” He motioned his head to behind him. “We have to break it in. What do you say?” He winked.

“No, Frank. I have that meeting with Joe.”

“Come on El. It’s the marriage law.” He lifted her up and nearly tossed her on the hard bed. Ellen bounced upon her landing. “No kids, a new house, we have to christen it.” Frank slowly climbed on the bed and crept to her.

Dean heard their voices coming from upstairs when he walked into the house, and he followed them. “Frank.” He called out as he stepped in.

Frank stopped in his move toward Ellen. “Am I hearing Dean?”

“Frank.” Dean called out again. “I need to speak to you.”

“He’s in here?” Frank turned his head slowly to see Dean standing in the doorway holding Brian. Frank panicked. “Dean, what’s wrong with my son?” He jumped from the bed and rushed over.

“Nothing, I need to talk to you.” Dean leaned closer and whispered. “Alone.”

Frank took the baby from Dean’s arms, then walked Brian to Ellen. “Hold him El, I’ll be right back.”

Ellen was shocked as the baby was just dropped in her arms, more so the way Frank escorted Dean calmly from the bedroom, with little irritation over Dean walking in.

Frank pulled the bedroom door shut. “What’s going on? Why did you bring Brian here?”

“I went to the nursery to check on the Matoose baby. When I walked in there were a bunch of *them* huddled around Brian, touching him, looking at him.”

“They what!”

Dean lowered his hands as if to tell Frank to lower his voice. “I don’t think they want to harm him. I just think they want to examine him, check him out. You can thank your wife on that one Frank. You see, I think that little fib Ellen told is snowballing. She told them--joking around--she was carrying one of their embryos.”

“We’ll just tell them she was lying about it. I’ll tell them.” Frank shook his head.

“Won’t work. They are so obsessed with these embryos, they aren’t gonna believe us. They’ll only think we’re lying to keep them from the baby.”

“What is so special about these embryos that they have to poke around my kid?”

“I don’t know. They are genetically enhanced. But I’ll tell you, I’m close finding out for myself. But we have to be even more on our toes. That’s why I came to you. Can you put a guard on the nursery?”

“Consider it done.” Frank shook his head at the thought of what happened. “In fact, consider it done now.” He opened up the bedroom door. “El, I have to go back to work.” He walked over to the bed, kissed Ellen and grabbed the baby.

“Where are you going with Brian?” She sat on the edge of the bed watching him leave.

“I’m uh . . . taking him to the nursery. Dean came to get you for that meeting and brought him by for us to see him. Thanks, Dean.” Frank walked to the doorway.

“No problem.” Dean held up his hand. “Sorry I interrupted your *moving*.” He looked at Ellen on the bed. “Need me to finish up for you Frank?”

“Sure if you want.” Frank stopped as his foot stepped for the first step, and he realized what Dean meant. “NO!” He left certain that was all that needed to be said.

Snickering Dean walked into the bedroom and extended his hand to Ellen. “Meeting?”

Ellen grabbed it and levered herself up. “Meeting.”

^^^

Joe listened to Dean and Ellen ramble on and on about their idea. An idea even too weird for Joe. And though the thought of it made him squirm, he sat there in the lab, at their request. “Dean, what is it

you want from me?"

"Permission, as the leader to do this." Dean leaned forward. "It's for the sake of science. Ellen and I have given this great thought."

"You want my permission to do something that you could do, without my knowledge?" Joe's hands rested on the counter as his fingers tapped about. "What will be so special about this kid?"

"He or she will be genetically enhanced." Dean answered. "These embryos are so important to them, I am curious to see what the child is like. We have a volunteer, no one will get hurt. No one except us three and the volunteer has to know it's nothing more than a routine pregnancy."

Joe immediately looked to Ellen. "You aren't doing this Ellen. You just had Brian."

"Not me. Melissa. She overheard Dean and I talking and she volunteered. Melissa can't have children on her own. She told only us that. So what do you say, Joe?"

Joe looked upon both of them. "If Dean feels it's safe, we really should find out. How will you determine which one gets implanted?"

That was the one thing Dean didn't have a scientific based answer for. "Since we don't know which embryos are which. We sort of told Melissa to chose a number. Like an embryo lottery. We are ready to do this in a couple hours. Do we have your go ahead?"

Joe nodded apprehensively. "I guess."

Excited, Dean grasped hold of Ellen's hand, squeezing it with enthusiasm. "Ready, El?"

Ellen didn't even answer, she jumped up at the same time as Dean and raced from the lab with him.

Alone, Joe stood up with a clap of his hands on the counter. "Christ." He shook his head as he started to leave. "Beginnings' own, Frankenstein and Igor."

^^^

Ellen slipped into the examining room next to the one they had just did the implantation in. Dean waited in there for her to situate Melissa. "Mother is . . ." Ellen slowed when she saw Dean. He laid back on the table, his legs hanging off the end, his arms dangling to the side while his eyes were tightly closed. "Wake up." She grabbed his knees and banged them together.

"I am up." He held out his hand for her to help pull him. "I was just resting that's all."

"I just want to let you know, the mother or mother-not, is resting. We can clock it for an hour, then I'm going home."

"How is she doing, you know, about this?"

"Better than you or I. She definitely isn't as nervous as us. She's actually excited. Her and Mark wanted to have a child and now they are. Of course, it may not end up being a baby at all." She joked, and saw Dean's expression. "Just kidding. But she's very excited."

"Rightfully so." Dean stared down at his legs which swung back and forth. He lifted his eyes. "Ellen . . . shut the door please."

"Why?" Ellen reached over and pushed it shut. "Are you gonna take advantage of me?"

"Not unless you want me too."

"You'll have to make it worth my guilt."

"Guilt?" Dean had to laugh. "I don't think guilt is a feeling you come equipped with."

"Oh that's not very nice. But . . ." She shrugged. "You're probably right. So, if you don't want to have sex with me, why did I shut the door?"

With a smile, Dean finally lifted his head all the way. "You and I are lucky. We work really well together. This afternoon was proof. With our history, we could have ended up with some really bad blood between us. We went past that. We're better friends for that."

"That we are. But sometimes, I feel there's still some things unresolved."

"Yeah." Dean spoke whispering as his smile softened. "There are . . . but that's not why I asked you to close the door. I want to ask you . . ." Dean scratched the nervous itch on the side of his nose. "Do you remember a conversation you and I had on Christmas Eve?"

“Ah.” Ellen nodded her head with closed eyes and mouth. “I do.”

“O.K.” Dean took a breath. “Taking a big chance at total humiliation. And chancing bad timing, I have to know. Ever since Brian was born, I’ve been bad. I want that El, I really do. So, maybe not right now, but in the near future, can I have that? Will you help me.? Are you still willing to have my baby for me?”

“I can’t believe you just asked me that.”

“I knew it.” Dean slid off of the table. “Forget I asked. Please.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Ellen reached forward grabbing his arm and pulling him back. “I just never thought you would really ask me. I thought the part of you that hated me would stop . . .”

“Hate you?” Dean’s voice dropped. “You think a part of me . . .” He chuckled in disbelief covering his eyes. “Yeah, El, I hate you.” Sliding his hand from his eyes, he seriously looked at her. “I don’t hate you. Far from it.” He cleared his throat. “So. What do you . . .”

Ellen’s hand quickly covered his mouth. “You don’t even have to ask.” she removed it. “Yes. Without a doubt.”

Arms instinctively going out to Ellen, Dean embraced her and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you.” He pulled back. “However, you’re gonna have to talk to Frank about this. We can’t do it if we don’t clear it with him first. Maybe if I go with you to talk, he’ll see how important this is.”

“No that’s all right.” Ellen stepped back and flung her hand. “I’ll handle Frank. It’s not like we’re getting together. It’s clinical. I think once he sees that. He’ll be O.K. with it.”

“You think.”

“Oh, sure.” Ellen spoke and looked as if she had so much certainty. And with good reason, she knew Frank better than anyone. And there wasn’t an ounce of doubt in her mind --Frank would be fine with it.

^^^

“I can’t believe you’re laughing at me.” Ellen handed Frank the settings for the dinner table.

“Because El. It’s, it’s such a ridiculous notion that it’s funny.” Frank placed the stack on the table.

“Frank, I am very serious about helping Dean out.”

“I know you are.” Frank kissed her on the cheek. “But over my dead body will my wife walk around pregnant with another man’s child. Let alone Dean’s. No.”

“Frank, he wants another baby.”

“Tough El. Tough. You aren’t doing it.”

“Can we discuss this rationally?”

“All right.” Frank drew up a semi-serious face. “Discuss rationally.”

“We owe him.”

“I don’t owe Dean anything, and neither do you.”

“Bullshit. I lived with him for almost five years. Think about what I did to him. What we did to him. I really feel I need to do this for Dean.” Ellen reached and grabbed Frank’s hands. “For him and for me.”

“See . . .” Frank moved his hands and began to wave them about. “This is what I don’t get. This sense of obligation you have to the guy. You’re my wife El, why do I feel a part of you still belongs to him. He’s the father of your twins. End of the line.”

“Oh you are so melo-dramatic. Every part of me belongs to you Frank. I just want to lend Dean my uterus for nine months.”

With laughter Frank walked in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “I can’t agree to this. And don’t go doing it behind my back either. I’ll get really pissed off.”

“I won’t do it behind your back.” Ellen leaned in the kitchen doorway. “Dean wouldn’t.”

“Then that’s one thing in his favor. Of course he *did* ask my wife to get pregnant.”

“It wasn’t Dean’s idea. It’s was mine.”

The refrigerator door slammed. “Why is my wife offering her body . . . never mind. It’s because it’s Dean right? Let me tell you Ellen, I’ll never give my permission for it. So you’ll never have his child. End

of discussion. Don't bring this up to me again." He stormed past her.

"You're angry. I thought we were discussing this rationally." She watched him walk to the livingroom toward the steps.

"That's before I realized how much I share my wife with another man."

"You don't share me Frank." Ellen followed him. "We're friends."

"Then quit pushing the boundaries of friendship Ellen!" Frank blasted as he started taking the steps. "Before you cross so far you can't take it back."

^^^

Finally, it was lights out. Dean was glad to be going home. It had been a long day, but a good one. Time would tell with Melissa, but Dean's instincts screamed success at him. Picking up the red pen from his lab counter, Dean slashed out the day on the calendar. And just to make him feel good after all the double up work he did in the wake of the nosey newcomers Dean lifted the calendar to the next month. He gloated for a moment at the smiling face that marked the day the rest would leave then he dropped the pen, took off his coat then grabbed the notes of Melissa's implantation. His eyes were tired and burning and he rubbed them as he walked out. But as if that momentary eye closing stint was a nap, Dean slipped into a nightmare. Joanna was standing at the door.

"Dr. Hayes." She spoke rudely to him. "I haven't the time for these games. We have to get things ready. The embryos are part of our things. Where are they?"

"Gone. Now if you'll excuse me."

"They are not gone." Joanna blocked his exit.

"They are. Sorry. We had a power problem and they died. Plain and simple."

"We safe guarded against something like that happening. Now . . . We are missing our Embryos, and our vials." Joanna stated.

"You wouldn't get the vials even if I had them. I can't take any chance on what is in them."

"It was an universal viral anti-serum. We were to take it just incase the virus was still in the air."

"Then you really don't need them." Dean slid his body between her hips and the door. He grabbed the handle. "I cured the virus. And I disposed of the vials safely."

"A move like that shows your true ignorance of science. I'm telling you Dr. Hayes, I want our embryos back, and we must have them before we depart. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. Then you will return them?"

"Nope. They are no longer viable, I've told you that. Sorry Joanna." Egotistically smiling, Dean pulled the door closed and ensured the lock. In his walk down the hall away from Joanna he looked at the notes in his hands. Dean was proud of how well he kept his cool demeanor despite the fact that all Joanna had to do was look down, glance at his notes and she would have discovered his lie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

July 29

Dean knew that voice when it called his name, the unmistakable English accent. He finished switching power cords in the outlet and stood. He turned on the microscope. “What do you want Joanna. And please knock next time when you come into my lab.”

Joanna knocked her fist three times on the counter with a giggle, then moved closer to him. “It seems Dr. Hayes, you and I have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“Probably not.” Dean held a slide up.

“Probably so. It seems we can’t agree on these embryos and it has caused a professional rift between us. I would like very much to get past that. The rest of us leave in two weeks. I’d like to use this time to get to know you better.”

“Really, why is that?” Dean adjusted the stand of the microscope.

“I owe you an apology. I have insulted your work without knowing of it.” She moved closer to him. “And if nothing else, it could benefit you.” She spoke softly. “Seeing how the female population seems to be a minority, a little companionship couldn’t be all that bad, would . . .”

A heavy slam on the counter jolted Joanna and Dean. Ellen stood with her hand on a stack of papers, fingers tapping. “I’m back.” She tilted her head sounding upset.

Joanna tilted her head with a smile. “Oh, hello Ellen.” She lightly placed her hand on Dean’s back. “Think about it Dr. Hayes.” She stepped back. “I’ll leave you two to your work.” Brushing her hand against Ellen as she walked by, Joanna left the lab.

Ellen let out a loud exclamation of shock and disgust. She ran over and shut the door. “I can not believe she just hit on you.”

“Is that what she was doing?”

“Oh don’t play dumb with me.” Ellen lifted herself to sit on the counter. “I hope to God you aren’t considering sleeping with that.”

“It would be sex Ellen. And you know sex to some men in this community is a commodity.”

“You aren’t that shallow. I will lose all respect for you. All respect. I would never . . .”

“El.” Dean turned around, folded his arms and leaned against the counter. “I have no intention of sleeping with her. I know what she’s up to, I’m not that stupid.”

“Oh good.” Ellen let out a sigh of relief.

“But . . .” Dean walked closer to her. “I’m curious.” He rested his hands on her knees. “Why are you so upset about this?” He raised one eyebrow. “Jealous perhaps.”

“No. I just can’t believe that she would do that. And I . . .” She watched Dean in a pacifying manner, nod his head. “All right maybe just a little.”

“Thank you.” Dean smiled. “Now, talk to me about Melissa.” He backed up.

“She’s definitely pregnant.” Ellen spoke with excitement, and handed him the test results. “HCG levels are through the roof. Seems the implantation of, G.A.F.-Number 37 was successful.”

“Yes.” Dean clapped, crinkling the paper.

“Dean, what does G.A.F. stand for?”

“Please Ellen, have you been married to Frank that long? G.A.F., Genetically altered fetus.” Dean shook his head.

“When will we get to view him?” Ellen asked. “Are you gonna do an ultrasound soon?”

“Not for a few weeks. It would be nearly impossible to see much. Give it some time.”

“Oh good. At least I won’t miss anything while I’m gone.” Her feet swung about.

“Gone?” Dean slanted his head with an odd smile. “Where are you going?”

“Uh . . .” Ellen slid off the counter. “To the bathroom.” She tried to make her getaway.

“El.” Dean reached for her. Her sudden willingness to get away told him something. “Where are you going? Does Frank know you’re planning on going somewhere?”

“I’m going to the bathroom.” She pulled her arm away nervously. “And no. I don’t inform Frank every time I have to go.”

Without anymore questions, Dean let her leave. She was up to something, he knew her too well. At first he wondered if it had to do with Joanna, and as soon as the thought of Joanna hit him. Dean panicked. Fearful of the timing coincidence of Ellen’s ‘being gone’ comment and the newcomers nearing departure, he took off to find Frank. Dean needed his fears confirmed or put to rest. If Ellen were leaving Beginnings, Frank would surely know.

^^^

“I’m telling you Dean . . .” Frank marched with a huff along side of Dean to the utility buildings. “It’s a wasted trip to see my Dad. He’s not gonna know something about my wife I don’t.”

“And I’m telling you, Frank, she’s planning on going with them.”

“Never.” Frank pounded a few times on his father’s office door then opened it. “Dad? We need to talk to you.”

Joe stared up from his work and straightened himself. “Come in.”

Frank sat down immediately. “I need you to tell Dean something for me. I need you to inform him that Ellen is not going to Colorado.”

Joe took a deep breath through his nose, he folded his hands, and motioned his head to Dean to sit. “I’m afraid to tell you, she is.”

“See Dean I told . . . she what?!” Frank cried out. “She isn’t fuckin going with these people. I won’t allow it.”

Joe subtly shook his head. “She is, and you will.”

Both Dean and Frank reacted verbally at the same time. “No!”

“Boys.” Joe held up his hands. “These people asked for Ellen to go. They need her to help set up the survivor program. I didn’t want her to go at first, but then I thought about it. Who would be the most unsuspecting spy to send? Ellen. She’ll find out more than anyone else. And the best part is, she won’t know she’s doing it. We’ll pick her mind when she gets back.” Joe leaned forward. “Now, I believe she will be totally safe . . .”

Frank had to interrupt his father. “No. I won’t let her leave. She can’t go out there.”

“She is Frank. On August 12th. You know Greg and I are heading down to that small town in Texas. We’ll pick her up on our way back. Ten days tops she’ll be gone. ”

Frank dramatically shook his head. “No. But if she goes, then I’m going with her.”

Joe disagreed. “Can’t do that Frank, besides the baby, you’re too important here.”

“Then I’ll go with her.” Dean suggested.

Both Joe and Frank looked at him at the same time.

Joe shook his head at Dean’s suggestion. “Neither of you will go. I already asked someone. I asked Miguel to go and watch over her. He’s the biggest and the strongest man I have next to you Frank. She’ll be fine with Miguel. This is a plan in motion. Don’t screw it up either of you by trying to get her to change her mind. Got that? Now I need to get back to work.”

Frank and Dean reluctantly agreed and they slowly stood up.

Turning just once more to his father, Frank gave it another attempt. “Dad, look, she’s my wife. I should have at least some say so in this right?”

“Oh sure Frank, you can say what ever you like. But it’s Ellen’s call. If she doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t have to. End of this discussion.” Joe returned to the work that he was doing before his son and Dean interrupted him. He paused before he brought his pencil down to the lined paper. He listened to the silence of his office and began to debate in his mind whether or not he was truly making the right decision.

^^^

Dean walked his separate way from Frank as they left Joe's office. He saw it on Frank's face. The shock, the anger, the frustration. And rightfully so. Ellen was his wife, she was planning on leaving the sanctity of her home, and when did she plan on telling her husband? Dean knew this shouldn't shock Frank. They were dealing with Ellen. Ellen did what she wanted to do. Still, a part of him was worried. He just couldn't decipher if it was out of pure fear for her, or because of anything he felt for her, and him just not wanting her to leave. Dean told himself over and over as he walked to the lab--just put the fear part to rest--the visitors had done nothing harmful other than touching Brian. As Dean reached the clinic, that final thought crossed his mind. And another worry hit him. Ellen's little fib about Brian. Could that be why they wanted her?

As he made his approach to the double glass entrance doors, he could see the dark shadow of Ellen emerging forth. Dean stopped on the step. Thinking, *'don't say anything, leave it be, just say hi, keep quiet'*. Dean slightly turned his head, he was just going to wave that's all.

"Hey, Dean!" Ellen flung open the doors. "I got tired of waiting on your ass to get back. I'm heading to containment." She moved closer to him, placing her face close to his. Why was he cowering? She wasn't that frightening. "Dean?"

"Hi El." He lifted his shoulder.

"What is up with you? You look really guilty."

"Oh, nothing, I . . ." Dean stood up and faced her. "What the hell is wrong with you? What are you thinking, up and leaving your kids, the baby, even Frank. When did you plan on saying anything?" Dean spoke fast and with angry enthusiasm. "You don't even know these people. They tell you they want you to help them. How do you know they don't want to do some sort of sick experiment on you. You don't. You just agree. And do you even discuss . . ."

"Whoa!" Ellen stepped back. "Is this what's up with you? My leaving for a measly week?"

"Yes it is." Dean placed his hands on hips, ready to fire again.

"O.K. See ya!" Ellen almost with a hop, jumped the step from the clinic building and walked, seemingly happy, to containment, never looking back.

Dean raised his hand, then smacked lightly into his forehead and ran his hand down to his chin. "I quit."

^^^

It was on Frank's mind all day also. He tried to reason his reaction but in his mind he only grew more angrier. Coupling that with the several fights he seemed to pick with his father throughout the day, Frank could have been in a better mood when he arrived home. He forgot Ellen had a social skills class. Therefore another hour of waiting and stewing.

Frank laid on his bed, the hour had come and gone. He knew Ellen was avoiding him. She had to know he knew. Dean approached Frank in the later afternoon telling him his attempts were futile in trying to convince Ellen. Frank was grateful for his try. Perhaps he should have said 'thanks' instead of telling Dean that Ellen was his wife and to mind his own business about it. And Frank couldn't figure out what was up with Joanna. He made a gentleman's approach to her. He asked her politely, to reconsider her choice of his wife. Frank knew he didn't come off threatening until Joanna irked him by asking him, 'why don't you want her to go? Are you afraid she may not wish to return to Beginnings?' Maybe it would have been better to laugh her off. Maybe he shouldn't have told her he'd just run down and snatch her back. And ending the conversation with a 'fuck off' wasn't the bright idea, it merely caused Joanna to edge him on more about the unlikelihood of Ellen's return.

How many times did he straighten the sheet that covered him? Ten? It was a nervous thing. The product of his all day thinking. Frank realized he should have found Ellen sooner.

"Sorry, I'm so late." Ellen opened up the bedroom door, smiling. She walked to the bed and kissed the sulking Frank. "Uh oh. What's wrong?"

Frank slid his one leg up, almost as if subconsciously to knock off her hand. “When were you planning on telling me you were leaving?”

“What are you talking about Frank. Where am I going?” She stood up from the bed and turned her back to him as she began to undress for bed.

“Stop it El. Colorado. You’re going to Colorado.”

“I am not.” Ellen laughed at him. “Now where would . . .”

“Knock it off!” Frank brought his tone down. “Just knock it off. I know. I know all about, so talk to me.”

“Fine.” She walked to the bed and sat. “I am leaving. I wasn’t supposed to tell you for another week. But if you know, you also know I’m not going to be gone for that long.”

“You’re right. You’re not going to be gone for that long. Because you aren’t going.”

“No Frank.” Ellen tried to get up but Frank pulled her back. “I am going. This is the reason Joe didn’t want me to tell you. Listen.” She looked into his eyes. “I have been here in Beginnings for six years. I have a chance to go out and see the world that I seemed to forget was out there. These people feel that I am an asset to our survivor program. Do you know how important that makes me feel? If you did, you would not fight with me over this.”

“I could say the same for you. If you knew how important you are to me, you wouldn’t go. El, I can’t protect you out there. I can’t. You aren’t safe out there.” Frank held on to her wrist. “In here, you’re safe.”

“Miguel will be with me . . .”

“Miguel is not me. Miguel wouldn’t lay his life on the line for you like I would.”

“You’re wrong, Frank. Miguel would. And nothing is going to happen. We’re taking the bus straight there to that installation. Don’t do this to me, Frank. I’m going.”

“No you aren’t, El. You are going to tell my father you changed your mind. They’re gonna have to find someone else to go. I won’t let you.”

“You won’t let me?” Ellen laughed at his remark. “Ten days. That’s all I’ll be gone.”

“I don’t trust these people. I get this bad feeling when I think about it.”

“You just aren’t going to see this clearly are you?” Ellen stood up from the bed. “I’m not gonna sit in here and argue with you. I’m leaving.”

Frank flung off his cover. Racing to the door, he slammed it shut as soon as she opened it. “You aren’t walking away.” His hand rested on the door above her head. “Listen to me.” He ran his hand down the side of her face. “You are what matters to me. I can not keep you safe if you leave. You won’t be safe. How many different ways can I tell you that? Please.” He kissed her softly. “Please don’t go. Don’t go with these people. I am begging you.” He kissed her again. “Please.”

“I’m sorry Frank.”

Frank’s hand whacked against the door. “Fine.” He stepped back. “Fine, this is going to come between us.” He raised his hands. “This is going to be a source of argument between us for the next two weeks, I can see.”

“No it won’t. I won’t argue over it.”

“Know something, El.” Frank climbed into bed. “I will stop you.”

“How?” Ellen spoke through a sort of laughter. “You’d have to take some pretty drastic measures.”

“I’ll do what I have to, to protect my family.” He covered himself and shut out the light.

“Goodnight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

August 12

“Joanna?” Jeffrey Barnett knocked once on her front door and proceeded inside. “Are you here?”

“Yes I am.” She walked down the steps laying small bag at the foot of the stairs. “I was just finishing up.”

“Everything is loaded on the bus. The equipment, everything.”

“No Jeffrey, not everything.” Joanna reached behind him closing the door which he forgot about. “We don’t have the embryos. We don’t have our vials. We don’t have the master program. These are all very vital things.”

“But not detrimental. It’s a step back, not a landslide. As far as the vials go, I really think that Dr. Hayes disposed of them. And the embryos are well hidden. We’ve searched everywhere. We can’t find them.”

“Dr. Hayes and his team again.”

A smile appeared on Jeffrey’s face. “Payback is a real bitch. Huh?”

“You took care of everything?” Joanna asked.

“Everything. Dr. Hayes, if all goes as planned, will experience a minor set back after we’ve left. And as far as the master program goes. They can’t possibly have it. If they did, we wouldn’t be taking Mrs. Slagel with us, would we?”

“No, not at all. Ellen. She’s the first step to getting that child with us. We know what he is capable of. Fortunately, they do not. It is in our favor that she has so many problems with her spouse. She told me just last night that they’ve been on bad terms. It’s perfect. It will make it even more believable that she doesn’t want to come back right away. And if everything goes as scheduled on that hill after we leave, we won’t have to worry about him bolting down to get her either.”

“I’ve taken care of that myself. Electronics *is* my forte. But what about this Miguel they are sending with us. We didn’t count on him.”

Joanna didn’t seem the least bit concerned. She folded her arms and looked nonchalantly at Jeffrey. “A man of his size, his manual skills. We need him with us. He’ll just have to become a level four. Easy enough.”

“Very good.” Jeffrey looked down at his watch. “I must leave you know. I want to get some rest before I go back out and finish my plants. I’ve got the security rounds pegged so I have only certain times I can be at places.”

“Then I’ll speak to you later?”

“If I get a chance.” Jeffrey opened the door. “If not. Noon at the front gate.” He stepped outside with a hesitation. “A part of me is going to miss this place.”

“Yes I know.” She stepped to him. “But we’ll be back.”

^^^

Ellen had spent the entire last hour in the community making her rounds, saying her goodbyes. She said her farewell to her baby and Dean promised he’d have the twins at the front gate to say goodbye to her. There was one more person she wanted to see before she left, Henry. He was busy and couldn’t make it to the gate. Henry didn’t want Ellen to go either. But he didn’t pester her quite as much as everyone else. She couldn’t figure out why they just couldn’t let her go. Let her have her ten days without feeling like she was breaking a law. All they way on her journey to Henry, Frank stayed on her mind. Would he be at the gate too? She only hoped. Ellen saw him earlier, he wasn’t happy. She thought he would have been at the nursery when she kissed Brian and held him, but he wasn’t. She was beginning to think she would wave from her seat on the bus, but she wouldn’t be waving to Frank.

Storage number two--clothing. That’s where Henry was. An odd place to be fixing something, but

why question him. Henry stood outside pacing around nervously. “Henry?” Ellen smiled. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“I guess this is goodbye huh? My bus leaves in ten minutes. Have you seen Frank?”

“Um, no.” Henry shook his head then reached out his arms and pulled Ellen into them. “I’ll miss you. Be careful.”

“Thank you.” Her cheek pressed close to his. “I will.” She stepped back, grabbed hold of his face and kissed him. “Watch my family while I’m gone.”

“I’ll do that. Oh . . .” Henry reached in his pocket. “I almost forgot. Here.” He handed her a small two inch square box. In the center of it was a brown button. It had a loop on top of it, almost as if it was suppose to be worn.

Ellen looked down at it curiously. “What is this?”

“Don’t tell anyone I gave that to you. It’s a transmitter. They used to give those to old people to press if they need assistance. Keep it with you. If you need help. Press that.”

“It won’t work Henry, I’ll be in Colorado.” She showed it to him.

“It’ll work . . . I think. But it’s worth a shot.” He rolled her hand around it. “I’ll feel better if you have the pendant.”

“Then I’ll take it.” She slightly unzipped the bag she had over her shoulder and dropped it in. “I have to go. If you see Frank, tell him I said goodbye.” Ellen backed up and turned around. She started walking away and didn’t make it far. A hand came from behind, covered her mouth, and she felt the air beneath her feet as an arm grasped her waist and lifted her. Kicking and fighting whoever it was, Ellen was not making it easy. Her fingernails ripped into the skin of the hand that cut off her air supply. In a backwards pull, Ellen saw the vision of the street leave her view and Henry as he covered his face. Trying to scream was a futile attempt. Before she knew it, she was in storage two, the door shut and she was placed in a chair.

It all happened so fast. Her hands pulled behind her, and rope tying them up quickly. She saw her attacker as he knelt to her side, tying her feet to the legs of the chair.

“Frank, you son of a bitch.” She tried to kick him with her free leg.

“It’s for your own good, El.” He blocked her attempts and moved to the other foot. He stood when he was finished.

“Let me go. I can’t believe you just did this.”

“I can’t.” Frank shook his head. “Listen to me. Don’t go. I’ll untie you if you don’t go.”

“No. And I’m divorcing your ass after this one. You can’t drag your wife across the street and tie her to . . .” A large piece of tape covered her mouth.

“Sorry. It’s for the best.”

Ellen flipped out in that chair. She squirmed and shook her head, shooting eye daggers at Frank.

Henry burst into the storage room. “Frank you didn’t say anything about tying her up. You said you needed a few minutes alone to try to stop her.”

“I did need a few minutes. And look, I stopped her.”

“Frank this isn’t right. Let her go.” Henry stated.

“Nope.” Frank walked over to Ellen and kissed her shaking head. “I’m going up to the front gate to tell them she changed her mind. Watch her.” He waved his fingers to Ellen and trotted out of the door.

^^^

The bus was ready to go when Frank arrived at the end of the tunnel at the front gate. Joe stood with Joanna and Miguel when he arrived. Dean was there with the twins waiting on Ellen.

“Frank?” Joe saw him. “What’s going on? Where’s your wife?”

“Got some bad news.” Frank placed his hands on his hips. “Ellen changed her mind. She isn’t going. She couldn’t face you guys with it. Sorry.”

Dean didn't buy it. Especially as he glanced at Frank's right hand, and the fresh bleeding scratches on it. He walked closer to him, pulled him back, and whispered. "Where is she?"

"She's not coming. Trust me, she's not coming." Frank kept his voice low.

"What did you do to her?" Dean asked. "Is she conscious?"

"What, do you think I'd knock out my wife?"

Dean shook his head and stepped away. "Big mistake if you didn't."

Joe faced Joanna. "I don't understand what happened. Ellen was set on it."

"I think Frank was just trying to get us to depart with out her." Joanna pointed to the jeep that was emerging from the tunnel. "Here she is now."

Ellen rested her hand on Henry's before she jumped from the jeep. "Thanks Henry."

"No problem. I'm just gonna back out of here now and hide. Frank's gonna kill me."

Ellen winked, grabbed her bag and closed the jeep door. "See you in ten days." With a huge grin on her face he waltzed up behind Frank and smacked him in the back of the head. "Prick." She moved to her children and knelt down before them. "Alex, Billy." She took their hands. "I have to go. I won't be gone long. Be good for Daddy and Uncle Frank."

They both nodded and hugged her tightly.

Ellen kissed them and felt the warmth of their hugs. She stood up to Dean. "Watch Frank for me."

"I will." He grabbed her hand, squeezing it. "Can I at least say goodbye properly?"

"Sure." She smiled.

Dean reached out his hands and placed them on her face, softly he pressed his lips to hers, holding them there briefly. With a loud Frank 'Hey!' he pulled back. "Come back."

"I will." She moved to Joe and embraced him tightly. "Bye."

"Sweetheart, be good, and be careful." With a father's pat and kiss to her cheek Joe turned her to Frank.

Ellen stepped one step to her husband, then changed her mind. "I'm ready." She walked to Miguel.

"Wait." Frank grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Don't go without saying goodbye to me."

"Goodbye Frank." She turned away and walked to the gate.

"El." He chased her. "El." He took hold of her face. "I love you." He pressed his lips hard to hers. "I love you. Don't leave hating me."

"I won't. I'll save it for when I get back." She walked backwards though the gate, but stopped. Rushing forward she ran into Frank's arms and embraced him with everything she could.

"Be careful." He released her.

Ellen, clutching her bag, stepped back slowly releasing her hand from his. "Always."

Frank's heart dropped as he watched her step on to the bus. No matter how many times she looked back, waved or mouthed the words 'I love you' to him and the twins. It still hurt to watch. Seeing Miguel getting ready to board the bus, Frank charged to him. "Miguel."

Miguel paused as he stepped up.

"Watch her." Frank requested passionately. "Watch her with everything you are. Promise me."

"I promise you." Miguel reached out his hand and shook Frank's. "I'll watch her with my life."

"Thanks." Frank moved from the bus and out of its way, watching the doors close, hearing it shift into gear and seeing it move. He stood, looking like his world had come to an end. Trying his hardest to ignore the fears that built in his heart, and praying to God to bring his wife back. He didn't want what was happening. His gut told him it was wrong. But it was out of his control.

Ellen watched through her window the vision of Frank and her children get smaller and smaller. They didn't move as they watched the bus. Pressing her hand tightly to the tinted window, Ellen saw the Beginnings' gate soon disappear.

The bus jolted and jumped on the dirt road they took that would soon lead to a main one. A roadway

Henry and other men from Beginnings kept clear for when they made their runs.

Ellen wasn't expecting to see what she saw as the bus finally drove onto what once was a major interstate. The last time she was out there, it still was a road. Now the branches of trees that had overgrown and reached outward toward the road, scratched against the sides of the bus as Miguel rolled it down the new growing jungle. The world looked different then what she remembered it. Perhaps a part of her thought it would not have changed at all. Perhaps that part didn't want to believe it could. As the bus moved along seemingly picking up speed, a feeling hit Ellen. An emptiness. A fear. She didn't expect to feel it, nor wanted to. But she had left her safe haven and felt lost. Besides the security of the walls, Beginnings gave her a sense of security she didn't know she needed until that point. Frightened a bit, she lifted herself from her fourth row seat on the silent bus and moved to the front. She rested her hand on Miguel's shoulder as she sat in the seat directly behind him. She would stare out then look into the mirror above Miguel's head for a reassuring smile from him. She sat quietly with him on the journey watching ahead. The visions, new ones to Ellen. The bright green leaves of trees, sandy colored grass and multitudes of wild flowers bellowed out along the road and on it. It was God's green earth, flourishing with life. How ironic that they blossomed in a dead world.

BEYOND THE WALL

*I envision God's hand touching down again.
Giving back a gift that we've long took advantage of.
A gift we ourselves, helped to destroy.
No one can ever tell me that if it happens, destiny, pre-destiny played no part.
For those of us who are left, those of us who remain, we are the chosen ones.
Not chosen by God's will, but by life's will. And God's intervention.
Some who remain will see it as a blessing. Others will see it as a curse.
Either way, we who remain are amenable for what is then left.
We must embrace it. We must use what's in us--our instincts, our abilities--to survive.
We must pray for the wisdom to use our chance wisely.
The new world, and the continuance of mankind is now our responsibility.
Without selfishness we must rebuild.
And use with gratitude, the resources that will flourish with abundance at our feet.
By the grace of God, the sins of the past, will remain just that--the past.
Any mistakes made here on in, are our own.
--Excerpts from the novel, *THE WORLD'S LAST STAND*.
By Dr. Forest Caceres, creator of *The Garfield Project*.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Perimeter seven lay at the northeast sector of Beginnings. A one mile trudge up a small grade to the twenty foot fence that was part of keeping the community safe. It was Frank's least favorite spot to check. Not that it wasn't accessible--it was--but because of the wide open area that lay behind it. An open invitation to the larger animals to try their luck at the gate. They always failed. And their botched attempts were made known by there carcasses that stuck like velcro to the metal fence.

Frank saved that perimeter so that Josh could be there with him. That was Josh's last stop of the day before going home. Make sure the dead animals were clear from perimeter seven. A dirty job, Frank knew, but someone had to do it. And Josh didn't mind. He actually seemed to like it at times.

It looked clear from where Frank could see as he walked with Josh up the grade. Maybe the only thing Frank would have to check it the--as Frank called it--the fryer beam, and make sure that some large animal didn't knock it off it's track.

Frank glanced down at his watch, it was one minute after three. Just on time. Frank made his check there everyday at that time. Everyone knew that. Unfortunately for Frank, so did the visitors that had just left.

^^^

Dean didn't feel much like working the rest of the day. Heavy would be a mild word to describe how Ellen was on his mind. But knowing he had things to do, Dean returned the twins to school and headed back to his clinic lab. Walking in, he headed straight to his work area. The vision of Johnny reminded him of those slides he had to do. Slides meant using the microscope and that entailed a new routine in the lab since Joe took away his power strips. Bend down, unplug his dialysis machine pug in the power scope. All because Joe promised Henry would get to the new outlets right away. Henry did get to it right away, finishing the task was still up in the air. With aching knees Dean lowered himself to the floor and reached to the plug. As he did, he heard John Matoose stroll in. Dean stayed hidden, he knew it was about Jenny or the baby.

"Dean?" John Matoose called out. "Andrea said for you to give me this medication. Dean?"

Dean rolled his eyes, he knew it. "What's it for?" Very well finished switching plugs, Dean stayed under the counter.

"Jenny has a breast infection. Tenderness, swelling, discharge, you know the stuff."

Dean winced, what a horrifying thought. "Johnny, give John what Andrea says please. I'm busy."

Johnny snickered and hit his large hand on the counter above Dean's head. "Let's see Mr. Matoose." Johnny grabbed the small sheet of paper that Andrea had written on. "Oh I'll get this. It's already mixed." He went to the large cooler where Dean kept all of the medications, he opened it. "Uh Dean. Where are the meds?"

"The pre-mixed ones are in the case." Dean knew if Johnny took any longer he'd eventually have to emerge from his safe haven.

"I'm in the case Dean. They aren't."

"They are, Johnny." Dean, annoyed, stood up with his usual bang to the top of his head. He flicked the switch to the microscope as he moved to Johnny. Not one step did he take before he heard the hissing and cracking. He looked back, sparks shot from the microscope and smoke from the outlet. He ran back over to it but John Matoose intercepted.

With the back of his hand, John gave a fierce sweep at the microscope sailing it across the room and enabling the cord to be ripped from the exploding outlet. Grabbing Dean's lab jacket that lay on the counter, John put out the flames that started.

Dean stood shocked, and looking upon what could have been worse. "What happened?"

"Bad over load I guess." John remained calm like this was an everyday occurrence. "I'll tell Henry

to get over here. But . . . my wife is in pain, may I have her medication.”

Stunned by his sudden change of subject, Dean stepped back. “Sure. I’ll just get them . . .” He peered into the empty case that Johnny stood waiting to show him. “Johnny, where in the hell are my medications?”

“Not here. Did you use them all?” Johnny asked.

“No.” Dean pulled out his set of keys. “I don’t know what happened to them.”

John Matoose grew a little impatient. “Can I have Jenny’s medication please.”

With the end of his request, Henry walked into the lab, holding a box. “Dean we have a problem . . . man what’s burning?”

John Matoose held his hand to Henry to stop him. “I’m first Henry. You’ll have to wait.”

Henry tried to make it past. “But John this is a problem.”

Dean turned sharply around. He almost exploded, he just had a fire, his pre-mixed meds were gone, and John Matoose wanted a prescription for Jenny. He unlocked his ingredient cabinet and sighed in relief to see it filled. Without saying anything, he ignored Henry and John who were going back and forth with ‘my problem’s more important . . . no *my* problem’s more important’ and went to the computer. “John, I’ll just mix you another one up.”

Henry set the box down to Dean. “We really have a problem.”

John Matoose again extended his hand and pulled Henry back. “Henry, wait your turn.”

Dean pulled up a stool and entered his program. He went into his file on anti-infection agents. “What?” His mouth dropped open. “No . . .” He tried again. “This isn’t right.” Pulling up another file, his expression didn’t change. “No . . .no.” He quickly ran from his stool and grabbed his supplies of disks. He looked for the one he needed and popped it in. Empty. “Where are all my formulas?”

Henry lowered his box forward. “Probably with all the cryo-data--gone.”

John Matoose took a brief moment before he said anything. He saw the confused looks on both Henry and Dean’s face. But he didn’t have much time. “Does uh, this mean Jenny’s not getting her medication?”

^^^^

“Yeah I miss her too Josh.” Frank spoke softly as they walked near perimeter seven. “Gone three hours and . . . hey.” Frank snatched the ball from Josh and dropped his clipboard. “Wanna play Josh? It’ll take my mind off of things.”

Josh nodded.

Frank clutched the ball and pulled back his arm. “Go long.” He waited until Josh began to trot backwards and Frank sailed the football far from Josh. On purpose, as a self pleasure tactic, just to see Josh chase a ball he’d never get. Laughing as he watched his perfectly thrown pass to nowhere, Frank picked up his pace to chase Josh when he stopped cold. He watched the football suddenly burst into flames mid-air. “Whoa. . . Josh hold up.”

Josh stopped walking and watched the flaming and smoking ball lay on the ground twenty feet from him. He pointed to it. “Trick.” He began to get it.

“What the . . .” In an instant, and with a quick shift of his eyes, Frank knew what caused that football to explode. The frying beam pointed on an angle inward to the community, and Josh was running straight for it. “Josh No!” Frank took off after the teenager. “Josh no!” Frank screamed with his whole heart and soul and ran on the uneven terrain as fast as he could. His heart raced, Josh was feet from him, still not stopping. Switching his running angle, Frank leaped for the smaller teenager barreling him to the ground, seconds before he crossed the line. The force of Frank’s landing to the hard dirt with Josh caused his shoulder blade to bang on the ground, his right arm to shoot outward in a reflex straight into the fryer beam. With the loud sound of singeing, Frank quickly retracted his arm back before the beam had its chance to sever the limb from his body. He grunted loudly in pain, with a cringing face at his nearly blackened forearm. Laying on his side, trying to hold back an hysterical Josh, Frank depressed his

receiver on his belt and called out. "Security. Down seven." He spoke harshly and in pain. "Down seven, now."

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Dean sat in his lab baffled, wondering what all had transpired. The old saying, when it rains it pours, sure held true in Dean's case. One good thing, John Matoose was gone. Dean quickly mixed up a placebo to get rid of him figuring he'd drop off the real stuff when he got his things together. "Henry, you can't possibly have a logical explanation for all this."

"But I do." Henry said. "I'm not saying it's true. But everything has a logical explanation."

"Yeah it does." Dean stood up, hand on head. "Sabotage."

"No way Dean. I know it smells like it. But this place and the cryo-lab are way too secure. They couldn't have gotten in here."

"Then explain my meds. Explain my microscope, files, the disk."

"All right." Henry was the calm explainer. "The meds, you used them, you got busy and used them all. Dean if they wanted to sabotage your medical supply, why wouldn't they take all of your supplies too. The microscope. Easy. You've been over working that circuit. And your programs, didn't you have a power surge just last night?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"Didn't it cause the computer to go out? Wasn't your disk in there. It's feasible that a part of your hard drive fried and you lost your data."

Dean rolled his eyes. "All of it?"

"Yeah. But keep in mind, I am not giving you answers, merely theories."

Dean took his seat again. He snapped his finger. "Our missing disks with the cryo-data . . ."

"I think they took them by accident. When they were packing up, someone grabbed ours not knowing that theirs were already packed."

"Your theories suck, Henry." Dean pouted, then slid forward resting his elbows on his knees. "Completely suck."

"I resent that. You asked me." Henry stepped to him.

"Maybe we should . . ." Dean's words slowed as he lifted his head to Frank who stood in the doorway. Frank had a look on his face, Dean rarely saw--pain. "What's wrong?" He jumped up.

"I burned my arm. I don't think it's too bad." Frank walked in holding it. He showed Dean.

"Holy shit!" Dean exclaimed at the burnt line from his wrist to the bend in his elbow. "What happened? Did you walk into a perimeter beam?" Dean reached for his glasses and put them on.

"More like the beam walked into us." He turned his head to Josh who stood at the door. "Huh Josh? Almost fried us. Good thing it wasn't the current beam."

"You're really lucky Frank." Dean finished his initial examination. "We know what those beams do. A few seconds more the arm would have been off."

"At least I wouldn't feel any pain." Frank joked.

"It's not funny." Dean handed him back his arm. "Go down to room four."

Henry was curious, even if Dean didn't appear to be. "Frank." He called to him as he walked out. "How did the beam walk into you?"

"Fuckin animal knocked it off track. Instead of it hitting it's partner beam, it was shooting straight in towards Beginnings." Frank, holding his arm walked from the room.

Henry scratched his head, and looked at Dean.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked as Henry stood up. "What are you thinking?"

"Uh . . . nothing." Henry moved to the door. "Take care of Frank. I'll talk to you later." Henry left knowing what he had to do. He had to get to the hill to check on that beam. Something just didn't seem right.

^^^

Dean looked up to Frank as he almost finished his arm. “Frank you’re doing very well with this. Can I ask you something?”

“Depends. Is it about Ellen?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “It’s about the beam. Do you think someone could have done that on purpose? I mean, don’t you check that perimeter at the same time everyday. Couldn’t someone had set you up?”

“Oh, sure, anyone could have. But who would?”

Dean returned to finishing his arm. “What if it was . . .”

Joe interrupted their conversation with a simple knock on the door. “You know it warms my heart to see you two like this . . . hey Frank what happened to your arm?”

Frank looked up. “Burned it.”

“Too bad.” Joe shrugged. “Anyway, did you guys see Henry? I heard he was here because you blew up your lab Dean?”

Dean turned to Joe. “He went up to perimeter seven. He should be back.”

“Good. Cause all hell seems to be breaking loose around here. Tell him I need him. All those keypads that he and John put in. None of them will take a passcode. I can’t get in to any of the storage facilities.” Speaking like it was nothing out of the ordinary. Joe waved the hand that held the clipboard, said his goodbye and left as quick as he entered.

Dean was done. He pushed his stool back. “I’ll give you something so it doesn’t get infected.”

“Sure.” Frank slid off the table. “Your lab blew up?”

“My microscope.” Dean went to the sink and washed his hands. “And get this. All my meds. Gone. My data for my formulas to make them. Erased.” He started to dry his hands.

“No shit. That’s not good. That’s a lot of work.”

“Yeah well I’m not stupid. I learned a hard lesson a long time ago to make a double back-up. And I did. Whoever meant to stall me didn’t. I have all that information at my house.”

With the shock of his injury disappearing, Frank began to think clearer and his mind raced. He didn’t like where his thoughts were going. “I’m heading out Dean. Thanks for the arm.” He walked to the door. “One more thing. I know what your thinking. But if they did . . . why? What’s the gain?”

“I don’t know.” Dean shrugged. “But stalling me and taking out you isn’t going to get them Beginnings. So why us?”

“We’ll figure it out. But just on the minor chance someone was trying to take me out, I’m downing every single perimeter in this place and checking the beams.” With a tap to the archway, Frank left the examining room. He had to find Josh and he wanted to get a team together to do the perimeters. In a way Frank felt lucky that it was him at perimeter seven. Had it been anyone else, they may not have had Josh. They wouldn’t have thrown a football into the beam. Anyone else would have walked right into it.

^^^

Ellen’s head raised slowly from the arm her chin rested on. Through the windshield of the bus, she could see the bright spotlights illuminating the long fence ahead. The setting sun behind the mountain that the fence protected, told her how long she had been journeying. “We’re here?” She spoke softly to Miguel.

“Looks that way.” He leaned into his steering wheel, trying to adjust his uncomfortableness he felt in his seat. “What do you think?”

“I think I want to go home.”

Miguel looked at her in his mirror. “If you want to go home Ellen, we will. We’ll park the bus for the night, then turn around in the morning.”

“No, I have to do this. It’s only for a little bit right?”

“It’s O.K. to be scared, Ellen.”

Ellen reached her hand up and placed it on his shoulder. “Not scared, nervous. I’m out of my element and I feel strange. How about you?”

“I’m all right.” Miguel slowed down the bus. He wasn’t truthful with Ellen. He wasn’t all right. He sensed her fear and he didn’t want to couple that with his own. But as he stopped at the gate, things grew worse in his mind. Something wasn’t right. An armed guard posted at the fence as if they just stepped back in time. And Miguel quickly had to wonder, where did they get him from?

^^^

“Sleeping quarters.” Joanna opened the steel door for Ellen, Miguel followed closely behind. “This room will be yours Ellen. My people have worked quite hard while they waited on us. They’ve told me they’ve still a long way to go. So what do you think?”

Ellen nodded as she looked around the room that so much resembled a dorm. Two beds, a stand between them. A mirrored closet, and tiny bathroom. All of which crammed into a ten by ten area. “Great. Miguel what do you think?”

Miguel wasn’t paying attention. He was too busy counting in his mind how many armed guards he had seen in the hallways. Four, five maybe. And there was something wrong with them. They looked so stone, staring forward. No eye contact as they passed them in the hall, despite the fact that Miguel tried. “Um. Yes.”

Joanna moved back to the door. “Now please rest. We’ll be busy with setting up tomorrow.” Joanna answered as she looked back to Miguel. “Unfortunately Miguel, your quarters are down the hall. Follow me I’ll show you.”

“Wait.” Ellen called out. “I’d like Miguel to stay here with me.”

Joanna was surprised. “Why Ellen? You aren’t frightened are you?”

“No, no, no. It’s just that.” Ellen smiled to Miguel. “He and I have been lovers for so long. I just thought it would be nice to be alone.”

Joanna smiled at the news. Another excuse to Beginnings for Ellen’s long stay in Colorado. “Ellen, I had no idea. Of course you may stay together. I’ll leave you two to get your rest.” Joanna backed from the room.

As soon as Ellen knew she had gone far enough away. She rushed to the door and shut it. “Thank God.” She leaned against it. “There was no way Miguel you were sleeping down the hall.”

“You’re right.” Miguel opened his duffel bag.

“Not too mention this can be great bonding time for . . .” Ellen saw him take out his revolver and check it for ammunition. “Why . . . why are you pulling that out?”

“I’d like to sleep, it is my security blanket you can say.” He set it on the night stand and plopped down on the bed. His thoughts stayed on the guards and a growing sickening feeling formed in his gut. All Miguel wanted to do was close his eyes and go to sleep. But he couldn’t stop thinking of a reason to get them out of there . . . soon.

^^^

The double zeros flipped over. Three o’clock in the morning. Frank must have checked the time every minute. He could remember watching every single number turn and hear the slight click as it did. He laid on his back, injured arm above his head. Just staring up. Sleep was not imminent.

At the sound of the slight whimper, Frank rolled on to his side to face Ellen’s half of the bed. Little Brian lay on his stomach next to him. His wide open eyes were catching the light that Frank kept lit in the hallway. “Hey little man.” Frank softly ran his hand down Brian’s bare back. “Are you up too? Can’t you sleep?” Frank pressed his lips to Brian’s head. “Me neither. Where’s Mommy?” His hand reached to Ellen’s pillow and touched the empty spot. “Mommy.” He pulled the sheet up to cover them, then nudged

closer to Brian to hold him.. “Why am I here Bri? Why am I here, while Mommy’s out there?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

August 13

Ellen walked sandwiched between Joanna and Miguel. Miguel kept his face stern, walking as if he were Ellen's body guard. In fact, in his mind he was. He studied and recorded in his mind, every detail he could as they made their way from the commissary to the elevator.

Ellen looked up to the silver number, floor sixteen. It was the floor, she learned that they lived on. The Josephine breakfast bar wasn't sitting well with her. Her stomach knotted some, but it was the only thing they had rationed for that meal. She was grateful for those rice cakes that Henry made. She packed some along for her midnight snacks. The doors to the elevators opened and all three of them stepped on. "This is amazing Joanna. How are you getting all the power for this?"

"My dear Ellen, we are scientists." Joanna pressed eight. "We sent our power expert early. He generated the power plant nearby."

"What's on eight?" Ellen asked.

"Agriculture." The elevator stopped. "I want to leave Miguel here with my two men. They want some of his advice on the fields they are designing and man power needed."

Ellen quickly turned her head to Miguel. "I thought . . ."

"You and I have other work to complete Ellen." Joanna held the door open. "Ah, There's Dr. Majors."

Dr. Majors approached with a smile. "You must be Miguel. We're ready for you. If you'll follow me, I'll show you what we've done."

Nodding his head, Miguel gave an assuring look to Ellen, trying to ease her mind. However, Ellen looked less apprehensive about him leaving, then he did.

Joanna pulled her back as the elevator doors closed. "I'm taking you to floor twelve. That's where we've designated for survivors. Dr. Gafsky is waiting on you."

"You won't be working with us?"

"No, not I. I'm in medicine. Genetics. I'll be on floor seven."

Off the elevator Ellen apprehensively walked with Joanna. "There are twenty-seven floors. Are all of them designated for something?"

"Not all. Not even most I suppose." Joanna spoke in a nonchalant manner. "The first five are storage and office. Seventeen through twenty-seven are useless right now. Old military set ups and such. I guess we'll get to them eventually. But, the others are utilized. Living, agriculture, medical, power, communications. We hope to have the phones back up and running in six months." She spotted Dr. Gafsky. "Then you and I Ellen, can call each other up and chat." She smiled a phoney smile at her. "And here's our man of the hour."

Dr. Gafsky, instead of a hand shake, gave a quick friendly embrace to Ellen. "So nice to see you again."

"Same here." Ellen stepped back, feeling sort of funny being touched by him.

"Joanna, I want to show Ellen our set up." Dr. Gafsky stated.

"Good." Joanna stepped back with a smile. "I'll leave you two."

Dr. Gafsky led Ellen to a single glass door. "This is open now, but as soon as we start doing survivor runs, this door will be secured like in Beginnings." He opened it for her. "I want to show you our computer set-up. I have this splendid program I think that you'll enjoy. Perhaps you may want it for Beginnings. It may make all that paper work you do obsolete."

Interest perked. Anything that would get rid of those stupid reports she would love, and give her complete attention to.

Henry replaced the cover to the keypad outside of Dean's clinic lab. He tightened the screws and stuck his head in the doorway. "Dean?" He watched Dean jolt from his thought. "Dean, I'm done. It'll work now. I'm just gonna test some codes."

"Thanks Henry." Dean stared at his half completed work. "Henry? Have you seen Frank. He was suppose to stop by and let me see his arm."

"Unfortunately, yes. Joe gave him a special assignment, because no one can say two words to him."

"What kind of special assignment?" Dean asked.

"We need some wood. And since Miguel is gone, Joe told Frank to hit a tree or two, he's only up by the back gate."

"I didn't hear any chain saws. Usually you can hear them."

"He's not using a chainsaw. Joe thought it better frustration therapy if he used an ax."

"An ax? Frank's up by the back gate playing Johnny Appleseed? He can't do that. If he starts to sweat and that arm gets dirty, he's gonna get an infection. Then how good will he be, if he's laid up." Dean stood up, hurried across the lab and kept going.

"Where you going?" Henry shouted to Dean as he moved down the hall.

"To bitch at him." Dean stormed through the double glass doors.

Henry whistled as he punched in the code. "Bad move." The lab door buzzed, and Henry opened it. "Yes. Problem solved."

^^^

Ellen wasn't sitting there that long listening to Dr. Gafsky ramble on and on about his program. Fifteen minutes maybe, but it seemed so much longer. Her elbow rested on the table and her head plopped in her hand. Lower and lower she seemed to hang. Time dragged on, not from lack of interest but from the breakfast bar that was failing to digest in her stomach. Her slight nausea and dull pain in her stomach grew, and coupled with the fact the Dr. Gafsky's breath didn't smell all that sweet, Ellen started to feel worse. She began to look it also.

"Ellen?" Dr. Gafsky noticed her face growing paler. "Are you all right?"

"You know what? No." She lifted her head. "I feel like shit. Those breakfast protein bars that Josephine makes. I never could eat them" She stood up from her stool. "Would you mind if I left you for a few minutes. Dean gave me some stomach stuff. It's in my bag in my room." She pointed her thumb back.

"Do you need me to go with you. You don't look well."

"No, that's all right. I can find my way." Ellen walked to the door. The short walk to the elevator seemed like a mile to her. Dizziness started to happen, and she knew it would only be a matter of time before she'd have to do it--vomit. She stepped into the elevator hoping the movement of it wouldn't set her off right there and then. With a trembling hand she reached for her floor button, without looking she pressed. Without knowing she pressed seventeen.

Mistake . . .

Ellen stepped out. It only took a second for her to know she had stepped onto the wrong floor, and possibly stepped into something she wasn't suppose to see. Realizing that it didn't appear to be the useless floor Joanna mentioned, Ellen let the elevator go.

"No." Ellen whispered in disbelief as she waked down the lang hall whose walls were made of glass. The dangling wires as far as the eye could see, the massive amounts of cryo suits laying about, computers, monitor panels, all horrifically told her the truth. By the amount of digital life signal displays, the number surpassed three hundred. Just as Ellen wondered how they cured all those people from the plague when they awoke, she spotted it. That recognizable small blue bottle. She picked it up from the edge of the table it sat on. She read the label, written in Dean's handwriting 'Hope'. That was the name they had given to the virus anti-serum. But one bottle wouldn't have done it. All she had to do was look through the glass. And she did.

Blue bottles and syringes sprawled out across the floor. Her and Dean had made such a huge amount

of anti-serum that they had filled at least a hundred bottles. And it appeared to Ellen that fifty were laying on the floor of the huge cryo-lab.

Knowing they had stolen from Beginnings, Ellen grabbed an empty blue bottle of and placed it in her pocket . As she started to leave the floor. She stared around looking for anything, papers, computer print outs, something that would tell her who the newly unfrozen masses were. Nothing but the bottles remained. It had to be on another floor.

Not wanting to take a chance on someone noticing the elevator bouncing from floor to floor, Ellen took the stairwell. She raced quietly down one flight to the next floor. Opening the door only a crack, she peeked in the hall--empty. Slipping by, like some sort of spy, she set foot on a floor that contained a bright lab. Through the glass window she saw only one man working, Dr. Rice. Her heart dropped and so did she, when the lab door opened. Dr. Rice walked out, reading off a clipboard, straight to the elevator. He blindly pressed a button and waited.

Ellen shot her foot out sideways to stop his door from closing. Her leg cramped waiting for Dr. Rice to step aboard his elevator. When he did, Ellen quickly got up, and raced inside. Keeping as low as she could, she ran to his computer to view his screen. The blinking curser at the end of the line highlighted the word 'Yes'. The question before it read 'Begin embryotic sequencing program?'

"Shit." Ellen turned away. "They're making more." As her back bumped into the computer she saw eight cases. She recognized the type. Hanging from each one was a clipboard. Knowing she had a chance before Dr. Rice returned, and knowing she had evidence to get, Ellen made a fast sweep around the room. With each pass of a case she swiped the last sheet from the clipboard, tucked them in her shirt then bolted from the lab straight to the stairwell. Back to the floor she was supposed to be on was not an option, Ellen raced down.

On the next level she cracked the door slightly, peeked out, saw empty and dashed to that level.

Ellen froze. Multitudes of people, men and women, all straggly, roamed the halls, up and down as if they were zombies. Blankly staring, continuously moving. Before she could determine that she had seen enough, Ellen heard the click and felt the cold hard metal press to her temple. She didn't need to turn around to know what was touching her.

"Seen enough?" The deep male voice asked. His fingers painfully pinched her skin as he gripped her arm. "We think you have."

^^^^

Frank stood shirtless before the tree he was victimizing. Swinging down the ax with great force, like a batter going after a low pitch. He grunted loudly and throaty with his every hard hit connection to the unsuspecting bark. Steady and strong wore his strikes, determination across his hard face. A mission to complete. With a final crack, the tree tilted and began to fall. Frank stepped backwards, placed one hand on his hip and leaned on the ax handle. He spoke softly out loud. "Fuckin timber." He watched his conquest fall to the ground.

"Poor tree." Dean pointed. "However, I don't think, as a doctor, cutting down trees is good for your arm. There's too much of a risk for infection."

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, Frank reached to the ground for his water. He took a large drink, swished the fluid in his mouth, spit it forcefully to the ground then wiped his mouth. "Well I have to be up here. I've been banished so I don't kill anyone."

"Frank, you know, if this Ellen situation has you feeling like this . . ."

"How am I suppose to feel Dean?" Frank asked harshly in anger. He breathed heavily as he peered at Dean. "My wife is hundreds of miles away with strangers. What am I suppose to do? I can't help if everyone thinks I'm wrong for . . ."

"I'm not saying your wrong Frank. Not at all." Dean tried to reason with Frank. "I want to talk to you about this."

"I don't want to talk about it." Frank grabbed his stuff from the ground.

“Fine Frank, but listen to me.” Dean continued in his argument. “If you’re feeling this strong maybe you should stop and figure out what it is your feeling, and why?”

“I said . . .” Frank stopped directly in front of Dean as he walked through the gate. “I don’t want to talk about it.” Frank roughly put his tee shirt back on. “Especially with you.” He walked away never stopping, never looking back at Dean who remained.

^^^

Miguel knew it was going to be a short trip to Colorado. Of course the fact that three armed guards came and escorted him back to his room told him quite a bit. The door to his and Ellen’s room opened and they shoved him inside, shutting the door.

The moment he stepped inside, Ellen stood from the bed. “Miguel.” She spoke his name like a relief. “What is going on?”

“Oh God.” She seemed frazzled. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I got us into such a mess.”

“What’s happening Ellen? They took my gun.” He placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Here.” She slipped her hand inside her shirt, then quickly pulled it out and stepped back when their door opened.

Joanna walked with arrogance in the room. “It appears Mrs. Slagel, that you’ve taken a little tour of your own.”

“So what?” Ellen rushed to her with attitude. “I didn’t see anything.”

Joanna laughed at her. “Right Ellen. You do know now that you and your lover are now permanent guests, don’t you?”

“You can’t keep us here. I really think we’ll be missed. My father is coming . . .”

“I will handle your father when he gets here.” She leaned closer to Ellen. “If you want to save yourself, you may want to consider telling us where the embryos are in Beginnings.”

“Are you threatening me? Fuck you.”

With a hard slap, Joanna’s hand connected with Ellen’s face. She however, did not expect what she got in return, Ellen, immediately struck her back. But Ellen didn’t slap, Ellen punched. And Ellen’s hard thrown hit was followed by her little body barreling into Joanna and knocking her to the ground.

Before Ellen could strike her a third time, a guard, easily lifted Ellen, and another held a gun to Miguel to keep him back.

Joanna picked herself up, and straightened her clothes, trying not to look shaken. “The embryos, Ellen.” She and the guards left, locking the door behind them.

Ellen raced to the closed door, banging herself into it in frustration and anger. “Shit.” She hit the door with her hand. “Can you believe she slapped me? I hate her.”

“Ellen, calm down.” Miguel pulled her away from the door. “We’ll get out of this mess. I promise. What happened?”

Ellen grunted loudly. “Wait until you see what I saw. Here.” She reached her hand into her shirt and pulled out a bunch of paper. She started to unfold them, reading them as she did. “Oh, shit.” She handed the first one to Miguel. “Check it out. Baby farming. Looks to me like their building up a new world.” She handed the rest of the papers to Miguel. “And they ripped off Dean. They stole all the anti-serum.” She reached in her pocket and tossed him the blue bottle.

Miguel held it in his hand. “Why did they need this?”

“For all the new people they defrosted. My guess . . . get this . . . over three hundred.”

“The guards.” Miguel spoke in awe and placed the bottle and the paper aside. “This could be bad for Beginnings. The guards, Ellen. Have you noticed. They’re cold. They stare forward. They don’t speak. Trained, well trained military.”

“So.” Ellen wasn’t phased. “A few guards so what?”

“So what?” Miguel rushed to her. “What if all those people they defrosted were trained Military. Used for protection, a safe guard just incase they need them. Good thinking in a world gone bad. We have to get home. We have to find a way out of here. Maybe hide out somewhere near the highway until we

spot Joe and George. Warn them. If they have three hundred soldiers . . .”

“Maybe they aren’t all soldiers, Miguel. They have cases of sperm. Ovum. Embryos. Maybe some of them are women to bear these children. Somebody has to.”

“Does it really matter? These scientists are well on their way to executing their little master plan. And Ellen. It can’t be good.” He walked to the door and turned the locked handle. “They’ve got us.”

^^^^

It was warm in his dream. The sun was bright as Dean stood on top of a high hill. He was in Colorado. He knew that hill, having been to Colorado Springs many times when he was in the military. It was a tall hillside, looking over the outskirts of a bigger city. The trees that surrounded him shaded the sun, and gave a comforting cool breeze. The town below him was green. Almost too green. A city disappearing within the wilderness. “Ellen!” He called out from the hillside. “Ellen!”

“Right here.” She tapped him on the shoulder almost startling him to the point of falling off the hill. “Boo.” She smiled and was perky. “Are you looking for me?”

“Ellen.” Dean looked at her face. The wind whipping her hair about. He brought his hand to her cheek, his lips to hers. “You have to come home now.”

Ellen giggled as she stepped away from him. “I can’t Dean.” She brought her fingers to touch her just kissed lips.

“But you have to Ellen. You have to come home before they do something to you.”

“I can’t Dean.” The smile fell from her face.

“But . . . why?” Dean asked.

“Because.” Ellen’s face grew sad. “I’m already dead.”

“No!” Dean no longer stood on that hillside but center of a lab. Ellen lay on a table before him, her blueish body dangled half off the table it appeared to have been just thrown on. Her wide open eyes, held the look of death as they stared right at him. “No!”

Dean awoke, flinging the sheet off of him. He could feel his heart beating in his throat as his feet touched down upon the floor. He rubbed his eyes as his elbows rested on his knees. Sitting there, Dean tried to sort through what was racing through his emotions. Was the fear he felt purely from the dream? As he stood in need of a drink of water, a God awful feeling hit him. One he tried to shrug. One he tried to pass off. But it burned in him and he didn’t know why. Why was he standing there, in his bedroom, in the middle of the night, feeling so strongly that Ellen was never coming back.

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“Miguel?” Ellen cracked open a sunflower seed between her teeth. The handful she munched on was her dinner. They hadn’t eaten since the breakfast bar in the morning. “What do you suppose they’re gonna do with us. I mean, they aren’t gonna kill us are they?”

“I don’t think.” Miguel savored each seed. He chewed them with appreciation. He was also glad that Ellen brought them and the rice cakes. “If they do anything, they’re gonna have to wait until Joe leaves, even George. They aren’t that stupid.”

“But it’s scary.” She chomped on another seed. “Miguel suppose they *do* have all these soldiers somewhere. And suppose they get weapons. We’ve only got a hundred people in Beginnings. And these people know Beginnings well.”

“I know. That’s why we have to make a run for it. Hopefully they’ll open up that door sometime and when they do, we seize the chance. There aren’t that many guards here. We can take them, then we head for the elevator, go to one and get out. Hide out, like I said, until George and Joe arrive. It’s only a few days or so. You think you can?”

“I know I can.” She finished her last seed. “When?”

“We’ll try tomorrow.”

“And what about everything they have in their lab. All those embryos they’re making?”

“We can’t worry about them. We have to get home. We have a warning to deliver.” Miguel dusted the excess salt from his hands. “Let’s just try right now to get some rest.”

^^^

Frank knew she stashed it somewhere. The only booze in the house. He searched every kitchen cabinet for it. He needed a drink. Something, anything, that might calm him down enough to sleep. Frank hadn’t slept more than an hour the night before, and it didn’t look as if he was going to surpass that on this night.

Found it. It sat nearly filled, at the bottom of the cabinet that she used to separate the living room from the dining room. Frank had his glass already in tow. Carrying it for when he found the bottle. He poured some in the glass and replaced the bottle. He took a drink. It tasted old and he cringed as it passed into him. Frank swished the brownish beverage around the glass, debating on whether or not to finish it. He chose not.

What was wrong with him, he wondered. Two days, that’s all she was gone. What was making him feel so nuts that he couldn’t even close his eyes at night for fear he was going to miss something. That inner feeling telling him something--but what? Did he just miss her that much, like everyone said, and his hideous mood was the result? Frank didn’t buy it. He wasn’t feeling depressed, he was feeling anger, he was feeling something much worse. He was feeling something he didn’t tell to anyone because they would think he’d lost it. He was feeling . . . genuine fear.

^^^

Friday night at the social hall was getting almost as bad as Saturday’s. The hall patrons staying later and later, even when they had work to do the next day. No one ever drank excessively. They came to socialize, drink a little, talk. But in the late hours, it was quiet in the hall. Everyone but Joe and Henry had gone. Even though it wasn’t Joe’s turn to clean up, he wanted to stay anyhow. Henry decided to help also, told Joe, he couldn’t sleep and didn’t know why.

Joe washed, while Henry wiped up tables. Keeping busy, that’s what Joe needed.

“All done Joe.” Henry tossed the rag at him. “Want me to wait for you?”

“If you want.” Joe released the water from the sink. “I just have to dry. But I’ll tell you Henry, I’m not tired.”

“Me neither. Hey, wanna throw some darts? George isn’t around to kick our butts.”

“I can do that.” Joe quickly dried glasses. He stared looking far off as he did.

“Something wrong? The thought of challenging me frighten you?”

“Nah.” Joe waved the towel at him. “Henry . . .” Joe’s hands rested on the bar. “Did you ever get that feeling that something was wrong, really wrong, and you just couldn’t put your finger on it?”

“Oh sure, lots of times.” Henry sat down on a bar stool. “Why, is that what you’re feeling?”

“Yeah.” Joe began drying his glasses again, his demeanor turning somber. “Yeah I am.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

August 14

Ellen stood with her ear to the door, listening for footsteps. “Slowing down . . . they’re jingling keys.”

“You know the plan.” Miguel moved her to the side and stood next to the door. “The guard will walk in first. I’ll take him out, then head straight to the elevator.” He leaned his head to her whispering. “Run fast.”

“No problem.” She poised herself ready.

Flush against the wall, Miguel waited. He watched with a fast beating heart for the door knob to turn. With the click-click, as expected, the guard stepped in. Not one foot inside, Miguel grabbed the unsuspecting guard by the collar. “Run Ellen.” With a crashing head butt to the guard, followed by a single blow to his face, Miguel tossed the man of the same height to the ground, lifted his revolver and took off after Ellen.

Ellen looked back as she ran, relieved to see Miguel, he waved the gun at her to hurry. Her eyes lit and she slowed almost to a stop in her backwards run when she saw what Miguel did not. From a side room, two guards emerged, blind siding Miguel to the ground.

“Go!” Miguel called out in his struggle, giving the two men the best he had. They didn’t strike him, they merely held him back. Miguel managed, but briefly to escape from their hold. “Go!” He slid the revolver on the floor as hard as he could to Ellen, it spun around and around as it slid quickly across the speckled floor to her.

Ellen did want to leave him, but had to chance it. She swiped up the gun and reached for the elevator button. Seconds seemed like an eternity for the doors to open. It was all happening in slow motion, looking at the doors, glancing down the hall, waiting for the elevator, watching a guard run to her.

The doors open. As Ellen went to step inside, a door was stepping out. Shoving him harshly, she held the gun pointed to him as she pressed the number one. Just as the guard reached the doors, they shut. Ellen breathed heavily watching the digital numbers decrease. Praying as the elevator moved, that they wouldn’t down the power. As the numbers counted down to one, she lifted the gun high and calked back the hammer, ready and waiting to fire at anyone who stood there.

The elevator stopped, and the door opened upon the halt. No one was there. Cautiously she stepped forward, holding up her guard. That was as far as she got. The last thing Ellen saw through the corner of her eye was the green of a uniform and the butt of a rifle crashing to her. The searing pain to her head, didn’t last. It was lights out.

^^^

‘Stay clear of Frank’ was the word around Beginnings. Frank too would have like to stay clear of himself, however that would be impossible. He didn’t like the mood he was in either. Snapping at everyone. Getting pissed off at the slightest thing. But he was handling himself well, he thought. When he felt that sensation start to happen, that burning under the collar, gonna scream like an idiot mood, Frank backed off. Saving the poor soul from any unnecessary verbal lashing.

But as Frank neared the helicopter hanger, he felt that sensation begin to happen. He didn’t walk away. The poor soul he viewed walking into the hanger was going to get it full fledged. Johnny. Frank had been looking for him all morning. Finding him wasn’t a relief, but rather another reason for his temple to throb. “John!” Frank bellowed into the hanger, the loud hard sound echoing.

“Hey Dad.” Johnny wasn’t even seeing what was coming, as he grabbed a box and walked to the helicopter.

“What are you doing?” Frank asked demanding. “Cole tells me you didn’t show up for field work this morning.”

“I slept in. So I figured I’d just work on the bird for an hour before my classes.”

“You slept in? You were late yesterday, too. This is your job. You do your job. Take it serious Johnny! I hope to God you aren’t taking advantage of the fact that Miguel is gone to act like this.”

“Why not.” Johnny threw his hands in the air. “You’re taking advantage of the fact that Ellen’s gone to act like you are.”

Frank’s arm came down pointing out to him. He opened his mouth with a deep breath, then paused. “You’re right. Forget it. I’m sorry.” He turned. “Go back to your bird.”

Johnny watched his father walk away, his big body swaying with his every step. “Dad! Wait.” Johnny ran to catch him. “I’ll walk with you.”

“I thought you wanted to work on the bird?” Frank asked.

“Nah.” Johnny pulled the hanger door closed. “Since I blew off work this morning, I’ll head down there now, pull an hour or two.”

“Good.” Frank looked up to the sky and to the sun. “Sorry I came down so hard on you.”

“I expected it. You’re tired Dad, you miss Ellen. And since she’s not around, who else are you gonna take your bad mood out on? Pap? Pap wouldn’t take it, he’d kick your ass.”

Frank laughed. “Pap could not kick my ass.”

“You don’t think? Pap’s the only man in this community that can do it. For now that is. In a couple years. I’ll be able to take you too.”

Frank slowed down on the edge of the field where he and Johnny would go their separate ways. “John, it won’t matter how big you get, or how old I get. You’ll never be able to take me, just like I’ll never be able to take my Dad.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Respect.” Frank said matter-of-fact. “I’d never take a swing at my father.”

“And I’d never take a swing at mine.” Johnny saw the look on his father’s face and he knew he had said the right thing. “I’m gonna head to the fields and apologize to Cole for blowing him off. Are you gonna be O.K.?”

“Yep.” Frank nodded. “I just want her home, John.”

“Me too.”

Frank pulled his son to him, and kissed the top of his head as he rubbed it. “Go to work. And uh, thanks for the talk.”

Johnny backed up, fixing his hair. “And thank for the kiss.” He smiled at his father then trotted off to the field house.

Frank felt somewhat better, even if it was momentarily, Johnny helped. His slide of bad mood didn’t last that long. As soon as he hit the edge of the fields, he began to think of Ellen and his emotions returned.

^^^

The voices sounded so far away, almost faded to Ellen. But she soon realized they were so very near to her as she returned to consciousness. Lifting her head slowly and feeling the knot in her neck and the pain from the side of her head. Finally opening her eyes, Ellen saw her hands bound to the chair she sat in, along with her feet. In focus, came Joanna and Jeffery Barnett.

Joanna noticed her awakening. “You’re up.” She neared her. “Good. In case you’re worried about Miguel, he’s alive. Better shape than you.” She picked up a vial and a syringe. “We need him in good shape for when your father arrives.” She inserted the needle into the vial. “Can’t have a bruised up Miguel telling your Father that you’ve decided to stay, can we?”

“He’ll never believe you.” Ellen watched her fill the needle. She tried her best to move, but failed.

“Of course he will. Now hold still or you’ll make it worse.” Joanna injected her. She plunged the fluid into her, emptying the contents of the syringe. “Done.” Joanna removed it, tossed the needle and checked out her watch. “Just about a minute.”

Ellen looked down to the tiny blood bubble that formed at the vein that was just injected. “What did you give me?”

“It’s our equivalent to Sodium Pentothal. Don’t worry, Ellen, we’re not going to kill you. You hold valuable information in that tiny mind of yours, and you are a female who is capable of reproducing. A very valuable commodity.” Joanna looked again at her watch. “Ten more seconds.”

“It won’t work on me. My mind’s too strong.” Ellen felt the drug take effect. Her pain in her head was gone, a sleepy feeling began to hit her as she fought to keep her eyes open.

“It’ll work.” Joanna grabbed a clipboard. “We’ll start with some easy questions. Ready?”

“Won’t work . . . yes.” Ellen felt out of control. She fought with everything she had, but the drug felt too strong.

“All right. What is your name?”

Don’t say it. Fight it. “Ellen.” Her words were slow.

“And what is your last name?”

“When?” Ellen asked. “Last name now? Last name before or last name awhile ago?”

“Now.”

“Slagel. Ellen Slagel. I married Frank Slagel. I used to be Ellen Calaway when I was married to Peter. Before that I was Ellen Martin. That was the time before Calaway, way before Slagel.”

“Ellen tell us . . .”

“But . . .” Ellen couldn’t stop from rambling. They wanted the truth about her name. “I could have had the last name Hayes. But who wants to walk around being called Ellen Hayes. Ellen Hayes, not Helen Hayes. Imagine what people would say. They’d make fun of your name. But that’s not why I didn’t marry Dean. I could have married Dean. I don’t think Frank would have let me. Of course I was living with Dean for so long everyone thought we were married. We acted . . .”

“Ellen!” Joanna grabbed her forehead. “Answer my questions.”

“I did.”

“Next question. What do you know about the embryos?”

“Embryos are what a baby is called before they become a baby. Embryos are the product of conception. When during intercourse the sperm meets the . . .”

“No. Our embryos. The frozen ones. What do you know about them?”

“They were in a case.” *Shut up Ellen, just shut up.* She kept telling herself.

“Where are the embryos now, Ellen?” Joanna questioned with little patience.

“In Beginnings.” Ellen answered.

“Where in Beginnings.”

“In a case.”

Grunting loudly Joanna slapped her clipboard down on the counter. “Where is the case?”

“Hidden.”

“Where is it hidden?”

“Away.”

Joanna turned away from Ellen to Jeffrey. “This isn’t working. You try.”

“Ellen.” Jeffrey spoke softer, more calmer. “Have one of the embryos been implanted at all?”

“Yes. Mother and child are fine.”

“We know that.” Confirmed to Jeffrey that Ellen’s baby was one of theirs. “Now Ellen listen carefully to me. We need to know where in Beginnings the embryos are.”

“In a case.” Ellen answered.

“Yes but where is the case?”

“Hidden.”

“Joanna, her mind is too strong.” Jeffrey pulled Joanna out of ear shot. “We’re going to have to try something else. Something drastic.”

“I agree. I’d like to know where they are. I’d rather not march into Beginnings and have to tear apart a place we need. We need the original batch.”

“I’m well aware.” Jeffrey signaled to the guard to get Ellen. “We’ll try again tomorrow.” He watched the guard untie Ellen and proceed to drag, not carry the rambling little woman back to her room.

^ ^ ^ ^

The dream from the night before truly stayed on Dean’s mind all day. He carried with him that feeling as if he just woke up. He could still see Ellen’s dead body laying on that table, as if it were real, like it hadn’t been a dream. Paranoia was what he thought was happening. Ellen had been gone for three days. And with each passing hour Dean felt more and more helpless. The longer she was away, the more wrong he felt Beginnings was for letting her go. The worse that fear in his gut grew.

His work wasn’t getting done. Things were piling up and he still hadn’t replenished the medical supplies. He hadn’t even worked on the cryo-data since before Ellen had left. He found himself spending his time staring blankly into a microscope or at a computer screen. Horrible visions in his mind.

After wasting the day stewing, Dean knew it was time. It was time to stop the madness that went through his head and heart. And though he and Frank were borderline mortal enemies, Dean felt strongly that they shared a common ground. However unsuccessful his attempts to talk to Frank over the past few days were, it was time to try again. And no matter what, no matter what it took, Dean was going to make Frank listen. Dean hoped with everything he had as he sought Frank out, that what he had to say would not be anything new to him, but merely a confirmation of the fears that Frank already had. Dean needed an ally in the battle of what he was fearing. Little did he know, so did Frank.

^ ^ ^ ^

Not a soul would go near him as he sat at that table in the social hall. Frank sat alone. A drink perched in front of him, one he nursed. One he barely sipped. It wasn’t quite midnight. Though the noise level in the hall was high, Frank heard none of it. His stare was forward as he slouched downward, arms reaching outward across the table, holding onto his drink.

Frank saw the bottle set down on the table, followed by a glass. He didn’t look up to see who it was. The small frame person standing before him could only be one man.

Dean pulled out a chair and poured a drink. “You once said to me, that if I wanted to talk to you, I had to have a drink with you. I need to talk to you, Frank. I really do.” Dean brought the glass to his lips, he hated alcohol, and he sipped it hesitantly, trying not to show the distaste as he swished in his mouth.

“I’m sitting here alone. I’m not in the mood for talking.”

“I need to talk to you about Ellen.”

The drink he had nursed slipped in its entirety into his mouth, Frank slammed his empty glass down. “I don’t talk to you about Ellen.” Frank began to stand.

“Tough.” Dean stood also, he was determined, his face showed it as he leaned quickly into Frank, facing him off. “This is important damn it. I need you of all people to listen to me. Listen to me Frank. Please.” Dean’s voice softened. “Please.”

Without saying anything Frank sat back down, he poured another drink. “Talk.”

“Thank you.” Dean grabbed his own glass and held it in his hands. “Just hear me out, and don’t get mad about what I say.” Dean knew exactly what had to come out. “I’m having a hard time with this. With Ellen being gone. I . . . I can’t eat right. I can’t work. I’m not sleeping right. She is on my mind constantly. And I’ve kicked myself trying to figure out why. I know why now. I had this dream about her, and it scared me. It really scared me.” Dean knew he had Frank’s attention, and that somewhere in that far off look, Frank was listening. “I have a bad feeling, Frank. A really bad feeling.” Dean leaned inward.

“No one is going to tell me that they didn’t sabotage my lab. Or they didn’t try to get you out of the way. They need you out of the way, because they are scared that you’re going to go get Ellen. And what makes matters worse . . . they have her now. She hundreds of miles away from us, no way to talk to her, no way to find out how she is. I can’t shake this fear. Now this is coming from me. I need to know, aren’t you

feeling it too? I can't be the only one. My God, you've known her over half your life. You know her better than anyone. Am I crazy, am I overreacting? Tell me what you think. What is your gut telling you?"

Frank's eyes lowered and he breathed heavily through his flaring nostrils. His long fingers tapped on his half empty glass. "My gut is telling me . . ." He leaned to Dean. "Something is wrong, something is really wrong. And she needs me."

Dean's body dropped in relief. "Then why are we just sitting here then. Why are *you* just sitting here?"

"You know what?" Frank released his glass. "You're right. Thanks Dean." He jumped up.

"Wait." Dean blocked his way. "I didn't mean for you to jump right now. Where are you going? I still need to talk to you."

"I'm going to get her."

"Great. Fine." Dean tried to reason. "But it has to be thought out. It has to be done right. Let's you and I put our heads together now and figure it out right."

Frank listened to Dean. His inner-soul told him that now was not the time for petty differences between them. Frank pulled out a chair and joined Dean. For as much as they've always been against each other it was time to pull together. It was time for both ends of the spectrum to meet.. As they sat talking, preparing for what they would say to Joe, they never stopped to realize how powerful a force they were actually going to be for Ellen.

^^^^

The guard was not gentle. He tossed Ellen into the room like a newspaper. It was fortunate for her sluggish body that Miguel was there to stop her hard fall to the not-too-soft floor. So drugged she was. So talkative. But it wasn't long after that she passed right out. Miguel had used his time wisely. Both before they had brought Ellen back and after. He did a lot of thinking. He had to try to make what they were going to be doing first thing in the morning, perfect.

Making him and Ellen hand weapons was foremost. Not much, but a way to break out, or at least go down swinging. Turning over his bed, and removing support bars from the bottom, took a lot out of his hands. He had no tools, and turning the screws caused his fingers to start to bleed. Miguel was strong and that worked in his favor. Four bars, two each tied together with the top sheet of his bed he ripped. Miguel had shown his bars to Ellen, telling her what to do, to use it as a club. She giggled at them, of course at the time she was still under the influence of the serum. He was still trying to figure out who they were trying to torture giving Ellen that drug. Him or Ellen. He had known her for six years and now he knew her differently. Of course Miguel was certain now he knew things about her both Frank and Dean didn't know.

Miguel sat on the floor in between the beds. His club under his, Ellen's under her pillow. He watched Ellen mostly. As the night progressed she began to toss in her sleep. He knew it had to be the pain, because not long before she had cried out. He felt helpless. How many times would he fail her. He broke his promise to Frank even inadvertently. And Miguel swore at that moment it wouldn't happen again, even if it meant his life.

^^^^

Joe groggily stumbled into his office half dressed. As he made it to his desk, he saw Frank and Dean shut the door. Frank turned the latch. "You're locking me in my office at four in the morning? This better be important."

"Dad, it is." Frank moved with Dean toward the desk. "We've been working on something all night."

"Together." Dean added. "And we think you should listen."

"With an open mind." Frank continued. "We . . . we have a bad feeling. A real bad feeling."

Joe sat down. "You want to get Ellen now, instead of waiting a few more days." He saw he impressed them with his Houdini style guess. "Can't say I haven't been boggled with bad feelings myself. But we have no proof. We'll look like fools if we rush down there like a Rambo squad and storm in."

Frank shook his head as he pulled p a chair and sat. "We're not pulling a siege. We actually have a plan."

Dean took over. "Leave a few days early. You, Greg, George and . . . Frank." He saw Joe getting ready to object and Dean held up his hand. "Listen. This will work. I know the installation and area well. About a mile from the compound, on the road you take there, is a picnic area. Frank and I are going to get supplies ready, survival supplies. You drop off the supplies at the area then you and Greg drop George and Frank off at the compound."

"What are you nuts?" Joe blasted. "Those two can't take them on alone. Especially if there is trouble."

"Which, there may not be." Dean stated. "But if there is, Frank and George will know. Come on, it's not like its heavily guarded anymore. All they have to do is get Ellen and Miguel out of there, head to the picnic area and wait for your return. A day or two maybe. They have supplies."

Frank interjected. "In those supplies will be four sleeping rolls. My main concern is getting Ellen out. Miguel and George can fend for themselves. If you return to the picnic area and we aren't there. That means we ran into trouble and had to book. I'll head north and stay as close to the highway as I can. But if we all don't get out, I'll leave something behind as a message."

"A sleeping roll or two?" Joe guessed and received his confirmation from Frank. "And, say everything is peachy. What then?"

"I stay with my wife." Frank lifted his hand. "A little honeymoon camping trip. That's the story we're giving everyone for why I'm leaving and the supplies. We don't want this going any further than the three of us."

"Who's gonna run security Frank?" Joe asked.

"John Matoose. I already gave him the honeymoon scenario."

Joe nodded. "And what about Josh. Brian?"

Frank took a breath. "Johnny can hang with Josh. And Brian, I really didn't . . ."

"I'll watch Brian. I'll take him." Dean said. "Josh too. Doesn't matter."

Joe's head immediately swung toward Dean. "You're gonna watch Frank's baby."

"Why not." Dean moved in to the desk. "This isn't about me and Frank. This is about Ellen. We want her back. We both feel that something is wrong. And Joe, if there is, let's face it. Frank's the only one who can get her out of there. Give the O.K."

Joe's hands slammed down to the desk as he stood. "Let's do it. I'll keep it between the three of us. We'll leave in twenty-four hours."

"Wait." Frank called out. "No, now. Dean and I can get the supplies together in a few hours. "Leave then."

"And what about rest?" Joe questioned. "Look at you." He reached out and grabbed Frank's face. "You haven't slept. You're pale. What good are you going to be to Ellen if you have to run with her? Use today to pack up. Use the night to sleep. I'll use the time to get the trucks ready and come up with a reason to tell George and Greg why we're leaving early. We'll leave first light, twenty four hours from now. O.K.?" He looked at his watch. "O.K., Right now I'm gonna try to go back to sleep. So, I'll meet up with you in a few hours." Giving a firm squeeze to Frank's shoulder as he passed him, Joe walked to the door and left.

Frank ran his hand down his goatee and looked at Dean. "All right. Let's get out of here. I'll check with you a couple times during the day to see how things are going." He moved to the door and opened it.

"I'm glad we're working together on this Frank." Dean walked through the open door. "Instead of ripping apart each other."

"Yeah." Frank shut off the light and pulled the door closed. "Me too."

^^^

Miguel had always known himself to be a light sleeper. He had trained himself that way. Even before the plague, he had to be. Being a truck driver and pulling off the side of the road at times to snooze made him jump at every noise. Just as he jumped when he heard the clicking of the door handle. Miguel glanced quickly at his watch, it wasn't quiet morning. He sprang to his feet but not before the door opened and two armed guards, along with Jeffrey Barnett stepped in. The guards held their rifles at Miguel.

Jeffrey stepped closer when he knew it was safe. "A little assurance, Mr. Sanchez." He walked behind him and immediately, without warning injected Miguel with a needle into the back of his neck. "That you won't try anything again tomorrow when we come to get Ellen."

Miguel felt the warmth of the fluid that entered. He could feel it move through his bloodstream almost painfully. With a paralyzing feeling, Miguel's knees buckled and he fell to the ground. He couldn't move, and his eyes closed.

Jeffrey dropped the syringe to the ground and stepped over him. "This should last for about eight hours. Throw him in bed. Mrs. Slagel will never know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

August 15

The shower did help some, but not much. Ellen's head still hurt and she still felt sluggish. Of course she had to take the shower it quickly. She didn't have any idea what time they would come back. And last she recalled her and Miguel had a plan.

Miguel was still sleeping when she walked back in the room. She reached in her open duffle bag and pulled out a rice cake. She broke it in two laying one half on the night stand. "Miguel." She took a bite and called louder. "Miguel get up. Miguel?" Fear struck her. He wasn't moving. With a trembling hand she reached for his pulse. She felt it beating strong. "Come on." She started to shake him, as she did, she noticed the back of his neck. A small bruise was there, the size of a quarter. A tiny dot of dried blood center of it. Ellen was all too familiar with a bad injection site. "What did they give you . . ." Her head turned to the sound of heavy footsteps. The slow walking grew louder. Remembering the club Miguel had made for her, she reached under her pillow for it. "I have to try Miguel." Ellen gripped it tightly and moved to the side of the door.

She was more nervous than she had ever been in her life. The turning of the knob made her heart jump. She watched the thin guard step slowly inside. In that brief moment when he searched. Ellen slipped from the room, pulled the door close, and grabbed the keys that still dangled from the knob.

As she ran down the hall as fast she could to the elevator, she realized alone, she couldn't make it out. They would get her. So she wasn't going down silently. She was going to take down with her as much as she could.

Passing the elevator, she ran to the steps and charged down two flights to the embryo lab. She saw Dr. Rice in his lab as soon as she stepped on the floor. Again, he was alone. Quietly she opened his lab door, holding the club behind her. "Dr. Rice!"

Startled, he faced her. As his body turned, he was greeted with a blow to the side of his face. Dr. Rice crashed into his computer and onto the floor.

Ellen swung forth with her anger sending the monitor crashing down. She raced over to the first case and lifted the lid. With her weapon, she smashed down into the objects below her, crushing the test tubes. She did all the damage she could, and quickly moved to the next case. She paid no attention, nor looked up when the lab door burst open.

They two guards grabbed Ellen. But she fought them, swinging about hitting blindly. One of them clutched her arm, stole her club, tossed it to the floor, then threw a hysterical Ellen as well.

Ellen caught her fall as her knees slid across the linoleum, burning them. She lifted herself from the floor and bolted to the door. Jeffrey stood in her way. As she reached back to strike him, her fist was grasped. She felt a hand grasp the back of her head and slam her into the wall. Face pressed against the surface, Ellen's eyes peered with anger at Jeffrey.

"Take her across the hall to the empty room." Jeffrey ordered.

With her arms bent drastically behind her, the guard banged Ellen into the wall one more time before talking her out.

Jeffrey stayed a moment in the lab, assessing the damage and becoming worse with it by the second. Ellen had destroyed so much of their work. Outraged at her, he charged across the hall to the room in which the two guards held on to her. He stood close to Ellen, reaching his hand out and wiping the blood from her temple. He showed it to her. "Does it need to go this far? Do you realize what you have done?"

"Fuck you." Her head jolted so hard with his hit, it smacked into the chest of the one guard who held her. "You don't frighten me."

"You should be little lady." He squeezed her face then pushed her back as he released her. "And you'll pay for what you did. Trust me. When we finish with you. You'll wish you were dead."

Ellen tired not to flinch. "When my father gets here. You will be dead. You don't think when he gets here, he's not gonna want to see me?" Ellen shouted as Jeffrey walked slowly away. "You're one stupid

asshole, Jeffrey! I pity you.”

“No.” Jeffrey stopped at the door. He looked at the two guards that held tightly to the fighting, strong willed woman. She was so determined. So lacking of any fear in her eyes. “No Ellen. I pity you.” He opened the door and faced the guards. “Rape her.”

^^^

Frank didn't know what caused him to drop what he was carrying. As he stepped to the long table in storage, to lay everything on. a chill, a deadly chill shot through him and everything he held in his arms crashed to the table. Frank's hands started to shake. It was a warning, an inner warning and he was receiving it loud and clear. The sense of urgency to go and get Ellen grew by the second. Even though it was against his better judgement to wait, it wouldn't be much longer and he knew she would be safe.

^^^

Joanna saw Jeffrey standing in front of the room. He looked frazzled, then again, she knew he was dealing with Ellen. “Jeffrey, what's going on?”

Jeffrey straightened his hair. “Ellen destroyed two cases. One sperm, one ovum. She destroyed a lab Joanna. Our guards are taking care of her now.” He took a few deep breaths and composed himself.

“Explain taking care of.”

“Extreme measures. Like you and I discussed.”

“I run this project, Jeffrey. Not you. I had plans for Mrs. Slagel today. We were going to try the serum again.”

“It didn't work Joanna and . . .” He stopped when a loud Ellen ‘no’ emerged from the other room. “. . . and it was time to take those measures.”

“We will take my measures.” Joanna opened up the door, as she did she watched a guard strike Ellen so fiercely it sent her across the room. The other guard grabbed a hold of her, pulling at what clothes she had on left, as Ellen fought with everything she had against them. “Stop!”

The one guard released Ellen and she dropped to the floor.

“What is going on?” She stepped inside. She looked down to a beaten Ellen. “Jeffrey?” She returned to Jeffrey's side. “Did you tell these men to do this, or are they doing this on their own?”

“You agreed to extreme measures.”

“I agreed to extreme measures yes. *My* extreme measures.” Joanna faced the guards. “Pick her up, grab her clothes and take her to her room.” She stormed past Jeffrey stopping to scold at him just once more. “Thank you very much Jeffrey. Now she's no use at all to us today.”

Ellen had fought her last bit of energy from her. She felt her clothes toss down to her face and her body being picked up, not dragged this time, and carried away.

^^^

“Frank?” Dean called out as he stepped into the storage building he was to meet Frank at.

“Back here.”

Dean could hear the banging around as he approached. “How's it going?”

“Good. I did the rolls. Two together. Yeah, nice and tight. And I twined them.” Frank tossed one to him.

Dean caught it, the heaviness of it nearly knocked him over. “Thanks. O.K. What else do you got together?”

“I have . . .” Frank lifted a knapsack. “Ammo, grenades, three revolvers, flares, two hunting knives, trip wire and all that shit. I figured I'll bring a rifle, but I'll hide it at the hill site. Um . . . I have my gun.”

He patted his shoulder harness. "You don't think it's too much do you?"

"No." Dean laughed then laid down a black pouch. "Here. This is an emergency care kit. Just in case Ellen forgets, I labeled the bottles in laymen terms and what they can be used for."

"Thanks." Frank took it and placed it in the duffel bag which had its awaited contents next to it.

"Take a look at what I have. See anything I'm missing?"

Dean looked over it. "I see you brought Ellen stuff."

"You know it." Frank lifted a pair of pants and a shirt and placed it in the bag. "No matter what the situation is, you know she's going to get trivial. We could be running for our lives and she'll complain if I don't have toiletries."

"Oh . . ." Dean indicated to a small plastic jar on the table. "I left that. Water will boggle you down. Two or three canteens worth tops. So I made that. It's a filtering system. Trust me it will work."

Frank held it up. "Good job."

"And what about food? Did you give any thought to that. Or are you gonna try to hunt?"

With a huge smile Frank lifted two seven inch long, brown pouches, he held them in each hand.

"Remember these?"

"Oh no. M.R.E.'s ." Dean cringed at the memory of the highly concentrated, military food packs.

"But . . . Good thinking."

"I'm the man. I figure I'll take out the useless shit and pack up only what we need from them."

"Like we had to do for field maneuvers."

Frank smiled. "Exactly." He rested his hand on one of the packs. "Let's hope I don't need any of this stuff."

"Let's hope." Dean turned very serious. "Bring her home safe, Frank. You can do that."

"I *will* do that." Frank stood in silence with Dean. "You know I want to tell you something. I uh . . . I appreciate all your help. I do."

"I wish I could do more. I wish I could go too. But you're the one."

"You're doing a lot. See, I guess we really can pull together if we need to huh?" Frank asked.

"More than I ever thought. We have a lot of bad history you and I. But we have a common interest right now. We know what's important."

"Yeah." Frank's head dropped.

"What?" Dean began to get a panicky feeling. "What's wrong?"

"As close as we are to going down there. I'm not feeling better." Frank's head swayed slowly. "I'm feeling worse. Something's happened to her. I know it. I feel it." Frank lifted his head. "And I can honestly say . . ." His eyes shifted to Dean. They were saddened and Frank spoke softly and with more sincerity than Dean has ever heard from him. "I can honestly say . . . I'm scared."

^^^

The heaviness of her eyes seemed to bother her the most, because they weren't allowing her to open them. Ellen tried to lift her head from the pillow that it laid upon. But with each slow movement, brought an aching shooting pain. She laid half on her stomach, her arm dangling from the left side of the bed. She felt the blood flow there, pulsating in her injuries. She tried to clench her fist, her knuckles cracking as she did. She slowly lifted her hand to blindly feel her face. As her fingers touched down she could feel the ruggedness of her cheek bones, the moisture there, the blood.

Ellen heard the slow footsteps. Fighting desperately she lifted her eyelids only a crease. The blurred vision of him walking to her was all she could make out. She felt his hand stroke away her hair gently, that had fallen on her cheek and stuck there. She moistened her lips with her tongue. They felt bigger and sore. "Frank?" She called weakly.

"No. It's me." Miguel reached under Ellen and lifted her up into his arms to carry her.

"Where are we going?" Ellen's voice was soft.

"I want to get you cleaned-up." Miguel carried her into the bathroom where he had the bath tub

already filled with warm water. He set her gently down to the commode to use it as a chair. He looked with sadness upon Ellen, her body slumping back, barely keeping its balance. He had to keep reaching for her to hold her up. It literally broke his heart. "I'm just going to help you undress. We need to get you into the tub so these cuts don't get infected." He knelt down before her and slipped off her shoes.

Ellen used the toilet and Miguel's shoulder to help stand. She let her shorts drop. They were still undone from being placed back on after her confrontation. There was no shirt to take off only her bra. "Not much clothing huh?"

Miguel looked at her. "What did they do to you?"

"Ask what I did to them instead. O.K.?" Ellen's eyes rolled and her legs weakened. Her stand began to drop.

Miguel caught her and scooped her up. "What did you do to them." He placed her in the tub.

"I destroyed up their lab." She went rigid as she felt the water hit her body. It burned her abrasions. She would have jumped ten feet from the water but she could barely move. "How's my face. Frank will have a fit if they messed it up."

"Not like your body." Miguel dipped the wash cloth into the water and wrung it out. "It's dirty though." He began to wipe gently across her face.

"They had me on the ground."

Miguel handed her the wash cloth. His body dropped and he sat to the floor leaning against the commode. "I'm so sorry about this." He brought his hand to his head.

"It's not your fault. It isn't." She reached her hand out to touch him.

Miguel only moved his eyes to her. "We'll get through this. Joe will be here soon."

"I know." Ellen took a deep breath and slumped further into the tub. She brought the wash cloth to her eyes and the thought of her children, Frank, Beginnings, rushed to her mind. Her eyes grew heavier as they welled with tears. She fought them, she fought them with all that she had.

"What is it?" Miguel asked.

Ellen shook her head and brought her knees close to her. She buried her face against them. "I just want to go home. I want to go home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

August 16

Frank cradled little Brian tightly in his arms as he paced slowly around Dean's living room. The sleeping infant never awoke, despite all the kisses that Frank plastered him with. "I won't be gone long Bri." Frank kissed him again. "Be good. I love you." Frank lifted his eyes to Dean. "He's crashed. I fed him about a half hour ago, so he should be good for a while."

"I can handle it." Dean reached for the baby.

"Thanks, Dean." He placed him gently in Dean's arms. "Take care of my kids. All of them."

"I will."

"I have to go." Frank glanced down at his watch.

"Good luck." Dean extended his hand. "Be careful."

Frank, without hesitation, shook it, then stepped back.

"Do your thing, Frank. I'm counting on you. Your family is counting on you."

"I will . . . oh . . . one more thing. Look down at your watch. Because at noon, you can breath a sigh of relief. I'll have her."

"I'll do that." Dean knew as he watched Frank walk out his door. That Frank would do everything in his power, do whatever it took, to ensure at noon, he *did* have Ellen.

They began their journey to Colorado earlier than they had wanted. It wasn't even five a.m. and already they were trudging the extremely dark roadways. Frank sat in the back of the truck for the trip. The pick-up truck had the larger cab, he could have sat inside with the others. But Frank wanted to sit in the back. He wanted to be alone, gather his thoughts, clear his mind. It was a long enough trip as it was. But the anxiety of getting there made it longer.

^^^

"You're awake." Miguel handed Ellen a glass of water as he watched her sit up. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore. But better. My fingers hurt the most." She looked at her open hand, closed it, then opened it again. "And I'm weak, I definitely don't have the energy I had yesterday. Of course I have more than last night. Last night I thought I was dying." She slowly sipped her water. "Can I add one more complaint?" she tried to smile as she grabbed her stomach. "I'm hungry."

"Rice cake?" Miguel chuckled. "I hated them when Henry made them in Beginnings."

"Yeah, but they taste gourmet now." She pointed to her bag. "Want to get our rations?"

"Sure." Miguel stood up. "It was a good thing you brought them, and those sunflower seeds." He opened the bag. "Let's just hope that Joe can get . . ."

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked as she saw him just stare into the bag. "Please don't tell me they took them."

"No." Miguel faced her. "What's this?" He held up the pendant Henry had given her.

Ellen sighed heavily. "Oh my God, I can't believe I forgot about that." She stood up and grabbed it. "He gave this to me to press if I'm in trouble. He said it would work." Her finger went to press it, but Miguel stopped her. "What?"

"Wait. You have to do a pattern or else they may think it was set off by accident. We want them to know we need help." Miguel took it back. "You eat your rice cake. I'll send the message."

^^^

Henry chuckled a bit as he walked with John Matoose along the line of utility buildings. He read the

list of things to do, left for him by Joe. “Do you really think Joe would be mad if I didn’t go to the social hall every day after work?”

“Nah. When will you have the time, Henry? You’ll always be working. Same here too.” John checked out his clip board. “Frank’s duties, my duties. Jenny’s starting to bitch and they just left.”

“Let’s just hope they aren’t gone . . .”

“Henry!” Jeff, a security personnel who worked in the monitoring room, came out of the security building. “Henry!” He looked confused and somewhat frazzled.

“What’s wrong?” Henry asked.

Jeff looked at him, then at John. “There is this beeping coming from somewhere. Hal and I thought it was a malfunction, but now we think it’s a perimeter and we can’t locate which one.”

John and Henry raced behind Jeff to the monitoring room, as soon as they walked in, the high pitch beeping was heard.

Henry knew exactly what it was as soon as he set foot in the door. “When did this start?”

“Ten minutes ago. Why?” Jeff said.

Henry gulped and turned to John. “I gave Ellen a transmitter to press if she’s in trouble. She’s pressing it. That’s what the signal is.”

John’s heart dropped to his stomach, then he tried to muster up a rational thought. “Before we go and get upset with this. Maybe something is pressed against it. Maybe she’s . . .”

Hal, the other security monitor, shook his head. “I would agree but it’s a pattern.” He turned up the volume which he had previously lowered. “Listen to it. I have.” He held up the small note book with slashes on it. “Steady. The same. Repeating. Almost as if she’s sending a message.”

John threw his head back. “She is. She’s sending an SOS”

“Shit.” Henry rubbed his face. “Joe and them are on their way down. What if there’s trouble. They aren’t ready for that.”

“We have to warn them.” John set down his clipboard. “Find Johnny. Tell him to get to the hanger. Him and I will fly out.. They have a . . .” He looked at his watch. “Two hour head start. We’ll have to hurry.”

“I’ll go get him now. Give me your jeep keys.” He caught the keys that were tossed to him. “We’ll meet you at the hanger.” He raced out and to the jeep. He knew where to find Johnny.

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“You sure you don’t want any breakfast, John?” Dean called as he walked from the kitchen. “Puffed rice, Beginning’s cereal of the month.”

“Nah.” Johnny stood from the couch with Brian. “I just came to check on my little brother. But he won’t wake up. Man is he crashed.” Johnny took him over to the cradle and laid him down.

“I’m beginning to wonder what your dad fed him before he brought him over.”

With a single knock, Henry flew open Dean’s door and barged in with a frenzy. “Johnny, thank God you’re here. I need you over at the hanger. Now. You have to fly out with John and find your dad.”

Johnny was shocked. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“Ellen and Miguel are in trouble. I gave her a transmitter to press just in case.” He looked at Dean. “She’s been pressing it for twenty minutes now. A steady pattern.”

Johnny, without hesitation bolted from the living room. “I’m on my way.”

In the instance that the door slammed Dean knew. All of his fears at that moment were now confirmed. He sat down on the couch next to Henry who looked as if he were diligently trying to make heads or tails out of this situation.

They weren’t sitting on the couch for more than ten minutes when the call from John Matoose came over the radio to Henry. John was calm, he usually was. Even though the situation dictated total pandemonium, he very calmly called to Henry telling him he was needed at the hanger. Henry left Dean

wondering why Johnny and John weren't in the air. It couldn't be a fuel situation. The helicopters hadn't been flown in a while. Trying to figure out all the way there what the hold up was, he commenced to building a theory list in his mind. No where on that mind list was the true reason for their lack of departure. Though the will was with John and Johnny, the way to do it certainly wasn't. They couldn't take the choppers. Someone, and everyone knew who, had taken it upon themselves to sabotage the engines of the helicopters.

Henry, always known as the fix-it man, wasn't quite sure he could fix it. He stared at what had been done. He stared at the wired and disassembled mess that once were helicopter engines, and he just didn't know where to begin.

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The journey seemed as if it took forever. And as they fast approached the last mile, the rocky terrain they took seemed to make the trip slow down. They had found the spot that Dean had mentioned. The balding area, used as a car turn around or rest area on the narrow road, was heavily overgrown. Frank took his supplies and placed them under the once green picnic table that set off toward the edge of the thicker woods. While there, he hooked a hunting knife to his belt along with an extra clip of ammunition. He left everything else and walked quickly back to the truck. He watched the area disappear as they made it down the hill. He watched the road way before him, studying the area surrounding it, photographing it in his mind.

So as not to arouse suspicion, Joe dropped Frank and George off just on the edge of the road that led to the installation. Wanting to appear as if they were expecting nothing out of the ordinary, Joe said a heart strained, worry-filled, goodbye to his son and left with Greg.

After watching the dust from the truck wheels settle, Frank moved to George and they began to walk the quarter of a mile hike to the gate that set before the entrance of the mountain tunnel. Frank took every detail of the area in as he walked. He kept his mind going the whole time.

It was as if someone yelled 'halt'. The steady stride of Frank and George both slowed to an almost stop when the vision of the gate came into focus. Frank saw him. The guard. He looked at George and without any words, he knew George was thinking the same thing. Why was there a guard? Where did he come from? Was he armed? . . . He was.

Standing stern and blanking staring forward, the guard asked their names when they approached. He let them in when Frank and George told him who they were. The guard returned to staring outward, never watching Frank or George as they walked to the tunnel that led to the installation.

The feeling that something was amiss grew stronger in Frank as they entered the first floor of the installation. They were stopped, by yet another guard. *Two?* Frank thought, then assessed the situation. Two guards, each with one single fire arm. What were they protecting and where did the guards come from? The guard informed George and Frank to wait there. He stood with them. They stood in silence.

Frank kept his stare down the long hallway before him. He checked his watch and began to keep time. If in five minutes he didn't see his wife, guard or no guard he was going to find her.

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Joanna was the first to enter Ellen and Miguel's room, she brought with her an armed soldier. Jeffrey Barnett stood in the hall. Joanna was not smiling, she had a certain look of nervousness as she spoke. "Miguel, come with me." She motioned her head to the guard to step in the room.

Miguel stood up. "I'm not leaving Ellen."

Another motion of her head to the guard and he lifted his weapon and pointed it at Ellen. "Now Miguel, you will come with me, and you will do exactly as I say. It appears your people are here early."

Ellen stood up suddenly with a burst of energy and relief, the guard shoved her back down.

Miguel turned away from Joanna. "I'm staying here."

“No you won’t.” Joanna insisted. “You will come with me. You will tell them that you and Ellen have decided to stay here longer. You will do this, Miguel. Or she . . .” Joanna pointed to Ellen. “Will die. We’ve had enough of her. What will it be?”

Miguel took a deep breath and stared to Ellen. He gave her a look that told her he was going to take care of it. With his head high, he walked with Joanna. She shut the door, leaving the guard inside, alone with Ellen.

Miguel’s heart beat faster in the elevator with every floor they passed. How was he going to relay to Joe that things were wrong. The moment he stepped from the elevator and turned the bend, Miguel knew it was over. The instant he saw Frank standing tall, arms folded, and expression stern, Miguel knew not much would need to be said. Frank came down for a reason.

Where was Ellen? Frank’s eyes shifted. *Miguel, Joanna, Barnett . . . another Guard?* He breathed heavier, and checked out the guard once more that stood two feet angled from him to his right. He watched Miguel walk between Joanna and Jeffrey Barnett. Then the guard with them, off to their right. A single fire arm, not drawn.

“Mr. Slagel.” Joanna smiled. “President Hadly. Imagine our surprise that you are early.”

Frank kept his arms tightly folded to him. He stared only at Miguel. “Where’s Ellen?”

Miguel didn’t answer, he didn’t smile, if Frank had any mind reading powers in him, Miguel was wishing them forward.

Joanna answered for him. “It seems your wife is very busy. In fact.” She tighten her lips before she spoke. “I hate to be the one to tell you this. But Ellen has decided to stay on with us a bit longer. She said you two were having some problems and she’d rather not go home. So, hating to be the rude hostess. We’ve only made arrangements for President Hadly. I’m afraid Mr. Slagel, you’ll have to leave.”

Frank expected to hear something like that. He still stared into Miguel’s eyes. “Sure I’ll leave.” He inched his way closer. “But I have to ask Miguel something. This Ellen wanting to stay thing. Is it the same situation as when Dean took a break from her and went with . . . Robbie?”

Miguel released his shoulders. “Yes, yes it is. It’s the same situation.”

“Thanks, Miguel. That’s all I needed to know.” It happened so fast, no one even expected it was coming. In one swift single motion, Frank pulled his revolver with his right hand, extended his left and grabbed hold of Joanna by her hair. As he jerked her into him, he aimed his gun, clicked back the hammer and fired one single shot directly into the forehead of the armed guard who stood by Jeffrey. The force of the bullet shattered his skull instantly, blood flew everywhere. “Back off!” Frank heard the clicking of a gun. He pinned Joanna to him with his arm. His fingers clasped tightly to her head, tilting it away from him. “Back off Now!” He pointed his gun at the other guard. “I break her fuckin neck or I shoot her. Your choice.”

The guard stepped back but still held aim at Frank.

“I’m not kidding!” Frank’s face was red as he dug the gun deep into Joanna’s temple. He could feel his anger growing in his throat, tightening, roughening his bellowing voice. “Put down your gun! To the floor!” He waited for the guard to become unarmed, placing his gun down, holding his hands up. As the guard stood straight up, Frank removed the gun from Joanna and aimed it at him. “Never drop your weapon.” Frank fired once, one deadly shot. Another guard down. “Miguel grab his weapon. Grab Barnett. George watch my back.”

George who had his own weapon pulled it and stood behind Frank.

Frank placed his lips close to Joanna’s ear. “I should break your fuckin neck right now, but I need you to get out of here. Where is my wife?”

Joanna struggled. “You’re choking me.”

“Good.” Frank tugged her head again, then put the gun back to it. “Miguel, how many guards are we looking at?”

“There’s another one down with Ellen. Maybe one or two.” He held Jeffrey at gun point.

“Take me to Ellen.” Frank, with George backed up behind him, held tightly to Joanna, her feet slid more than moved on their own, as he raced after Miguel to the elevator. He plotted his escape the whole way down. In his mind he thought Ellen was fine. Miguel was, why wouldn’t she be. They’d be able to use Joanna to get to the front gate. They would off the guard and flee to the hill.

“She’s in here, Frank.” Miguel spoke softly outside the door so as not to alert the guard inside. “But it’s locked.”

Frank gave a hard pull to Joanna’s neck. “The key.”

“I don’t have it.” She choked as her face grew red. “The guard you shot upstairs does.”

“Fuck.” Frustrated, Frank threw her into George. “Hold the gun on her.” He instructed, as he stepped back, raised his gun, calked back the hammer and barreled forth.

Like a blast of electricity through her body, Ellen felt the charge of life surge into her as the door to her room burst open and she saw Frank. The guard that held her at gun point stood not one chance. Frank fired a single shot, eliminating him as a threat.

Lifting herself from the bed and ignoring the pain, Ellen used the exhilaration of hope that Frank had just given her, to charge forth to her husband.

Frank reached her before she reached him. He took her tightly in his strong arms, clutching her against his chest. He could feel her gasp-of-emotions the moment he held her. “We have to hurry. Can you make it out?”

Ellen nodded to him with a sad smile.

Frank saw her face, the bruises. “My God, what did they do to you?” He placed her behind his back and held out his gun. “Hold on to me.” He walked from the room filled with outrage. “George, Miguel come on.”

George, his hand trembling just a bit as he placed the gun tight to Joanna’s temple, shook his head. “No Frank, take her and go. We’ll meet you there. If we hold these two here. You’ll be able to get her out. Now go! Get her out of here!” George motioned his head.

Frank clutched Ellen’s hand. “Miguel?”

“Go Frank. We’ll meet you. If not. Send for us.”

Frank hadn’t the time, he pulled Ellen to run. “Come on.”

Ellen reached her hand out to Miguel as Frank pulled at her, it slid down his arm across his fingers. She gave a thank you smile, yet her face showed so much worry. “Hurry to us, Miguel.” Ellen moved slow, her legs too sore, too injured to keep up with Frank, even a little.

Realizing that Ellen, physically couldn’t do it. Frank swept her up and carried her the rest of the way. In his arms, she collapsed, her head fell to his chest.

Once safely inside the elevator, Frank dropped to one knee. He placed his hand on her face, gently shaking it. “El, Come on. Wake up. I need you up just a little more. Come on. I need you awake enough to hold on to me. Can you do that?”

Ellen opened her eyes. “I can walk.”

“Right.” Frank looked up, they were reaching their floor. He kissed her softly. “I love you.” He stood up and helped Ellen to stand. “Don’t move until I check this floor.” When the doors opened he stood ready, gun held high, and positioned. No one was around. “It’s clear.” He took hold of Ellen again and raced from the installation with her. At the edge of the tunnel he saw his last obstacle. Frank smiled, it was easy enough. The not-too-bright, unsuspecting watch guard at the front gate. He still stood, rifle in arms staring forward. Setting down Ellen to lean against the wall of the tunnel, Frank got down on one knee. The guard was twenty-five feet away. Frank had one shot, that’s all he could take before the guard fired back. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Frank aimed with a steady hand, and fired.

“Better.” Frank smiled when the guard dropped. He put his gun away and turned to Ellen. Though it was a long trudge, Frank would have to carry her out of the compound and up the road. Ellen was passed out.

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Down on the sixteenth floor, George kept staring at his watch, a gun still held to Joanna. He hadn't heard anything, and no one had charged down.

Miguel, holding Jeffrey, kept his stare down the hall, waiting. "Should we head up now?"

"No." George answered then slowly removed the gun from Joanna's temple, extended his reach and placed it on Miguel's. "Let him go, Miguel."

Miguel's eye widened as he felt the gun pressed to him. He released Jeffrey. "George what . . ."

"Shut up." He held the gun tight to Miguel's head, his arm steady. "Joanna, how many guards do you have left in this place?"

"Four." She rubbed her throat.

"We're dealing with Frank. Give them a few more minutes then send two of them after them. Bring Ellen back alive. Kill Frank."

Joanna, still shaken, motioned her head to Miguel. "What about him?"

"He knows too much already." George clicked back the hammer. "A real shame. I liked you Miguel."

Miguel breathed deeply as he slowly shifted his eyes. "No, George." With a single second of pain, pressure and a loud ringing of the firing gun . . . Miguel . . . fell to the floor.

^^^

Something tickled her nose, she groggily brought her hand up to rub it, the pain as she did awakened her. Ellen opened her eyes, tall grass surrounded her. She laid amongst two knapsack, and two rolls of sleeping bags. The one sack laid open at her feet. No one was around. She was alone. Where was Frank? As she opened her mouth to call him, the eerie silence was broken by the loud cracking of gunfire. Ellen's heart began to pound and beat out of control, she was afraid to get up. Who was shooting. Bringing herself to her hands and knees she was nearly barreled over by Frank's legs as he slid down into the grassy area with her.

"Shh. Stay down." Frank reached to the side of her and grabbed the rifle she didn't see and checked it. "I'll be right back." Hunching low to the ground, he moved ten feet in front of her to the picnic table totally engrossed with weeds. Kneeling low behind it, he lifted up the rifle and aimed. "Go to it." Frank spoke softly. "Come on . . . go to it." Slowly he spoke as if he was actually beckoning someone to do something. "That's it, one more step . . . Yes."

The two guards that had followed him up the hill, firing at him, chasing him, stopped cold when they heard the soft snap. Both looking at each other in their last free second. Their faces showed the fact that they realized their error.

The loud explosion sent dirt, sticks and flesh spraying like rain, Frank ducked under the picnic table until the pattering stopped. "Yes." He crawled out. "You can get up, El." Excited and full of energy, he ran to get a closer look. He didn't need to get too close, the mess that laid around told him that conquest was complete. "Oh, yeah." He clenched his fist and ran back to Ellen. "I always wanted to do that for real."

^^^

George walked in silence alongside of Joanna to a quiet room where he could speak with her. His rage could be felt even though he spoke no words. Waiting for Joanna to follow him in, he slammed the door fiercely and pointed at her. "What in Christ's name has been happening here? What happened to Ellen?"

"We were working diligently to get things ready. But, she destroyed two cases in the embryo lab. A major set back. We estimate we've lost . . ."

“How did she get to the lab . . . never mind. I don’t want to know. Obviously, trusting you Joanna, to run things here until I could join you was a mistake. A big mistake.”

“Our guards will bring her back. Don’t . . .”

“They will not.” George crossed his arms. “Those guards aren’t coming back. Two of them.” He shook his head as he laughed. “Against Frank? The man will take them down. But . . .” George shrugged. “We had to give it a try, didn’t we?”

“Shall I get the other two left, to go out?”

“What? And leave us alone with the survivors you’ve picked up? No. When the next squad comes in we’ll send them out after them. Divide them into groups. Eight in a group, Frank will have a bit of trouble. Besides. They’re gonna stay close to the highway, so it shouldn’t be too hard to spot them.”

“Do you think they suspect you at all?”

“No.” George answered her quickly. “And it will stay that way too. If something goes wrong with this, I want to be able to walk back into Beginnings and bring them down my own way. As one of them. As far as they’ll be concerned, I’m one of your prisoners now.” George moved to the door. “Now . . . I had a long trip. I come down here and everything is screwed up. You want to show me to my room so I can rest.” He waited for Joanna to agree and he followed her. “There will be no more mistakes.” George began to walk down the hall. “I’m here. And I’m running things now.”

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Frank wasted no time pulling their supplies back from the clearing. He immediately opened the knapsack with food, pulled out a brown pouch of applesauce and a spoon. Eat.” He told Ellen. “You look like you haven’t eaten in days.”

“I haven’t. But we can’t stop. We have to . . .” A large spoon of food pummeled into her mouth shutting her up. The bitterness of it sent a shiver through her. Not to mention the shock of being suddenly fed.

“You gonna eat or do I feed you?” He tilted his head. “You can talk to me while you eat.”

Ellen took the package and looked inside. “It looks red. I never saw red applesauce.”

“You’re being pretty picky for someone who hasn’t eaten.” Frank grabbed the spoon again and lifted it. “Eat El . . . look an airplane.” He made motor noises. “Open up.”

“Stop it.” Laughing, she grabbed the spoon and stuck it in her mouth. “There.” She swallowed. Whether it tasted good or not, it was food. “Listen to me Frank. You seem to think they can’t get us here.”

“Who’s going to get us here, El?” Frank asked.

“There are more of them. They aren’t in the compound, they couldn’t have hidden that many. But they’re somewhere out here.”

“That many?” Frank scoffed. “Really. How many can there be?”

“Maybe more than three hundred.” Ellen placed another spoon of food in her mouth.

“El?” Frank snapped his finger in front of her. “Are you all right? Three hundred, El please. I haven’t seen three hundred people in more than one area since before the plague. Where are they getting three hundred?” He questioned her so non-believing.

“They didn’t get them, Frank. They had them. Frozen in that compound. I saw it, with my own eyes. The biggest Cryo-lab ever.”

“You’re serious.”

“Very.”

“Fuck.” Frank ran his hand over his face. “This isn’t good. I can’t take on three hundred men. Or at least I don’t think I can.”

“And they aren’t stupid security guard like they used to have at the bank, the ones that worked for minimum wage. These men are trained soldiers like you.”

“Not like me. I wouldn’t have ran into a obvious trip wire, I can tell you.” Frank took a moment to think. “If what you’re saying is true, then this changes everything. We had it planned out. If there was

trouble, I brought you here. If we had to run, we'd stay close to the highway. But . . . if there are three hundred or even a hundred running around out here, then they'll get word they we are here. We're gonna have to stay away from the obvious clearings and further from the highway. Which means we have to constantly move, and it may mean my Dad might not spot us on his way back up."

"What about Miguel and George?"

"I don't think they're coming." Frank looked sadly. "They should have been here."

"Could we be stuck out here?" Ellen asked.

"At least until my dad gets home, then he'll send the choppers out. We'll still head north. They will find us. But how long it'll take, I don't know."

"Are you worried?"

"For you I am." Frank lifted his head and smiled. "Seriously El. It could be bad out here."

"I'm not scared." Ellen inched closer. "How can I be. Look what you did. No one could have come in there and did what you did. I knew as soon as I saw you, it was over. I was going home."

"Home." Frank laughed a nervous laugh. "We aren't exactly home. But . . . if we want to get there alive. We'd better start moving." He stood and began to gather their things. "Just for a little while and we'll take it slow. You up for it?"

"Absolutely." Ellen stood. "I'm with you."

Frank stopped for a moment and faced Ellen. He looked down at her face, so pale, so much thinner than before she had left Beginnings. The cut on her cheek, the bruises, showed what she had been through. Frank could tell by her eyes, that she was trying her hardest to hide it all from him. It didn't matter, he felt it all the same. "If you start to get tired, you let me know. I'll carry you all the way if I have to." Grabbing their gear, he kissed her softly then began to walk, staying so close to her.

"I'll let you know. But I think I'll be fine." Ellen truly believed that. The fearful reality of the journey they were about to embark on never crossed her mind. The world that they wandered upon, one that she heard of, but never faced, sparked not one ounce of fear in her. Why would it? She was with Frank.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Cryo-lab. Dean hadn't been there in quite some time. But it was time now, even more so, to work on that data. Mid-afternoon, his clinic work complete and Dean went directly to there. Henry had been to the clinic to give a progress report on the helicopters--still nothing. The only thing that Henry seemed to be producing in that hanger was blood. He had gashed his hand twice, and with the progress reports he sought out stitches. Henry was trying to repair the choppers as fast as he could, but still nothing. How Henry described the situation to Dean told him everything. He explained that the engines were like the world's biggest jigsaw puzzles. All the pieces there, but no picture to follow.

"Dr. Dean?" Johnny peeked his head in the lab. "I know your busy, but can Josh hang with you? I want to get up to the hanger to see if I can help."

"Sure, John." Dean reached for a box..

Johnny led Josh in. "Josh, Dr. Dean is gonna pal with you, O.K.? Thanks, Dr. Dean."

Josh waved to Johnny and hugged his book and walked slowly to the counter.

"Thanks Dean." Johnny waved then left.

"Got your book there Josh?" Dean peeked. "Physics. Wow. Let me let you in on a little secret Josh." He leaned closer to the still standing teenage boy. "I'm a scientist. Physics is not fun. But go ahead."

Josh watched Dean walk over to the counter with a small box. Dean set it down, and slid his body on a stool. Josh, imitated him almost to a tee.

Dean snickered when he noticed that. "You miss Frank, Josh?"

"Frank's cool."

Dean shook his head. "He's brainwashed all the young, hasn't he?" Dean pulled out a red disk and showed it to Josh. "I have work ." He reached down and booted up the computer. He saw through the corner of his eyes, Josh mimicking him. "You gonna work, Josh?" Dean pulled out a disk and slipped it in. Typing a few taps, he pulled up what he wanted. He heard tapping come from Josh. "What are you doing?"

"Work."

"Work?" Dean glanced over, Josh had pulled something up. "No, Josh." He stood from the stool and ran over. "I don't know how you did it. But you pulled something . . ." Dean looked at the screen. 'A' prompt was up. "Josh, did you see what I typed?" He peeked down, the light in the disk drive was lit. "You put a disk in there? Where did you get a disk from." Dean pointed.

"Book." Josh opened up his physics book.

As the cover flipped open Dean stepped back in surprise, there were no pages, it was completely shelled out. "This was Chester's book. Was it in here?" Dean began to get excited.

"Work."

"Yeah, I heard." Dean placed his hand on the keyboard and pulled up the contents of the disk. He read the menu and chose set-up. The screen turned bright purple, and the words 'Select drive to load de-sequencing program on:' Read loud and clear. "No, I'm not that lucky." Dean began to load the program. "Please, please." Fingers crossed, he waited. Once the program was complete, Dean ran to grab a red disk. He followed the instructions, placing the new disk inside. The data came up, it still made no sense. Then suddenly before his eyes it changed, all of it. "Yes! It's a de-scrambling program." Dean screamed and jumped up and down. "Josh, Josh." He excitedly grabbed the unsuspecting teenager and kissed him. "You're the man. Holy shit!" Dean had to sit. His heart raced. He breathed heavier. "Josh . . ." He shook his head. "What can I say?"

"Frank's cool."

"No. Josh is cool." Dean sat back. "This is what we need." He began to read the opening paragraph. "*The Caceres Society.*" Again he smiled as he read. "This is it."

How many miles had they walked? They hadn't seen a soul. Frank told her they probably wouldn't. Most survivors stayed away from the big cities. They had wiped them out long ago. Ellen supposed it was for other reasons. Bad memories was the reason that come to her mind first. And rightfully so. Though her and Frank stayed on the outskirts of Colorado Springs, visions of the world's last dying days were still so predominant.

Through the weeds that became small trees and poked through the parking lots and sidewalks, final chaos was so evident. Burnt cars. People hanging out of them. People who were mere skeletons of the beings they once were. From a distance the actual city of Colorado Springs looked normal. Ellen wanted to go into center town, curiosity beckoned her. But they couldn't do that. They had to make their way out of the city to Pike National Forest. They'd use Highway Twenty-Five--the route that Joe would take--staying deep enough in the wooded area, but close enough to the road.

Ellen took the hike well. Trying not to let the sight of the dead cities and suburbs be frightening. The only thing that rattled her, that brought back the painful reality of the plague, was the med-station they had passed as they neared the edge of Colorado Springs. On a football field. Army trucks still posted, long tables, tents, and cots. The long over grown grass peeking up and almost covering the scattered about cots that held the now blanket covered, skeletal remains of the once civilized world. That sight was not that long ago, distance wise, and it was still fresh on her mind. She wanted to keep going, but was glad they stopped.

Ellen enjoyed the moment as she sat on the bus stop bench outside of sporting goods store. She looked at the store front, glass busted, naked male dummies in the window. The word eunuch coming to her mind and making her smile while she sat alone. She was tired, but couldn't tell Frank. He'd end up picking her up, and she couldn't have him do that. She sat there waiting for him and eating her supposed lunch from its brown foil package.

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Joe leaned back in the drivers seat. He stretched his head, rolling his neck. The trip was quiet, Greg and he spoke very little except to tell him what was really going on with Frank.

"Joe, there's the exit." Greg indicted. "Delhart. This is it right?"

"That's what Paul had told us." Joe slowed up. "Yeah, this is it." He smiled at the exit sign as they turned off. The green sign over painted with white spray paint, and words that read 'all are welcome'.

"Where is everyone?"

"Probably more centered in town. Paul said it wasn't a big gathering place. One mile . . . see." Joe pointed to the town square milage sign. He smiled and followed it with a chuckle. Both soon disappeared. "What is this?"

"This can't be the place."

Joe brought the truck to a stop, he had to, blocking the road were two over turned vehicles, blackened from being burned. They seemed to have barricade the road. And it seemed as if for a reason. Joe opened the truck door and stepped out, grabbing his gun and bringing it with him.

Greg moved closer to the wreckage. "Joe, come here."

Running over, Joe slowed down as he neared. A freshly decomposing hand, holding a gun stuck out the side of the car. "Shit." He began to take in the sight. It wasn't the welcome he and Greg expected. The two vehicles were indeed a barricade of protection. And the body laying off to the side, and the two burnt ones, still holding their weapons on top, were the proof. With a click of the cartridge into his revolver, Joe slowly moved behind the car toward the heart of the town of Delhart. "Follow me." As he stepped cautiously beyond the barricade, he lowered his gun, and put it away. "Son of a bitch."

"Christ." Greg lowered his gun also. "What the hell happened at this town?"

Shaking his head, Joe took in the vision before him. The town, the small town, which had appeared to have been cleaned-up looked like the scene of a massacre. Bodies laid shot, sprawled on the street,

hanging from doorways. All over. Thirty? Forty? Joe tried to estimate a count in his head as he stepped over them. He knew the scene well. The rotting smell of flesh was fresh in the hot August air. Flies buzzed about, and birds swept down to enjoy the blanket of food set out for them. "This just happened Joe." Joe bent down to one of the bodies. He looked at the decomposition of an arm. "Four, five days ago." He brushed off his hands.

A loud charging scream was heard in the distance, it grew louder and louder toward Joe and Greg. The running male figure barreled to them, then past them. His tall thin body a mere blur as he shot out of town.

Joe pulled his gun and chased after him. He picked up speed when he heard the truck door shut and the engine turn over. As Joe arrived to his transportation, the young dark haired boy inside tried diligently to drive, but only jerked the vehicle about. Putting his gun away, Joe marched to the truck. "Get the hell out of there, your gonna drop my transmission."

The young man, no older than nineteen, slid in fear of Joe across the bench seat to the passenger's door. He stopped, petrified when he saw Greg blocking the way. He huffed in fright, sweat poured down his dirty face.

Joe opened up the truck door. "Calm down. We aren't gonna hurt you. What happened here?"

The young man's head dropped to the dashboard and he started to cry.

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Fingers slightly dusty from the crumbs of the preserved crackers, Ellen brushed them off and looked up when Frank finally emerged from the store.

"Got them." Frank immediately knelt before her.

"I'm sorry about this, Frank." She felt him place on her, socks then tennis shoes.

"No, it's all right. I wished I would have thought about having to do all this walking. I forgot you didn't have good shoes with you." He began to tie them on. "And I grabbed some clothes for you. I . . uh . . kinda forgot about your clothes." He cringed waiting for the yell.

"That's all right. We should still be able to find something here and there for me." She smiled at him, then her smile dropped when she looked at what he got. "Green? I hate green."

"You need green. It's either that or the military pants and shirt." Frank set her foot down. "There, all tied, stand up, what do you think?"

Ellen stood up in the black high tops, her feet sunk in comfort. "Whoa. These are nice."

"Too big?" Frank asked then watched Ellen indicate to him only a little. "You know these had a price tag of two-hundred bucks. They ought to be comfortable." He lifted the gear over his shoulder. "You ready?"

"Yep." She really wanted to sit on that bench a bit longer, but realized they had to move on. At least Frank kept the pace slow, only occasionally she did have to tell him to slow down. But Ellen knew his mind was elsewhere. He barely spoke as they walked, keeping his eyes peered straight ahead. Frank treated it like they were on a mission, a detail. He knew where they had to be and when, and he didn't want to stop until he got there.

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His name was Michael and he was barely nineteen. He had stopped shaking and finally felt safe sitting with Joe and Greg, smoking their cigarettes, one after another. "And I just . . . I just hid." Michael stated.

Joe whistled. "Smart move. You guys tried to defend yourselves. You were outnumbered." He laid a fatherly hand on the boy's back. "How many were in your town."

"Two hundred. Give or take a few."

Greg quickly looked at Joe then to Michael. "There aren't two hundred bodies out there. Did some of

your people run.”

“No.” Michael shook his head. “The ones that fought got killed. Everyone else they loaded in the trucks and took.”

“Took?” Joe questioned in shock. “They took over a hundred people. Who took them?”

“Military.”

Joe thought it was the trauma talking. “Son, there is no more military.”

Again Michael shook his head adamantly. “No, sir. They were military. Came in with their military trucks, guns, uniforms with a ‘CS’ on the shoulder. Soldiers all the way.”

Joe didn’t know how to react or what to say. The Beginnings men had never run into something like what had happened in the small town. It was new. There was a new band of survivors out there. Dressing like soldiers, acting like soldiers, and wiping out towns like the savages. Michael couldn’t give a good count as to how many. But Joe knew by the number of residents taken and killed, the number of soldiers had to be frighteningly high.

^ ^ ^ ^

The noise level in Dean’s living room was astronomical, but he didn’t seem to mind. More like, he really didn’t seem to care. Rambunctious twins jumping from the couch to Josh, to the stairs. Katie, Andrea’s seven year daughter, joining in the screaming frenzy contest, pummeling herself in wrestling moves onto Josh’s back trying desperately with Alexandra to bring Josh and Billy down. It was a major tag-team competition and Dean failed to notice.

Little Brian slept comfortably on his chest as Dean sprawled out on the couch. His head on a pillow, one knee up, the other leg stretched forward. Massive amounts of computer paper all around, nearly burying himself and Brian.. He read from a sheet and the long line of papers still connected, dangled about on the floor.

“Daddy.” Alexandra ran up to him, red faced and out of breath.

“Yes.” Dean adjusted his glasses, never taking his eyes off the papers he was engrossed in.

“Billy and Josh are cheating. Can I cheat too?”

“Sure whatever.” Dean flipped to the next page, then rested his hand on Brian’s back.

Alex ran off full speed to Billy. “Daddy said I can cheat.” Before she knew it she was on the floor being pinned again. Her tiny meek voice bellowing out like Ellen’s. “Assholes!”

“Daddy, Alex swore.” Billy told.

“Alex, don’t swear.” Dean shook his head as he read. He never heard the children call out loudly and with excitement ‘Aunt Andrea!’ when Andrea walked in.

“Dean!” Andrea shouted, standing over him. “I know you aren’t dead. I can hear the noise a block away.”

“What noise?” Dean peered up at her.

“This noise.” She held her hand back and showed Dean. The level was unbearable. Andrea took charge. “All of you shut up right now. Go up stairs.” She rubbed her forehead. “You said you were watching my daughter for me.”

“I was watching her.” Dean sat up with the papers, still clutching Brian. “Andrea you have to hear . . .”

“Look at this house Dean. You are usually so meticulous.”

“I’ll clean up later. I’m reading this. You have to hear this.”

“What?” Andrea sat next to him, she reached over and touched the sleeping baby. “Is he being good for you?”

“The best.” Dean pressed his lips to Brian’s head. “He’s such a good baby . . . huh Brian?”

“Dean.” Andrea gave that Andrea-mother-look. “Don’t get too used to him. He isn’t yours.” She paused then looked at him. “He *isn’t* yours, is he?”

“Hmm.” Dean stood up and walked Brian to the cradle and set him down. “You know how I was

having so much trouble figuring out what the formulas were on those disks?”

“Yes. And what is all this?” She reached for the long line of papers.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Those formulas, weren’t formulas. It was information coded. That blue book Josh carries, isn’t a book, it held the program that decoded at all. And this . . . this is all the information from one disk only.”

Andrea gasped as she lifted it. “No wonder you’re so engrossed.”

“I want to read as much as I can. Learn as much as I can. This basically is info about the Garfield project and how it came to be part of the Caceres Society. It says basically, Beginnings is a center point. I don’t know what that means. I’ll get to it. It mentioned about it also being the basis. Farming, industry. And according to what I can gather from their game plan. We’ve done *that* part of their plan for them.” Dean placed down his stack. “The rest of it is pretty useless information.” Standing up Dean stretched as he looked upon his livingroom. “Oh my God, what happened to my house?”

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It felt good to finally stop. Ellen was wondering when Frank would. She could hear him walking about in the deep wooded area surrounding them. He had set up the camp for them. The two sleeping bags rolled out side by side. A very small fire lit at her feet.. Ellen poked a stick into it, playing with it, just like Frank told her not to. Her head jolted to the sound of footsteps.

“It’s me.” Frank sat down next to her, kissing her on the cheek as he did. He took the twig, made sure the end wasn’t smoldering and tossed it. “I don’t want this fire spotted. And don’t get up in the middle of the night to run around. I have traps set up all over the place so . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen brought her hand to his mouth. “Can we just sit here together. Please. I haven’t seen you in days and when I do, I feel like I’m in a platoon with you.”

Frank grabbed her hand. “I’m sorry. I just want to make sure you’re protected.”

“You’re doing a good job.” Ellen brought her knees close to her and tucked her hair behind her ears. “So . . . you have to tell me what made *you* come and get me. And early too.”

“It wasn’t exactly just me. I mean I had this bad feeling, and I wanted to get down here, but the other man in your life gave me that final push.”

“The other man?”

“Dean. He helped me get all this shit together. He helped me plan this whole escape. Not that I couldn’t have done it on my own mind you. But he was a big help.” Frank picked up a stone and tossed it. “He was worried. He, uh, still cares about you.” Frank looked at her. “And wipe that gloating smile off your face.”

“I’m not smiling because of Dean. I’m smiling because people care. Miguel for example. I always thought Miguel only tolerated me. But when they did the things they did to me. He helped me out. He was really . . .”

“What did they do to you, El?” Frank asked.

“I’d rather not talk about it right now. Not tonight.” Ellen took a deep breath and let it out. “I’m not bringing any of this up. Can you help me get undressed please. My shoulder is still bad.”

Frank grasped the bottom of her tee shirt, helping her out of it. His eyes widened when he set his vision upon her bra. Her shirt dropped from his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Ellen asked.

“This is blood.” He touched her bra. The brown color of dried blood made a patch on the left side of her white bra. “Is this your blood?”

Ellen’s head dropped, she lifted her eyes to him, then grabbed her shirt pulling it to her. “Let’s just get to sleep.

“El, don’t do this. What happened to your breast?” He slowly reached his hand to the edge of her bra to pull it out.

“Stop.” Ellen smacked his hand away.

“What did they do to you? That’s a lot of blood.”

“Nothing, Frank.”

“That’s not nothing. What happened to . . .”

“Two guards . . . tried . . . to rape me.” Ellen stood up and walked away a few feet. “And one of them bit me pretty bad.” She tried to control herself, looking out.

Frank felt a singeing, a tingling knot form in his gut, it burned from his stomach to his throat. With a deep breath, trying so hard to be in control, he lifted himself to stand, and slowly walked over to her. He bit his bottom lip, and with half closed eyes, and clenching jaw, he slipped the shoulder strap from her, letting the garment fall from her back and showing her injury. With a loud emotional exhale he gently brought his finger tips to just above the bruising and still slightly bleeding open wound that surrounded her nipple. “Oh my God.” He pulled her close to him, holding back his rage. “I am so sorry. I’m sorry.” He buried his lips on her head.

“I just want to forget about this.” Ellen stepped from him, pulling her strap back.

“How could they do this to you?” Frank’s words cracked with his anger and sadness for her. “Where was Miguel?”

“They had him drugged. There was nothing he could do. He didn’t even know what happened until they brought me back.” She walked near him. “He felt bad, really bad. He took care of me. Washed me, carried me.”

Frank cringed in pain listening to her, his head tilted, as he kept his eyes closed. “I let this happen.”

“No. No one did.” Ellen grabbed his clenching fist. “Just know . . . I fought with everything I had.” She brought her body against his. “Please let’s just not talk about this. Please.”

Slowly he opened his eyes. It hurt him more than anything to see her and the battle scars she had. “I love you. More than life. You know that?”

Ellen nodded, then took the shirt she had in her hand and lifted it over her head.

Frank watched her place the shirt back on. He knew it would cover her body, but it would never be able to cover the truth of everything Ellen had gone through.

^^^

After knocking once in fear, Joanna entered George’s sleeping quarters following his gruff ‘yeah.’ Nervously she shut the door. “I can’t wait until communications are in full swing.” She let out a breath. “Lots of static but there. Radio transmission went through. Three more regiments are on their way from New Mexico.”

“Good.” George nodded as he sat at a table. “How are things down there?”

“Moving along.” Joanna stated. “Survivors sweeps are, well, trouble some, but we’ll get the hang of it. We’re almost ready to branch out. Begin moving onward with everything at the other sites. I just wish we had Beginnings. We need the food supply.”

“Don’t worry about it.” George stated. “Besides the stockpile down here, I should be back there shortly. No more dropping excess off at the savage camps. My bird will drop it off to you guys.”

“When do you think they’ll come for you?” Joanna asked.

“Probably soon. That’s why I want things to start getting packed up now, ready to move. I don’t want them coming here while we still are. If they don’t show back up, I’ll go to them. Use the ‘I made my escape’ story.”

“Are you sure it will be safe to do that?” With concern Joanna questioned.

“I have to. I have to maintain control of Beginnings, you know how vital a center point that is. And I have to go back to take out Joe.”

“We’ll have that already for you whenever you leave. The doses are strong, but if you don’t re-inject him every week, he’ll come out of it and you’ll be busted.”

“I’d like to just kill the know-it-all-Hitler-son-of-a-bitch.” George slammed his hand down and stood up. “But I can’t give myself away.” He ran his hand over his hair. “You’re sure it’ll work?”

“Yes. It’ll look like he had a stroke. Of course Beginnings still has the vials, and the anti-serum to it

is in the vials. But . . . why would they suspect he was even given the drug?" Joanna stared up at George as he walked around. "They don't even know what they have."

"And that's better for us. All right . . . Let me know when our troops arrive. I went to send them right back out for Frank and Ellen. I have a plan." George went to the desk and spread out a map. His finger moved about it. "Keeping in groups of eight, we'll send each group out in three or four hour intervals. Use the highway route, even though I'll bet Frank and Ellen take this secluded route here, near the interstate.."

"They won't stay on the highway? Why? It makes perfect sense." Joanna stated. "Mr. Slagel will take that route."

"Yeah, but I know Frank. If he senses trouble he's gonna wander far off the path and hope for the Beginning choppers to pick them up. Which you and I both know, they won't. At least not for awhile. We should get them first." George refolded the map. He was confident in his plan that Frank and Ellen wouldn't get that far. He had something in his favor. He got to know his enemy.

CHAPTER THIRTY

August 17

“Frank?” Ellen walked behind him, keeping up the rear. “I’ve been looking at this map.” She took another bite of the cracker she munched on.

“Don’t look at the map, El.” Frank stopped reached back and snatched it up. “Please.”

“But it appears to me, that if we followed the basic principals of Geometry--the shortest distance between two points is . . .”

“El. Just walk.” Frank kept his stare ahead.

“Are we stopping soon?”

Frank opened the map as he walked. “Uh . . . about four more miles than we’ll stop for an hour. We’ll clear the woods and hit the highway by then. If my guess is right.” Frank looked down at his watch. “My dad should be hitting the highway just about that time. I hope.”

Ellen’s legs stepped high to go over the large clumps of grass that seemed to patch up. “Are we going to stop and get me more clothes at the next town. These are too big.” She lifted the shorts and rolled them. “I keep losing my pants. No clothes, no running water. I hope you find me a large enough area of water so I can purge my body in it. I feel gross. And I hope to God I don’t get my period out here.”

“You and me both.” Frank stopped walking and held his hand out.

“What’s wrong? Hey we . . .” Her mouth was covered by his hand and he pulled her back, almost dragging her back into the depths of the trees. “What?”

“Shh.” Frank held her back and placed his mouth to her ear. “Be quiet. Look.”

Ellen slowly turned her head, a hundred feet away, through the trees she saw them. They walked in a line across the road way. Soldiers, peering out to their left and right.

“They’re looking for us.” Frank said. “We’ll stay deep and try to get a head of them, so we can take them out. Can you run?”

“As fast as you need me to.”

Frank pulled her back another fifteen feet into the wooded area. He ran with her, fast and forward to get ahead of the small squad of men. They found their spot. A small rocky hillside off to the side of the road. Frank pulled their gear close and grabbed his ammunition sac. He pulled from it two grenades and then set up his rifle, keeping an extra clip handy. He perched his rifle and picked up a grenade, holding it in his hand. The soldiers grew closer, fifty feet, forty. Frank pulled out the pin and held it . . . thirty, twenty. Standing up enough to get his throw he tossed the first grenade.

It clanked on the road way, rolling across the cracked pavement into the tip of a boot. Looking up to see where it came from, the soldier tried to run. With an explosion, he and the man next to him flew off ten feet from the ground, leaving their feet still behind.

Frank pulled the pin on the second grenade, tossing it, and taking out two more. Rifle carefully aimed through the smoke, catching the scurrying men in the scope of his rifle, Frank very nonchalantly picked them off, one by one as if they were sitting ducks in an easy child’s game. He put down his rifle, grabbed his revolver, then stood up.

“Frank get down.” She pulled at his leg.

“El, they’re all hit.” Holding his revolver out and aimed, Frank walked to the highway. He extended his gun to each of the four men he hit. And one at a time, Frank nudged them with his boot, then fired into their heads. Placing his revolver back in his shoulder harness he went back to Ellen. “We have to go now.” He began to lug the gear over his shoulders.

“What about your dad? You said that he’d be here.”

“El, we don’t know how long that’ll be. That was eight men. Eight. If there’s more, we have to get out now.”

Ellen stood up and followed, Frank was walking toward the just killed men. “Where are we going?”

“To cross the highway. We’re going east for a little bit.”

“East? Home is north.”

“We’ll shift north after we get far enough out.” Frank led her. “And whatever you do, do not step in any blood. The only trail I want to leave them is a fake one.”

Ellen watched her every step. Being careful not to touch her foot down upon anything that once used to be alive was difficult, Frank had made quite the mess.

^^^

Henry whistled long and drawn out as he lifted the stack of papers. “This is one disk?”

“Seven hundred and fifty sheets.” Dean stated.

“And how many of these trained assassins does the plan call for?” Henry asked.

“Twenty-five hundred.”

Another whistle came from Henry as he stood up. “What in the world do they need all those assassins for and where are they?”

“According to their theory, in order to rebuild a perfect civilization non viable life forms will either be eliminated or restructured, what ever that means.” Dean shrugged. “Where? I don’t know. The first disk is merely the preparation phase. I have the other disks printing out now. Or at least some. Some of them the decoder won’t touch. They’re password protected.”

“Bet me like the hidden files that we didn’t find yet.” Henry tapped his hand on the counter and backed up ready to leave, he paused as he reached the door. “Find me when you know more. I’ll be at the hanger.”

“Will do.” Dean returned to his stack of reading.

“Dean?” The woman’s voice called softly to him from the lab door.

“Melissa.” Dean turned. “What’s up?”

“Are you busy?” She stepped in. “I’m having a problem with this pregnancy.”

“What kind?” Dean asked.

“I didn’t want to mention it yesterday. I started noticing it the day before. Dean . . . I’m starting to swell. I mean really swell.”

“You hands, ankles? What? You’re not even a month along.”

“Tell me about it.” Melissa moved closer. “So if that’s the case. Why do I look like this?” She opened up the big lab coat she wore that covered her. Protruding forth was her stomach, it’s roundness looked as if it belonged to a woman in her fourth or fifth month, rather than her first.

“Holy shit!” Dean literally fell from his stool, knocking it over and sending it crashing to the ground. “Shit.” He reached his hand out but didn’t touch her. “Cover back up.” He closed her coat, grabbed his stool and nervously sat back down.

“What are we going to do? This isn’t normal.”

“Um . . .um.” Dean shook his head. “No it’s not. I’ll tell you what.” Dean ran his hands through his hair. “Give me an hour. Meet me back in the room with the ultra sound. O.K.?” He jumped up and ran to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To find out what we implanted.” Dean bolted to the hall then stuck his head back in. “What number was that. Thirty-seven?” Snapping his finger he took off for the Cryo-lab. Trying to look cool and calm, Dean knew he was failing at that task. He was fearful of what he did. Fearful of going down into the lab and finding out for sure, what number thirty-seven really was.

^^^

Crouched down, Joe looked at what appeared to be a finger ten or so feet from what looked like a blast site. “Yep, Frank’s work.” He stood up and brushed off his hands, and moved up closer to the site. “Sloppy trip wire. Frank you’ll have to be better.” Joe spoke to himself as he examined everything.

Michael stayed in the truck, while Greg made his way over to the green picnic table. "What else." Joe placed his hands on his hips looking about, catching glimpse of the arm waving to him from the tree. "Damn grenades are good."

"Did you say something, Joe?" Greg moved closer, holding a sleeping roll.

"I said our homemade grenades are good.." He pointed up to the tree.

"Oh yeah." Greg spoke with sarcasm. "Real good. Got that 'blast it a mile away effect' going. Anyway, two rolls left behind." He tossed them to Joe. "Frank is running. But with who?"

"It's definitely Ellen." Joe took in the site around him. "My son would die trying to get her if he had too. My guess, Miguel and George are still in there." Joe began to walk back to the truck. "And by the looks of things, Frank's going on with the plan, move forward if there's trouble."

"So we're gonna try to find them?" Greg opened his side of the truck.

"Yep." Joe climbed in. "Barring anymore trouble Frank knows we're heading up here. He'll be close to the highway if not there." Joe turned over the ignition and placed the truck in gear. After the subtle bumps of going over the two torsos, they drove on.

^^^

Andrea's looked at the ultrasound picture of Melissa's baby. She brought it to her lips, taping it several times as she stared at a very frazzled Dean. "He looks normal."

"On the outside, yes." Dean's stated. "We have to abort it."

"Do you hear yourself, Dr. Hayes?" Andrea asked sternly. "This is life."

"Not the way it's meant to be."

"You knew there was a chance of that when you proceeded, you knew it. Now you want to turn it all back? Take it back? You're a scientist. Do you always abort your experiments?"

"We're talking about Melissa's life here, Andrea." Dean snatched up the photo. "Yes, this baby looks normal. Looks. He's approximately four weeks gestation and is measuring a very large twenty-two weeks. All characteristics appear to be normal, but he is not. G.A.F. number thirty seven." Dean pulled out a sheet of paper. "Genetically enhanced male. Intelligence level seven. I looked up their level-seven. Level-seven intelligence are designed for manual labor, physically created to withstand the elements." Dean held up the paper. "That's exactly what it says, withstand the elements without any detrimental effects to mental or physical state. Therefor lessening the chance of the worker becoming non-viable." Dean slapped the paper down. "Not to mention, less-than-intelligent."

"You're wanting to destroy this life because he'll be less than intelligent?"

"No." Dean drastically shook his head, passion consumed his tone of argument. "By this little black and white picture he looks normal. But designed to withstand elements. What the hell is that? And you are forgetting the most important thing. G.A.F., doesn't stand for genetically altered fetus. It stands for growth accelerated fetus. Designed to achieve complete gestation not in forty weeks, but in eight weeks. The human body is not designed to give birth that quickly, you know that and I know that. We have to abort to eliminate any risk to Melissa . . ." A very strong and stern 'no' came into the room. Dean and Andrea both looked to the door, Melissa stood there.

"No, Dean." Melissa shut the door. "I've been listening, I'm sorry. But I can't sit in the hall and let you determine the fate of my baby." She rubbed her hand over her stomach.

Dean was rattled in shock by her statement. "Melissa look . . ."

"No, Dean." Melissa spoke softly. "You look. I feel this child move . . . move." She sat down in a chair next to him, speaking from her heart. "Since I was fifteen years old I was told I would never have a child. I want this. Isn't it life, no matter what it is?" She looked to Andrea. "Isn't it life?"

Andrea leaned into her desk. "Dean's concerned about you. You have approximately four more weeks to go, the shock of going into such a sudden labor could be deadly."

"Then take the baby out before he's due." Melissa leaned in.

Andrea the woman heard her, but Andrea the doctor had to think. She leaned back, resembling Joe

just a bit as she sank into thought. “We could do that. Maybe in three weeks.”

Dean’s hand slammed down on the table. “No. Don’t risk it.”

Andrea, whose hands were in a prayer motion at her lips, turned to Melissa. “I will have it be your call.”

Melissa smiled slightly. “I’m risking it. I have faith in you two.”

Dean stood to his feet. “It’s your life we’re talking about here, Melissa. I want my objection known.” Bewildered, beaten, with an outstanding argument given, but not heard, Dean picked up his report, giving into the recent defeat, and moved on. He had more work to do, and more to learn.

^^^

“Son of a bitch.” Joe exclaimed in disgust as he screeched the fast moving wheels of the truck to a halt. The flock of birds that had gathered on the highway like something from a Hitchcock film, scattered like a black cloud into the air at the approaching vehicle. “What in God’s name is going on?”

Michael, nervous in the back seat, tapped Joe on the shoulder. “The military.”

Slamming his hand hard against the steering wheel, Joe looked to the rear view mirror. “There is no military!” He opened the truck door. “At least I didn’t think there was.”

Greg joined him looking at the scattered bodies. “Six?”

Joe shaded his eyes from the bright sun, looking about. “Nope. Eight.” His hand extended out. “One over there, and another, sort of, over there.” Joe moved closer to the bodies. “Frank. Two shots, chest and head.” Hands on hips, Joe looked upon the bodies, studying the scene, speaking his thoughts low and out loud. “Tell me something, Frank. Anything.” Joe reached his hand up rubbing his head. And he took in the angle of the fallen bodies. He spun his body to face the wooded area to his left. “They shot from somewhere over there. There’s a grade. Let’s check it out.”

Greg ran over first. Joe hem-hawed along at a slower pace. “Hey, Joe! They went back into the woods.” He was staring down into the grass.

“How do you know?” Joe ran back over and saw what Greg did. A trail of bloody footprints leading from the road, and fading into the woods. “I’ll be damned, he’s heading east.”

“No Joe, these woods are west.”

“My son is not that stupid. This is a fake trail. He’s trying to throw them off.” Joe turned back around, heading up to the truck. Once there he reached inside, giving a smile to Michael, grabbed the map from the visor, then spread it out on the hood of the truck. “All right.” Joe took a pen. “Here’s where we found the first bodies.” He circled the area and mumbled to himself in thought about what Frank would assume and wouldn’t. Joe folded the map. “Let’s go.”

“Whoa-whoa Wait.” Greg stated panicked. “We aren’t looking for them?”

“Not right now we aren’t. He’s heading east for a while before going north. We have to head home, then at dawn send out the choppers to look for them.”

“How will we know where they are?” Greg asked as he and Joe got back in the truck.

“Estimate.” Joe slammed the truck door. “He’s only going to hike it about thirty miles a day with her. We can get a pretty good guess where he’ll be.”

“What if he just heads east?”

“He won’t.” Joe started the truck. “He’ll go far enough out to throw them off. But he is going to count on those choppers.” He placed the truck in drive. “Let’s head home.”

“Can we not drive over the bodies . . .” Greg bounced up and down a few times. “You had to drive over them?”

“What the hell do they care? And be a man for Christ’s sake.” Joe pulled out a cigarette from his pocket as he drove home. He had to make it back to Beginnings quickly. Planning had to be done. Not only were Frank and Ellen wandering around in the unscathed world, but George and Miguel were still at the installation. Getting them out had to be a priority. Not only were George and Miguel Beginnings’

people, they were originals, and to Joe, they were family.

Joe began his phase of planning almost immediately, in his mind, in the cab of that truck. He wanted to have it straight and nearly laid out, so he could set it in motion the moment he walked through those gates of home.

^^^

George kept his stride slow, walking the hall of floor nineteen alongside Dr. Theodore Peltzer. He stood the same height as George, the same built, yet much younger. Dr. Peltzer, a cyborg-physicist, handled the questions that George tossed at him with accuracy.

“They will follow their instructions?” George asked, his hands behind his back as he walked.

“To the specifications. The second group of soldiers should be back by morning, are they to be given the same instructions?”

“No.” George shook his head. “I want the second group to march straight to Greeley go that extra fifty miles, then fan back toward us. Southeast and southwest. Knowing Frank, he’s going to stay off the highway. Doing about twenty miles a day with Ellen. It’s my hopes that our men will pass them, But . . . coming back, intercept them” George paused and looked into the large window before him. The room was filled with people, all wearing hospital gowns, all staring blankly outward. He tapped on the glass. “They don’t respond.”

“Not yet they won’t. They’re only in step one. They’ve had the laser lobotomy, we just need to implant them with the chip also. Then they’ll be easy to train. Just like our soldiers. We’ll ship them out in another week.”

“Good, we have to get them out and down there. On the outside chance Beginnings tries to pull some rescue operation, I don’t want them here.” George reached out bracing the arm of Dr. Peltzer. “I’ll leave you to your work. Just keep in mind Doctor, time is of a grave importance.”

“I’m not understanding why. If we work at our own pace, we’ll be much more able to complete everything with precision.”

“True.” George nodded. “But remember. It’s only been a month or so for you, since the world was normal. It’s been six years for me. Six years was a lot longer than we planned. And in six years, how much further do you suppose everyone else has gotten?” George raised his eyebrows, released the doctor’s arm and walked down the hall.

^^^

“Goods?” Ellen stopped abruptly, the dust below her feet clouding up. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the wood framed building, tall brown bushes meeting the window, the single gas pump in front over turned. “You think you’re going to find me something to wear in a place called, Bob’s Goods?”

“Sit!” Frank pointed to the wooden step that led to the long porch. “I’ll be right out.”

“Can’t I go in with . . .”

“No.” Frank rolled his eyes and tried the door knob, it was locked. It only took one shove with his shoulder and the door opened with a creak.

Ellen kicked her feet on the dirt below her, she could hear Frank’s coughing coming from inside. She mumbled out loud to herself. “Choking on the dust, huh Frank?” She kicked her feet. She listen to Frank as he shuffled about in the store. She’d hear things crash, he’d cough, then say ‘fuck’. Ellen giggled. Then she caught whiff of it, that oh-too-familiar survivor smell. She heard a creak then the board she sat on bounced up . . . she was no longer alone. Shifting her eyes only, she looked to see who or what just sat down next to her.

He smiled at her, the man did. No more than thirty years old, his longer brown hair, cut into a page boy hair cut, blew a little in the wind. He wasn’t dirty, not at all. He looked more like a farm hand than a survivor. “Hi.” He spoke nervously. His nose twitched as he smiled. A look of excitement on his face.

“Hi.” Ellen spoke with a smile, no fear of the man at all. In fact she wanted to laugh at the nervous, skinny guy, especially with bad hair like he had. Ellen figured it was a poor taste practical joke one of his fellow survivors played on him.

“We-we saw-saw you com-coming up the road, the roadway.” His head twitched as he spoke quickly. “We live on a far-farm. Twelve-twelve of us. Gosh your pret-pretty.” He touched her hair lifting it.

“Thanks-thanks.” Ellen pulled his hand away.

“We were won-wondering, if-if, you may-maybe.” He sniffled and rubbed his nose. “Would like to com-come with us to have food. We have a-a deer. Gosh your pret-pretty.”

“El, I found some . . .” Frank stepped out with a thump on the wooden porch. “. . .thing.” He reached his hand down to Ellen. “Let’s go.” He didn’t take his eyes of the stranger.

“Look Frank, I made a new friend.” Ellen ignored his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Os-Oscar.”

“Frank, this is Os-Oscar.”

Frank grunted and grabbed Ellen’s hand. “El, we have to move.”

“Frank, Os-Oscar invited me to a picnic. Him and his friends are having a deer roast.” She smiled at Oscar. He still hadn’t picked up on her sarcasm. “He wants me to come.”

Oscar nodded his head very fast. “She’s pret-pretty. We have fo-food. Wanna trade?”

Frank adjusted the gear he had. “You wanna me to trade my wife for food?” Frank rubbed his goatee. “Hmm. I don’t know El, I’m pretty hungry, feel like hooking him up?”

Oscar nodded at her.

“Nah.” Ellen shook her head.

“Sorry, pal.” Frank took Ellen’s hand. “Thanks for the offer though.” Tightly he gripped Ellen’s hand and began to walk with her.

Oscar ran to catch them, walking backwards in front of them. “Two-two deer.”

“My wife is not for sale.” Frank began to get perturbed.. “Beat it.” The little man didn’t. “I said . . .” In his loudest meanest voice Frank shouted at him. “Beat it!”

Oscar, though not extremely bright, was smart enough to see it was time to run, and run he did. He took off in the opposite direction, running all the way.

Frank shook his head. “Why didn’t you call me when he showed up?”

“He was harmless. I work with enough survivors to know that. So, what did you get me?”

“Jeans. We’ll knife them off, so please don’t start bitching.”

“You’re gonna find me a place to get cleaned up won’t you.”

Frank tried to shun the irritation he felt. “El . . . If I’m right, by this map, we should hit a river, or rather stream that heads north. We’ll follow that.”

“Hurrah, we’re going north.” She started moving faster, because Frank seemed to be.

“Maybe I should have sold you for a deer.”

“Fine.” Ellen stopped and turned around. “I’ll give myself to the group of guys.”

“Get back here.” Frank reached out pulling her back, he wrapped his arm around her neck and pulled Ellen to him to give her a hard kiss to her cheek. He smiled and kept walking.

“Oh, yeah now be nice to me.” Ellen rubbed her cheek. “A little insecure over Os-Oscar, huh?”

Frank shook his head with a chuckle. There was a sense of relief that was evident as they started heading north. It was apparent in the way they talked, and joked some. They felt safer--and they were--being so far from the main road. They headed forward, though still boggled down with all of their supplies, they had a little less weight to carry on their shoulders.

^^^

“So what am I reading?” Jason Godrichson asked Dean as they sat reviewing printouts in the lab.

“I want to have a sot of cliff-notes version for when Joe gets back. However, I need you to read

about cyborg-physics. I can't make heads or tails out of it. I'm going to read over the correspondence. See if there's anything in the letters that helps." Dean began to flip through the pages. "And . . . if there is anything you can remember on your own, it'll be helpful."

"I've told everything I could remember to Joe." Jason flipped a page with a 'hmm'.

"Your father didn't say anything to you about the master plan of the society?"

"Nope, just that he was part of it. And about being frozen." Jason continued to read as he spoke.

"Didn't the thought of being cryogenically frozen frighten you?" Dean made a face at a letter he read and placed a big red 'x' over it.

"No, not really. The plane ride frightened me more. With all that snow I thought for sure we'd crash. I truly feared the landing."

Dean laughed and shook his head. "Where in the world were you that it was snowing at the end of May?"

"May?" Jason dropped the page he held up. "I wasn't cryogenically frozen in May."

"Yeah, you were." Dean quite enjoyed the sudden lapse of memory of the doctor. "Maybe you just lost track of time."

"I'm a quantum-physicist! I highly doubt that. And I remember the snow vividly. A blizzard to be exact."

"In May?" Dean asked doubtfully and sarcastically.

"Why do you keep insisting on May. I ought to know." Jason argued.

"And I ought to know too. The Plague started on May 29th."

"The plague started in May?" Jason rubbed his face in bewilderment. "If that's the case. Then why was I frozen in January?"

^^^

"See El, isn't this nice." Frank motioned his hand outward to the stream that ran behind him. A wide one, clear waters, running over the rocks. "Big enough to purge in."

Ellen peeked at it. "Sure if I lay on my back."

"Then lay on your back." Frank set down the gear. "We're stopping here for the night. We've hit about thirty-two miles today . . . good job. Right now, let's just both sit down and stop." He plopped to the ground. "And, we should eat. It's been awhile." Frank handed her the food.

"I don't feel like eating. Not this stuff." Ellen handed it back. "It's gross. And what was the meaning of feeding me that brown thing today, you called a brownie. You didn't eat it."

"It's because I don't weigh fifty-fuckin pounds." He tossed it to her. "Eat."

"No." She shook her head and tossed it back.

"Ellen." Frank grabbed the brown bag and crawled to her. He knelt, his arms extended to both sides of her, and his face close to hers. "El, listen to me. You will survive this trip. And not only will you survive it, you'll be healthy too. I *will* see to it. Now, if I have to pin your skinny ass down, hold your mouth open and feed you like a two year old, I will. But you will eat!" He handed her meal back to her, less than gentle, then scooted back.

"Fine." Ellen opened up the bag and looked into it. "Gross. And you don't understand. My legs hurt, my feet hurt . . ."

"El . . ." Frank tilted his head with closed eyes, trying to block her out, but not succeeding.

"No Frank, you're used to this walking shit. It's hot Frank. I feel gross. Everything around us is spooky. And you yell and snap at me, barking orders. So why do you yell at me so much?"

"Why do you bitch so much!?" Frank asked in a yell.

"Because I don't wanna be here! I want to be home!"

"I'm doing the best I can, El!" Frank slammed his hand to the ground then brought it to his face.

"Fuck. I'm trying! Can't you see that!?" From over his knuckles cupped just beneath his nose, he watched Ellen turn her back to him, bring her knees up, and place her head down on them. Her shoulders bounced.

“Don’t.” Frank shook his head. “Don’t pull that fake crying shit on me.”

Ellen held up one hand, her head moving from side to side.

“Quit it. I know you better. So stop it before I get even more pissed.” Frank stood up and walked over to right before her. “Talk to me. Talk to me . . . El!” Frank grew annoyed. “Quit with the games and look at me.” He saw her lift her head, and Frank saw her face. He knew at that moment she had to feel really bad. For Ellen to be actually crying, something was wrong. “El.” Frank spoke his words as his heart sunk. He knelt down. “Hon.”

“I’m sorry Frank. You are trying.” She tried to hide her face. “I just . . . I just miss my family. And I’m scared out here . . . I just want to go home.”

Frank sat down with her and took her in his arms. “I’ll get you there.” He held her tight. “I promise. I’ll get you home.”

^^^

It was all Dean waited to hear. The truck was on its way back. Right on schedule, a definite good sign--no problems to hold Joe up. Henry came to Dean to tell him personally that Joe had reached radio range. The news made him smile, he wanted to be at that front gate to watch them all pull up safely. He had so much to tell them, so much they probably didn’t want to hear.

When they saw them it was like a breath of fresh air. The truck moved fast and stopped at the end directly in front of Dean and Henry, almost hitting them. Dean ran to the side of the truck with Henry, the huge smile he had, dropped from his face when he looked in the truck.

Leaning out the open driver’s window, Joe’s serious face said it all. “Henry, get John Matoose, and Johnny. All of you meet me at my office stat, you hear?”

Dean nodded. “Joe, where’s Ellen?”

Joe didn’t answer, he sped off almost taking Dean unwillingly with him.

“Henry, something’s happened.” Dean turned to Henry who was still watching the truck. “Something went wrong . . . Henry? . . . Henry?”

Henry turned his head, but his eyes still focused on the truck. “Who do you suppose the new guy is?”

Dean opened his mouth to speak, but words failed to emerge. Henry left him dumbfounded. Giving up, Dean went ahead to follow Joe’s orders. The sooner he did that, the sooner he could find out what had happened.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

With a slam of his office door, Joe strolled in. The look on his face told everyone what they had guessed. He took the rolled map he had, and tacked it up to the cork board he had hanging. "All right." Joe took a deep breath and ran his hand over his face. "I guess you can all tell by now that Greg and I came back without our people. We've got trouble and that's why I want you all here." Joe pointed to the map as he spoke to the requested ones in the room, along with Jason Godrichson. "We believe that George and Miguel are still in the compound. Frank got Ellen out of there and they now are on the run. I estimate by now they are somewhere past Castle Rock. There's a new breed of survivors out there. Coincidentally they appeared with our scientists. So, first plan of action, get the choppers up in the . . ."

"Can't, Pap." Johnny stood up. "Maybe not for another day. There's something you should know."

Dean lifted a large and heavy stack of papers from the floor and set them on Joe's desk. "No, Joe. There's a lot you should know."

Joe looked at the stack, then at Dean. "This gonna be worse than I'm imagining." He didn't need a response from everyone, their silence and expressions confirmed his fear. Joe sat down.

^ ^ ^ ^

Frank had to admit he did feel better after getting cleaned up. The water in the stream was cool, but even though it was shallow, he managed to make the best of it. He watched Ellen, as he bent down to pick up his clothes. She combed her wet hair, staring kind of blankly off. She looked better after the surprise of the century Ellen outburst. Of course she fell asleep for an hour right afterwards. Frank figured exhaustion added some to her mood. "Hey El." He smiled, rushing to the ground with her, leaning in. "Feeling better?" He kissed her.

"Yeah . . . I am." She smiled at him. "Just missing the kids. How were they?"

"Oh they're great." Frank began to pull at the grass next to him. "Dean . . . Dean has Brian." He hunched because he knew it was coming.

"Dean! Why in the world would you do that?" Ellen saw him try to speak in his defense, but she just wouldn't let him. "You know bad he wants a baby. Talk about being cruel, rubbing it in, gloating . . ."

"Whoa." Frank held his hands up. "Dean offered to take Brian. I didn't see a problem with it. Things are a bit different with Dean and me now. Just a bit. And you're forgetting. Dean doesn't just want to have a baby. He wants to have a baby with my wife."

"He wants to have a baby with the same woman who gave him his last children. You just aren't seeing the point. You are so immature about this whole situation."

"Immature?" Frank brought his knees up to him. "I don't want you walking around knocked up by some other man."

"Try this. Let's say for arguments sake, that . . . Henry was never going to find a woman. And let's say Henry really wanted to have a child and he came to us. Would you let me have Henry's baby?"

"That's different. Yes." Frank said.

"Why could I have Henry's baby and not Dean's?"

"Because Henry is not Dean."

"Henry . . . Dean. No Difference, Frank. I wouldn't be sleeping with them."

"Dean is different, El. I don't want to have another reason to share you with him."

"Why do you insist you share me with Dean?" Ellen asked. "Dean and I have become very good friends. Yes we have children, and because of that there will always be a connection between us. But I'm married to you. I'm your wife. And I just wish you could see that your wife would like to do something for her friend. A friend that she feels she owes a lot to."

Frank lowered his head. "This is a big thing. You want to carry his child. I can't give a part of you up, even if it's just for a little while. No matter how you look at it, that's what I'll be doing. I can't share

you.”

“I love you, Frank.” Ellen spoke softly and lifted his chin. “I don’t need your permission to do this. But I want it. So would please, please just think about it.”

Frank closed his eyes. He could at least give her that.

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Amidst the complete silence in the room following Dean’s explanation, Joe shocked, looked up. “So much sabotage.” he shook his head once. “Altered fetuses. Large amounts of trained assassins. Mock Caceres societies. Elimination of the weak. Cyborg enhancements? Who do they plan to do that to?”

Dean lifted his hand. “From what we can figure, those they want to train to be killers, workers, but most of all . . . the women. Any woman born of the old world or pre-society, will be used for farming. Or if they’re older, they’ll be enhanced to be a worker. But that’s not the worst part.” When Dean saw Joe raise his eyes, he motioned his hand to Jason. “Dr. Godrichson, tell us when you were frozen.”

“Same year as the plague, but . . .” Jason added that dramatic effect. “January fourth.”

It caused a loud eruption of questions, especially from Joe. “Hold it. Why were you frozen so far before . . .” Then it hit Joe. “No.”

Dean nodded. “Oh, yeah. It was planned. They didn’t expect it to be so devastating though. They planned on a fifty percent population decrease and diminishing of society. They awake, they’re heroes, they start the world over to their specifications. But it get’s better.” Dean hid his snicker at Joe’s mumbling stock ‘Christ’. “Ready. The plague was planned to be released on June 1st. But here’s what happened. An underground group called the Mohemians discovered this little ‘end the world’ plot and set out to stop it at all cost. The Society, found out who the Mohemians were, set them up as the bad guys and led . . . the CIA directly to their main US guy . . . Barat Ashrad. Barat’s warnings to the CDC were real. He did have the virus. But he wasn’t trying to start it, he was trying to stop it. And you Joe, did your job. You chased him, you got him, but you also inadvertently started the early release of the plague. You, Joe, started the world’s end.”

With a tilted head Joe looked at Dean with a hint of irritation. “Could you have any less tact, Dean? I started the end of the world?”

Dean snickered then stopped “Sorry. Yeah. It’s kind of ironic since you and your boys had this big end of the world contingency . . .”

“Dean!” Joe’s hand hit on the desk. “It’s not funny.”

“No, Joe.” Dean looked serious. “Not at all.” He cleared his throat. “And you really didn’t start the end. It would have happened in two days anyhow. But when word go out of the early release, the suicide droppers released it at the other designated sites.”

“These sons of bitches deserve everything we give.” Joe stood back up with a rush and moved to his map. “And we’re gonna give it to them. First thing first, fix those choppers, get them in the air, I’ll figure coordinates, find Frank and Ellen, and get them home. Doesn’t matter how many if those soldiers there are, we can take them out by chopper.. John . . .” Joe turned to John Matoose. “I want top shooters on each bird, enough ammo, you guys fire at anything in a uniform, except Frank.” He got agreement from John. “Second, George and Miguel, we have to get them out of here. When we infiltrate the compound we’ll take out our little brainiacs. I’ve been given this a lot of thought. I think it may work. Dean, are our scientist immune to our plague?”

Dean’s head bounced in thought. “Somewhat. However, a mutated form, or stronger form would definitely have an effect on them, probably fatal. That is not a guarantee though.”

“Then I need you to work on it, Dean.” Joe smiled widely. “Immediately. We’re bringing them down that way.” Joe turned to Jason, ignoring Dean’s open mouth. “Jason I’m taking you out of plastics and putting you in the clinic to work Dean’s patients. Dean, you’ll need an assistant. When Ellen gets back, I’ll put her with you. Is Ellen all right? You two worked on the virus before. I’ll pull her from containment to work on this with you. Day and night, got that, until you come up with it. Greg . . .” Joe’s

attention turned to him. “You’re in containment, you and I will split that . . .”

“Wait!” Dean spoke loudly holding up his hand in a halt manner. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but did you just ask me to create a biological weapon to take these people out with?”

Joe and everyone else in the room grunted. “Yes Dean I did. That’s how we’re going to do it. We can’t just go bursting in there and chance them killing our two men. You and I are immune to this virus. You create something that we can dump into their air filtering system. They die, George and Miguel and any other survivors there, will walk out. But don’t create anything that you can’t have an antidote.”

“It’s wrong.” Dean spoke up interrupting him. “It’s morally wrong and I won’t do it.”

The enthusiastic smile wiped from Joe’s face, immediate tension daggers were thrown at Dean as he peered at him. Only raising his eyes, Joe looked to everyone else in the room. “That will be all everyone. I’ll check on everyone’s progress in the morning.”

One by one, almost immediately, everyone left the room. Waving to Joe, feeling sorry for Dean as they passed him. Dean hadn’t been told directly to stay. He stood up, the last one, but didn’t make it very far. With a firm hand pressed down on his shoulder Joe shoved him back in the chair.

“Dean, you want to repeat what you said to me just a minute ago?” Joe folded his hands waiting for a different answer.

Dean’s fingers nervously tapped on the arms of his seat. Feeling like a child awaiting a scolding. But he had to speak his mind. “I said, it’s wrong. Morally wrong and I won’t do it Joe.”

“That’s what thought you said.” Joe put his finger to his ear rubbing it. “I thought perhaps I heard you wrong.” Giving Dean the benefit of the doubt, Joe continued on calmly. “Now let me understand correctly. Is it that you *can’t* do it. Or you just *won’t* do it.”

“Oh, I can do it. I won’t do it, it’s wrong.” Dean argued adamantly.

“Dean, this *so* wrong, but what you did for the military wasn’t?”

“It’s different, Joe.” Dean began to ramble on, not realizing that his every excuse would make Joe’s blood boil and anger rise. “This is a different situation, this is real. What I did for the military was different from what you are asking . . .”

“BULLSHIT!” Joe, red faced leaned into Dean closer. “Bullshit. Don’t you play Mr. high and mighty, morally wrong with me, son. Don’t you do it. I know exactly what you did for the U.S. Army, and so do you.”

“What are you talking about Joe?” Dean kept his stare straight ahead. Fussing in his chair, feeling the heat of Joe’s breath smack against his neck.

Joe stood behind Dean, in a one word whisper, he said it all. “Riacon.”

Dean swallowed dramatically and closed his eyes.

“Riacon.” Joe stood upright and walked in front of him. “Fifteen years ago, some whiz kid they enlisted straight from medical school invented it. The Army’s bright boy. The army’s newest Chemical weapon, Riacon. It burned you from the inside out. Liquefying all internal organs, boiling the blood, singeing out the lungs, slowly . . .” Joe looked closer at Dean. “Painfully all the way out to the skins surface. It was so deadly that it even scared the U.S. Army. They buried the Nevada desert two hundred feet below the surface. Remember that? Remember . . . your invention?”

With a face full of sadness, Dean lowered his head. “How did you know about Riacon?”

“I was in the CIA for over twenty-years. We saw the demo videos on it. I knew as soon as you told me your name at that med-station, that you weren’t some pissy young doctor playing God. Your name, was forever imbedded in my brain as some sort of monster.” Joe leaned back on his desk.

“That’s why I don’t want you to make me do this. I worked so hard to put that part of my life behind me. What I do now is good work, I don’t plan to kill people anymore.”

“Make an exception this time, Dean. You did it for the United States because it was your country. You did it as a means of protection. Well low and behold.” Joe held out his hands. “Beginnings is your country. Beginnings is your home. It’s time to protect it, and you’re the only one who can do it right. So get off your high horse.”

Dean slumped far down into his chair. He brought his hand up to his head to lean against. Staring at

Joe like a small child, not wanting to do his chores. "I'll do this. I'll come up with something for you. Just please make sure I don't lose the respect I worked so hard for."

"Won't happen. How can people lose respect for a man who's fight for them." Joe stood up. "They won't. Because, they like me, know *this* is something we have to do."

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The black plastic case George peered into look like the case he carried his darts in. The hard black cover perched open as George stared at the contents inside the red pseudo-velvet interior. Four small vials all containing a clear substance. Two syringes. The vials were unmarked, yet George knew exactly what was in them. The drug he was going to use on Joe.

Joe was home in Beginnings, of that George was certain. Perhaps already making the plans to rescue Frank and Ellen, come and get he and Miguel. George knew that impending rescue wouldn't be far away, so he planned on it. Everything of vital importance would be moved near immediately, to the lowest floors of the compound. They were secure. When Beginnings made their rush in, and they would, barreling forth weapons high. The scientist would go down there too. George would make his escape out, telling Beginnings that most of the scientists had left the compound. A few guards held them captive there, but Miguel was such the tragic victim in it all. Beginnings would believe him. Why would they doubt him. According to them, George was one of their own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

August 18

“It’s time to get up!”

“Ow.” Ellen felt the rude awakening, hard stinging slap to her backside as she slept on her stomach. “You are such an asshole Frank.”

“Daylight’s breaking, we have to move. Let’s go.” Frank continued to gather up the gear.

“I can’t move. My legs hurt.” Ellen pulled the sleeping bag over her head.

“Yeah, but that’ll stop as soon as you move.”

“You’re being mean.” Her words were muffled. “Are we being Frank the Sargent again?”

“Let’s go El.” Frank pulled the sleeping bag off of her. “We don’t have time to waste. We have to move. We’ve been pretty lucky not running into any of those stupid soldiers. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“All right, all right.” Ellen sat up grabbing to her back. “I can’t wait to get home and get in my bed.” Achy, she lifted herself up. “Let me go down to the stream to wash my face.” Ellen picked up what she needed, taking one more look at perky Frank. He was rearing to go, and she could barely move. The walking from the previous two days was beginning to catch up to her. As she slowly walked the twenty feet to the stream, she dreaded with every painful step, the milage she would have to put in on this day.

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Johnny opened the door to the cryo-lab with his backside. His arms full of equipment, he could carry more than just about anyone. “This is the last of it.”

“Just set it down on the counter, John. Thanks.” Dean tried to make heads or tails out of his newest working quarters. It would be difficult, he was so used to working on most things above.

He stood staring at everything they had brought down, everything that would play a vital role in the project he had to undertake. In a sense, Dean felt guilty. Guilty because it took very little thought, and he already knew what direction he was going to go with it. In a way it made him wonder if he was truly the monster that Joe had once depicted him as being. What kind of person did that make him to be able to think of something so deadly in such a short amount of time. That programmed part of his brain, that section he turned off so many years ago, kicked back, almost automatically in full gear.

But Dean knew, he wouldn’t be able to go fully ahead with it--no matter how much he thought of it--until his mind was clearer. And right now, his mind was still to clouded up with Ellen.

^^^

“Please, Frank.” Ellen spoke in a begging manner. “Please.”

“Nope.” Frank kept walking, trying not to hear her.

“Please. I saw it when we were at that hilltop. It should be coming into view any moment.”

“No, El, No. It’s stupid. I’m not doing it.”

“What is it going to hurt?” She asked.

“Ellen, I’m not going to stop at K-Mart.”

“Frank, fifteen minutes, I won’t be any longer than fifteen minutes. You haven’t let me stop and see one thing on this whole road trip.”

“This is not a vacation. We aren’t sight seeing.” Frank shook his head over and over as she pleaded.

“You are such a dick.” Ellen trotted to be in front of him, she walked backwards as she spoke.

“Please. This is like a really special gift, that right now, only you can give to me. Please.”

Frank stopped walking. “All right . . . but . . . one small bag and you can’t bitch about anything for ten miles.”

“Deal.” She sealed it with a kiss then turned to walk next to him. “Whoa.” She slowed down, just

ahead of them on the roadway lay a long line of cars.

“The ones that didn’t quite make it.” Frank peeked in a car that contained the skeletal remains of four people. He looked above the tops of the vehicles. “Just like I thought. A med station.”

“Where?” Ellen stood on tip toes, still unable to see what Frank did. She moved a little further and Ellen finally saw it. The med station. Army trucks made a wall, dead soldiers still holding their posts. Just beyond it, the tops of tents could be seen, cots sprawled out everywhere. And the victims that never acquired a bed, sprawled out on the roadway as if a new blanket of grass. The med station covered the road and extended into the parking lot of the K-Mart Department store.

It was hard to walk, so many things, people blocked their way. Frank had a harder time than Ellen, she was more agile. Of course Frank really didn’t care if he stepped on anyone. And he did. It was hard to avoid. The bones crunched and crumbled into dust as his heavy boot set down on it.

“Oh man, Frank.” Ellen commented as she stepped around. “How pitiful.”

“What is El, all these people?”

“No.” Ellen took a moment to giggle. “All these people dying in a K-Mart parking lot. It must say a lot about their care. Was the K-mart parking lot the generic section of medical attention?”

“El, it’s not funny.”

“Yes it is. Can you hear it?” Ellen cupped her hand over her mouth. “Attention K-mart Plague victims. Now in housewares we have a flashing blue light special on Morphine . . .”

“El!” Frank really wanted to tell her have a little compassion. “Listen, don’t expect there to be a lot of stuff in this store. The fronts all busted. It probably was looted by survivors already.”

“What I want to get, the survivors didn’t take.” Ellen ran past Frank. “I’m getting what we don’t have in Beginnings.” After carefully stepping over the broken glass, she darted into the department store, without waiting on her husband.

Frank followed right in after her, but she was long gone from his view. “El!” He called out. “El where are you?” After hearing her faint voice, he followed it to the back.

“Oh, this is so great. Look, Frank. Underwear in plastic bags.” She held up three of them speaking with child-like enthusiasm. “And a bra. Oh this is great.” She shoved it in the knapsack she apparently snatched from a nearby rack. “Real underwear too, Frank.”

Frank stared down at his watch. “I’m timing this.” As his eyes raised he caught glimpse of the redness of it. The dusty, yet shiny little red out fit. “Hey, El. What about this little number.” He raised one eyebrow as he showed it to her.

“Put it down Frank. I am not wasting room in my bag for a red ‘G’ string.”

Frank shrugged, then went to put it back down. He stopped, saw she wasn’t looking, then shoved it in his own duffle bag. She’d appreciate it later.

“Oh, Frank check this out!” Ellen called out excited from another section of the store.

“What is she doing, running? . . . EL, there isn’t much stuff left, what are you finding?”

“Lipstick.” She jumped out in front of him. “What do you think?” She smacked her lips together. “I’m just going to take some. A whole bunch. I got this for Andrea. What do you think?”

“I think you have eight minutes left.”

“Oh, I haven’t been here that long. Liar. Jenny Matoose is going to eat her heart out when I come back with lipstick. Ha! And I’m just gonna . . . shampoo!” She saw the health and beauty aides. “Frank, it’s been so long since I had real shampoo.” Ellen stood before the shelf of dusty shampoo bottles. She smiled in awe at them. “Look at them Frank.” She snatched up a bottle and proceed to the next aisle. “Real dental floss. Real.” She tossed one in her sack, then reached for another. “I’m getting one for Dean, he’s so fussy about his teeth.”

“Don’t be getting Dean a souvenir.” Frank reached in her bag to take it out.

“Hey!” Ellen smacked his hand. “My shopping trip . . . my trip.” She smacked his hand again. “Back off. I’m carrying this bag, I can stick in it what I want.”

“Then unless you want to wear those big clothes again, I suggest you throw something in that bag to wear. I’m not stopping again.”

“O.K.” Ellen didn’t even care that he spoke with attitude. It didn’t phase her one bit. Though the store was dirty, half torn apart and dismal, it was still a place that she hadn’t seen in so long. She appreciated every minute. It was part of her old world that she missed. The part that allowed her to go and get what she needed without having to have it issued to her. Without having to have it rationed. Ellen ran madly through the store, grabbing things, little things for all of the originals. But most of all she filled her sack with stuff for herself. She forgot about everything, all her fears, her worries, in that brief fifteen minutes in the store. Ellen was in her glory.

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The progress in the hanger was encouraging. Things were looking better, Henry told Joe, and it wouldn’t be long. But still, the news that in less than twenty-four hours they would be out searching for Frank and Ellen, did not make Joe feel better.

He sat in Ellen’s small office, sitting in her chair, running his hands over the smoothness of her desk. Containment was quiet, almost too quiet. All the survivors felt for Ellen, fearful of what she would run into out there. Joe stared at the badly drawn pictures Ellen had hanging on the wall. Most of them from Alexandra and Billy, one was drawn by Frank on behalf of Brian. Her desktop was neat. Joe chuckled as he looked what Ellen tried to hide underneath her pencil holder. Etched in the wooden desktop was a heart, inside of it, Frank loves Ellen. Only his son would do something so juvenile, and ruin a good piece of furniture in the process. What Joe wouldn’t give at that moment to bitch at Frank for carving up Ellen’s desk. And at Ellen for letting him do it. What Joe wouldn’t give at that moment to have his family together.

Trying to remain strong was a tedious task for Joe. When it came to his kids, no matter how old, Joe worried. No matter how confident Joe felt in Frank’s ability to keep him and Ellen safe, there was still that chance that something could go wrong. That something could happen in the wasted time Beginnings spent repairing engines that should have never been torn apart had he’d not given the visitors cart blanc.

“Joseph?” Andrea called softly as she walked into the office. She saw Joe staring out, his face covered by his hands. She felt his sadness the moment she moved closer to the room. “Need a friend right now? I know I can use one.”

“I am sorry, Andrea.” Joe turned himself to face her as she stood above him. “I’m sorry Miguel didn’t come back with us.”

“I expected that.” Andrea reached her hand down, running it across the side of his face. “We knew before you, that there was trouble. As soon as we got Ellen’s distress signal, I knew that my husband, no matter what, would ensure Ellen got out of there with Frank. Even if it meant him staying behind. And that’s probably exactly what happened.”

Joe grabbed her hand. “We’ll try our best to bring him home.”

“I know you will. I’m hoping for the best, and expecting the worst.”

“I know that rationing.” He gripped tighter. “I’m having a hard time here Andrea. A real hard time. I sent her out there.” Joe closed his eyes. “I willingly let her go. My spy.” Joe gave a short exhale as he opened his eyes to a caring Andrea. “Now, she’s out there. Her and Frank are running from crazed militants. I pray to God Frank brings her back safe. But, if something happens to her I’ll never, never forgive myself. What kind of father sends his kid into a potentially dangerous situation?”

“You’re a great father, Joe Slagel. You didn’t know it was dangerous, I certainly didn’t suspect it.” Andrea rubbed her hands gently over his. “It’s going to be fine, it really is.”

“Thank you.” He stood up, lifting Andrea to her feet, tightly he embraced her, his friend. “I just want them home right now.”

“You’ll get them here.” She kissed his cheek. “You’ll get them *all* here.”

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“El, are you done playing yet? It’s getting late. We have to get some sleep.” Frank sat on a rock, his rifle between his legs, watching Ellen.

“Right Frank.” Ellen looked to the sky. “It’s not even dark yet.” A single sleeping bag was opened all the way--their camping equivalent to a double bed--Ellen, sat upon it. The entire contents of her K-Mart knapsack flowered before her. She sat Indian style center of it. She wore a pair of her new underwear complete with the price tag still sticking out. “Look how great my stuff is. I can’t wait to wear my new bra.”

“Speaking of which. How is your breast? You haven’t let me see if it’s getting better.”

“And I won’t. It’s healing, badly, but healing.”

“What do you mean, you won’t.” Frank up and walked over to her.

“Frank your stepping on my stuff. Move your feet.” Ellen sighed and began to move the contents back in her bag. “I can see I can’t do this when your around.”

“Why are you changing the subject.” Frank knelt down. “Is the wound infected?”

“No.” Ellen closed her knapsack. “It’s healing.”

“I’d feel better if you just let me take a look.” He reached for her shirt, fearful that she was hiding something. It dawned on him she said hadn’t taken off her shirt in front of him since the first night after he rescued her. His hand touched the bottom of her clothing.

“Frank don’t!” She snapped and removed his hand. “Don’t.” She stood up and carried her knapsack with her, she set it with the other packed gear.

“El, this isn’t like you. Are you going to hide your body from me? Your husband. How long? Till it heals? Till it looks right?”

“It’ll never look right. I’m not just hiding it from you. I’m hiding it from me. It turns my stomach to see it.” Ellen closed her eyes and took in a silent moment. “Can we change the subject?”

“Yes we can. What do you want to change it too?”

“My stuff. Let me show you the great souvenir I got Jenny Matoose.” Ellen scooted quickly to the knapsack and pulled out a book, tossing it to Frank.

“This is really nice . . .” Frank flipped it over and looked at it. “You can’t give her this. It’s mean.”

“Oh, look at you being Mr. Sensitive.” Ellen took it back. “Like you care.”

“El, John is my friend. My wife can’t go running around insulting his wife by giving her a book called, *Ten steps to losing that Baby weight.*”

“I’m not insulting her, I’m deeply concerned about her. Perhaps I should just write my own diet book. I’ll call it, *Torture*, the ultimate diet.”

“It’s not funny.”

“No, it’s not. But this book is. And . . . once again, my shopping trip. I think I’ll bask in the old world feel of it.” Dramatically sighing, Ellen returned to her knapsack and dumped out the contents. She shook her head at the red ‘G’ string.

Frank gave up. He went back to sitting on the rock. “El, if you’re gonna make me watch you do this. Can you at least lose the price tag.” He watched her rip it off and toss it. “Thank you.”

^^^

The pitiful evening meal that George consumed made his stomach gnaw. It made him wish for the food that he’d come to take advantage of in Beginnings. It made him want, even so much more, to just go home. It would be so easy, leaving the installation, go home, say that he’d escaped, take out Joe and proceed from there. But he just couldn’t. The project was getting a struggle it didn’t expect.

George never thought *that* would happen. He always figured that once the top minds awoke that the plan would proceed smoothly. But as the years wore on, and George waited for the plague’s cure, he watched Joe gain more and more control over the routine of Beginnings. He watched the people grow to trust and place their every faith in whatever he chose to do as if he were some sort of God. Had George even slightly perceived it going in that direction, he himself would have bid for the leadership role in the

community. It was too late. No one in Beginnings even looked to George as a leader as they did Joe. But George knew they would soon, they'd have to. Someone, someone they trusted would have to step in and take control once Joe took a fall. That someone would be he.

With the probability of the choppers being able to fly, fast approaching, George had to move his plan in a quicker motion. The entire new brigade of forty men would go fifty miles past Denver to Greeley as planned. They would leave at first light, driving straight there. Once in Greeley, they would fan back towards Colorado Springs. There was no way that Frank and Ellen had made it to Greeley. And the possibility of catching them was great. He hoped the new troop and the one already out there would somehow merge in their search going north and south. Finding in between them, Frank and Ellen.

His orders were simple enough. Find Frank and Ellen, waste no time on anyone else. Ensure themselves that they had the correct couple. Take Ellen, bring her back. And when, and only when they had Ellen safely from Frank's way. Take Frank out.

George knew as he made it back to his office that evening, that his plan was not fool proof. George knew who he was dealing with. It was a race against time, a race against the Beginnings' choppers. And even though Frank was only one man, he was going to give one hell of a fight to anyone, no matter how many, that tried to take Ellen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

August 19

Like an expectant father awaiting the impending birth of his child, Joe stood outside that hanger doorway. The hours since Joe's early morning progress check had slipped by so quickly, that without hesitation, it suddenly was approaching late morning.

Every time he stopped by the hanger, Joe was told the same thing. 'Soon, we're close.'

Then, it was if the powers that be, reached inside of Joe and pulled out from him all of his tension. Joe's body nearly dropped in relief when from inside the hanger the sound of fluttering engines were heard. The full blow gunning engines were almost muffled by the loud cheers that followed.

"Pap!" Johnny flung open the hanger door. "They're ready." A huge grin fell upon his face.

"Yes." Joe clapped his hands. "Load 'em John and get 'em out."

"You got it, Pap!"

^^^^

With a deep swallow and a heavily embedded vision of his grandson walking tall, toward the helicopter, Joe stood on the landing pad watching the two choppers lift slowly from the ground. A sense of pride bestowed him, pride in his community, pride in his family. The wind from the propellers tossed dirt about violently into his eyes that he desperately tried to shield as he stood there. With every foot that they raised to the clear blue sky above, Joe prayed. He prayed to God with his soul and with his heavy heart, that the mission he observed happening, would be a successful one.

Slowly the helicopters faded from his eyesight. And soon the sound of the choppers that began to soften in distance, would disappear completely leaving a strong silence. Leaving Joe to wait until that moment, the moment he prayed for, when he'd hear his grandson's voice over the radio saying 'Pap, we got 'em. We're on our way.'

^^^^

Though they had a lifetimes worth of moments, the one that had just transpired between her and Frank would forever stay with her, perhaps as one of her favorites. Ellen thought about that moment as she sat on the rocky beach not ten feet from Frank, watching him dress so close to the water's edge. A cooling shade came from the trees that over powered in height and thickness, just behind her. The lake, so big, so blue, was their afternoon stop. The August sun had beat them down, the heat was almost intolerable.

The lake was warm, yet it cooled them, refreshed them for the aching journey and long hot walk they had before them. Ellen could honestly tell herself, she loved what they just experienced. The feeling of freedom, alone in the wide openness. A non-sexual, intimate moment that was filled with an innocence her and Frank had never shared. The lake experience was time that--as long as they couldn't leave the sanctity of Beginnings--she'd have to etch in her mind. It saddened Ellen that it took such a life's tragedy for her to finally appreciate the beauty of something that always had been available to her before the plague. A moment in the sun, in a world she somehow forgot existed.

Frank looked tired as she watched him finish dressing. Strapping his shoulder harness tightly to him, checking his revolver, looking like he was going off to battle. Frank knew she was watching him dress, and he basked in that. Doing those little Frank poses that made her laugh. But all good things had to come to an end. Ellen knew that when she saw Frank moved to gather up their stuff. She stood to her feet, her entire body felt stiff.

Frank stared at the gear, and to the K-Mart knapsack that now sat with the stuff he had to carry. He

shook his head, figuring he'd be nice and at least hand it to her. Just as he began to grasp their belongings, his heart sank and his fingers released them in fear, when he heard Ellen shriek. The split second it took for him to turn around, seemed like a lifetime. And his ultimate fear had happened when he took in the vision before him, and Ellen was gone. "EL!"

"Frank, help!" Her cries came from the distance, echoing through the trees.

"Oh God!" Reaching for his revolver, he charged forth to the woods. "Keep calling . . ." On his fourth step forward it hit him. He saw the brownness of it striking down, and he felt the burning stinging crack of it to his face. Frank's head jerked back, it took all that he had to keep his balance and his focus. The pain was strong, the blood that poured in his eyes did not block the vision of the soldier holding the log in front of him. Another attempt for his revolver again went futile when he saw the soldier swing again. Frank reached out his hand stopping it, grabbing it. With his strength in his favor, Frank snatched the log from the soldier's grip, reared it back and pummeled it into the target face. The blood from his breaking nose sprayed forth to Frank.

He knew he didn't have time to waste. He could still hear Ellen screaming. Another step brought an accosting from behind. An arm, tightly choke holding around his neck. Frank, still trying to run, gripped the body that the arm belonged to, flipped him over his shoulder, clasped his hair, grabbed the knife that he had strapped to his thigh and quickly slit his assailant's throat.

Returning his knife, he rushed forward, over the body, to the trees, emotional to Ellen's cries. Frank readied his weapon tightly in his hand, and barely slowed down when two more soldiers, aiming at him appeared. Frank clicked back, fired once, then twice, taking them out. And in a backwards run, just to be safe, he fired a third time at his very first assailant who laid bleeding and motionless on the ground. "Ellen!" He called out his loudest, his heart beating strong.

"Frank, help me. Help me!" Ellen sounded so far.

"Keeping calling me! Keep calling me!" Frank followed her voice.

"Frank!" Ellen could hear him too, as they dragged her, knees running across the rough brush, through the woods. "Frank!"

Then suddenly she heard a crack, one soldier suddenly released her, she used it to her advantage, and took off running. What happened she didn't know. She just ran. "Frank!" Before she could cry out again, a hand grabbed her mouth and pulled her off into the other direction, bringing her down to the ground.

"Shh!" Oscar held his finger to her lips. "Hi-hide."

Ellen's lips quivered in bewilderment and her head shook as she held herself by her hands and knees. "What?" She spoke softly as Oscar knocked her to the ground, covering her with himself as the soldiers ran past them. The Oscar grabbed her hand and ran the other way with her.

"ELLEN!" The dead silence of the woods frightened Frank like nothing had ever done before. Frank breathed heavier, trying so hard to hear something. Anything. He had lost her call, and lost the direction she was in. With bent knees he brought his hands to his head, screaming out with his every emotion from the depths of his soul. "Oh, God answer me! Ellen!" As he started to move again, he heard the footsteps. They grew louder, and louder and headed in his direction. He could see the branches move about, and darting figures rustling the leaves. Wiping the blood from his eyes to see clearer, he held up his gun pointing. With a long breath, his trigger finger relaxed. Ellen barreled from the trees. Leaping right behind her, Oscar.

"Frank. They're coming." She charged to him, and he quickly shoved her behind his back.

Frank wiped his eyes again and aimed at the four soldiers who ran after them. It took only four shoots and it was over. He waited to see if he saw any more, and he let his arm drop in relief. Frank could hear his heart beating in his ears as he turned around to Ellen. "I thought I lost you." He placed his hands, still holding the gun, to her face and kissed her. "I'm so sorry." He embraced her.

"It's not your fault." She had never felt him shake, but Frank trembled as he held her. "It's all right Frank, I'm fine. I'm fine." For him, Ellen wanted to seem so unaffected.

Releasing her slightly from his firm embrace, Frank swallowed and stared at her, assuring himself she was all right. "We have to get our stuff and go." He grabbed her hand and led her.

“Frank, it’s unreal. Os-Oscar got me away from them. I don’t . . .”

“Thanks.” Frank lifted his chin to Oscar. Still pulling Ellen to the beach, Frank didn’t say another word. When they reached their gear, he began to pick it up. “We have to move, there may be more.”

“Frank, stop.” Ellen grabbed his hand. “You’re bleeding really bad. Let me close that.”

“Fine.” Frank dropped the gear and sat down. He needed a moment anyhow to catch his bearings. “I’m glad your all right.”

“Thanks to you and Os-Oscar.” She opened the duffle bag for the medical supplies. She pulled out a cloth from the pouch and showed it to Oscar. “Could you wet this for me?”

“Sure-sure.” Oscar took it and ran to the lake.

“Oh, Frank.” Ellen looked at the depth of his gash next to his eye. “This is bad. I’ll clean this and put a topical on it.”

“Just stitch it El. No topical. We have to move.”

“O.K.” Ellen shrugged and pulled out the sutures. She saw Oscar rush back and hand her the cloth. “Thanks.” She wiped the blood from Frank. “I’m still in shock. I don’t know where Os-Oscar came from.”

“He’s been following us since Bob’s Good’s.” Frank shifted his eyes to Oscar. “Good job back there, pal.” Frank held a thumbs up. “I owe you.”

“You knew?” Ellen started to stitch. “When?”

“El, Please. I knew all along. He was following us.”

Oscar edged his way in. “Frank gave-gave me a j-j, a job.”

“He did, did he. Frank?” Ellen asked.

Frank shrugged. “I told him to hold up the rear. I fed him. He just had to keep his distance. Man, I thought for sure you saw him in K-Mart.”

“Wait a second. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because, you’d want him to hang with us El. And you know how I feel about survivors and . . . OW!” He felt her tug on the stitches--hard.

“All done.” She glared at him. “You are so mean.”

“Me?” Frank grunted and touched his throbbing injury. “You fuckin killed me with those stitches. And . . .” He pointed as he walked to the gear. “You got that diet book for Jenny Matoose, don’t talk to me about mean.” He complained, picked up the stuff and headed toward the woods. “Let’s go!”

Oscar moved with Ellen. “J-Jenny?”

“Matoose, yes. You’ll love her. She’s gonna be your new girlfriend in Beginnings.” She saw Frank hit the edge of the woods. “Frank! Wait.” Legs injured, Ellen sped to catch up.

^^^

The woods always seemed before to hold a sense of safe-haven for Frank and Ellen whenever they trudged through them. They didn’t really have a choice. It was either walking through the woods, trying to stay hidden within the towering trees, or walk the open field that lay parallel fifty yards away.

Frank stayed armed through the journey. He walked forwards, backwards, taking in everything his peripheral vision inhibited. His eye was feeling better as they moved on. He tried not to let the occasional conversation between Ellen and Oscar bother him. He did however, have to remind them to keep it below a whisper.

“B-blood.” Oscar pointed to Ellen. “Does-does, it hurt?”

“It’s getting there. I’m trying to ignore it.”

Frank glanced at Ellen’s legs. All the brush burns, and cuts from the rocks and branches began to bleed from her movement. Her legs from the knees down were covered in her seeping blood. He felt like a heel for not even noticing it sooner. “Did they drag you?”

“Did you think I’d go freely.”

“We’re gonna have to stop and clean you up before they get infected.”

“They’ll be fine. They’ll hurt like hell tomorrow. Os-Oscar did you ever . . .”

“Shh . . .” Frank needed complete silence. “Listen.” Faint in the distance he heard it, the flutter of helicopters and growing louder. With a smile he turned to Ellen. “Beginnings.”

“Are you sure? Maybe it’s the other side?” She watched him reach into the ammo bag.

“No, if they had chopper they would have used them sooner. I have to signal them or they’ll never find us. As soon as this goes up we make a run for it to the clearing.” Frank aimed the flare gun up and east toward the open area just beyond the woods. Knowing, along with Beginnings, he may have been alerting the other side as well, he fired. The bang and whistle meant the signal was sent.

Cowering, with her ears covered from the noise, she felt Frank’s tug to move. Raising up, and feeling as if in slow motion, she caught the horror of what appeared to be a wall of soldiers racing toward them, weapons high. “Frank!”

Frank running, looked back at her, as his eyes caught what she had seen. “Run!”

They raced, the three of them, as fast as they could. Leaping fallen trees, mazing though the branches to the brightness of the open field. Frank held tightly to Ellen’s arm, pulling her every step of the way. She kept up well. As they neared the edge of the forest the bright sun, the unshaded, unprotected area was their guiding light.

They were vulnerable and they knew it as they darted into the field with the high waving grass. Grass burnt brown from the sun, weeded grass standing tall, blanketed the hillside they now so diligently chartered. The grass whipped at them, stung them as they ran through it, inhibiting them to reach their full speed.

Their followers drew nearer.

“Frank, there’s so many.” Ellen cried out as they ran.

“Don’t look back just run.” Frank tugged her harder. “Oscar drop the rolls.” Frank not letting go of his ammo bag, dropped everything else, and so did Oscar.

The soldiers George had sent grew closer, they were joined by another squad that George had not given direct orders to. This other squad . . . proceeded to fire.

The cracking of the guns far away coming at Ellen, Frank and Oscar raised their adrenaline. Yet they couldn’t move any faster through nature’s foliage. The noise level in the field raised--firing guns, the rustling of dried grass, heavy breathing, and helicopter engines.

Nearing the top, a fierce wind caught them whipping dust and leaves at them. And slowly, emerging up from over the crest of a further hill, seemingly from the horizon, came Beginnings. They rose up loudly and with rapid machine gun fire.

Johnny veered the helicopter sideways to the right. “John, more militants following them to the left.”

“Got em in my view.” John Matoose answered. “You lead Frank off in your direction, we’ll hold steady and fire.” John gunned from his seat as Greg, perched through the open side door of the helicopter fired away picking them off, mutilating his targets with each fierce bullet.

Johnny hovered his chopper off fifty yards from Frank and Ellen. He and Dan noticed they were spotted. “You see ‘em?”

“They’re coming.” Dan shouted through his occasional gun fire. He aimed off to the left to the soldiers that raced toward Frank and Ellen and the third he didn’t recognize.

From his pilot seat Johnny saw his father and Ellen. Ellen dragged behind. “Come on.” He beckoned, controlling the chopper the best he could in the ready to take off mode it sat in.

“El.” Frank, knowing she was wearing down, ran back, scooped up Ellen and raced to the chopper with her. As he hit the open doors, he very proudly smiled when he saw his son. “Johnny!”

“Dad, come on.”

Frank lifted Ellen inside, then turned back. Where was Oscar? He saw him hopping through the grass trying to run to the safety of the helicopter. “Oscar, hurry!”

Oscar lifted his hand, his mouth yelled something back but he couldn’t be heard through the loud cross fire of Beginnings and the soldiers. Then Oscar fell.

“Frank!” Ellen panicked. “He’s been hit.”

“Dad come on!” Johnny yelled. “They’re coming.”

Frank looked at Johnny and Ellen then at Oscar.

“Dad now!”

With slamming hands on the floor of the helicopter, Frank tossed in his ammo pack, turned around and charged like a bull out to the field for Oscar. He spotted him, holding his leg. Throwing the small thin man over his shoulder, Frank raced back to the chopper, realizing every step he ran, that mere yards from him, the soldiers came. “Lift her John.” Frank tossed Oscar in, then climbed in the raising bird.

Ellen scurried near Oscar, whose leg was bleeding.

Frank dropped to his knees next to Dan. He perched his rifle across his lap as he reached in his ammo bag. “Ellen stay back, we’re still not out of safety range.” He loaded his rifle and looked below. “Fuck. Where’d they come all from?” Frank raised up near the open side door to shoot.

Johnny adjusted his headset microphone. “I’m lifting to . . .” A shattering of glass, the sound of a ricocheting bullet, and Johnny grunted loudly--he was hit. The moment of the bullet’s impact to Johnny’s arm, sent his hands off the controls and the chopper turned sharply on its side.

With the sudden turn, Ellen flipped from the leg of Oscar that she cared for, rolled across the floor of the helicopter and straight out the open side door. Hundreds of feet from the ground, she felt her body leave the safety of the helicopter and knew it was over. Her fall came to a stop, seconds as she slipped over the edge when a hand reached forth down locking tight to her forearm. Feet dangling in the air below her, her K-mart knapsack hung around her neck, she looked up to her saving grace . . .Frank. She brought her hands up and held on to his strong grip--he wasn’t letting go.

Frank lifted her inside, pulling her safely in.

In shock and speaking quickly, Ellen grabbed a hold of Frank. “Oh-my-God. Oh-my-God.”

“You’re all right.” Frank took a deep breath. “You’re gonna make me have a heart attack yet, before I get you home aren’t you.” Kissing her quickly, he moved her back to the rear then he returned to the side door. Helicopter in control, Johnny all right, Frank raised his rifle. He watched through his scope as he fired, the soldiers who waged war with diligence, fall to the ground and disappear into the grass.

Johnny, after getting word from John Matoose that he’d finish off the few remaining, turned the bird and headed home.

Frank watched the land that he and Ellen had roamed for days grew distant below him. Setting down his rifle he went to the back of the helicopter where Ellen still remained the same. “Hey.” He spoke softly as he sat next to her. “We’re going home.” He smiled when she only scurried to him, huddling against him. “Whoa. A frightened Ellen?”

Ellen took a deep breath. She started to calm down. “I thought I was dead.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“I’ll say it again. You amaze me. I’ll never forget what you just did.” She lifted her head to look at him. “Frank Slagel you defy the meaning of the word hero.”

Frank laughed loudly in embarrassment. “El.” He shook his head and pulled her to him. “You’re just emotional right now. Trust me, as soon as we’re home, you’ll hate me again.” Ellen tight against him, Frank relaxed back against the wall of the chopper. Relaxing was something he could do. They’d be in Beginnings before long and he’d know for sure they were really safe . . . they would be home.

^^^

Everyone in Beginnings waited with baited breath on the return of the two helicopters. Joe’s orders were for everyone to hang tight until they safely landed. A huge welcome greeting at the landing pad was not what Joe wanted, if on the outside chance something was not right when they returned.

Joe waded in his office through hours of pestering ‘anything yet’s’ and knocks to see if he needed company.

Dean was the worst of them all. Joe counted twelve times he had been to the office. Not only did Joe keep throwing him out, he also gave Dean strict orders to stay away from the pad until Ellen was in her home. It was a tough order to give, but a realistic one. Dean wanted Ellen home as much as Joe. And if Dean stood there, while the helicopters landed, what would happen if Ellen failed to step from the chopper. And painful enough as it was to Joe to think about, it was a reality he *had* to think about.

The frequency was breaking up from a storm that was nearing when the radio call came. It was almost like Joe was in a dream, and that he had dozed off and dreamt Johnny sounding so bad. But Johnny *did* sound bad.

Joe waited on the landing pad, three cigarettes had burned themselves into his lungs. Waiting on the arrival that would hopefully bring his family to safety.

It was after the fourth cigarette--flicked from his fingers and onto the ground, smashed to bits with his shoe--that he saw it. The two small black dots in the grey overcast sky. Tiny objects, that would be unrecognizable if not for the sound they carried. Larger and larger into his focus they drew. Returning home, and lowering themselves to the landing field. The gust of wind that cycloned around Joe went unnoticed as he waited impatiently for them to touch down and shut down.

Be there, please be there. Joe begged in his thoughts, though the loud pressure the wind from the helicopter shot in his ear. *Please, dear God, let them be there.* Joe's heart skipped a beat when he watched John Matoose step from his pilot's door, smile and give a thumbs up.

From the second chopper, Dan emerged first. He lowered a stranger and tossed him over his shoulder. *Who?* Joe wondered, then he saw Frank. Frank jumped out, waved to his father then reached his hand into the helicopter, helping out Ellen. Pride. An immediate sense of pride and joy filled Joe when he saw Ellen's feet touch down. Joe raced to her wanting to grab her, hold her, know for sure when he felt her in his arms, that she was fine. Before he even made it a third of a way there, Ellen charged for him running and moving faster than he'd ever seen. *She* threw herself in his arms. *She* beat him to the punch.

Joe swung her back and forth, lifting her from the ground. "Thank God you're home."

Ellen didn't speak, she just held on.

"Honey let me see you." Joe set her down, he cupped her face in his hands. He viewed her pain, her injuries. How different she looked, how worn. "What did they do to you?" Seeing her, broke his heart.

Ellen shook her head. "I'm all right. I'm all right now. I'm home."

"That you are." Joe pulled her into him again and smiled at his son who walked to him.

"Dad, we made it." Frank looked at his watch. "And all before dinner."

"Son of a bitch." Joe released Ellen and grabbed his son. "You did it. You were stuck out there and you brought her home."

"You doubted me?" Frank smiled, then felt the smack of his father's lips on his. "Uh!"

"Frank Slagel, you make me proud." Joe gave a slap to Frank's cheek. "Goddamn it you make me proud of you." He laid his hands on both of their backs and walked across the landing field with them. "I have a jeep for you. You, little lady should get home. And after you cleaned up you have some kids that want to see you."

"I don't look that bad do I?" She asked to Joe.

"A little, but that's not it." Joe whispered in her ear. "You have that survivor smell."

Ellen freaked. "No. No I don't, please don't tell me that."

Joe only raised his eyebrows. He could tell her he was joking, but he decided against it. He enjoyed the panic on her face. Joe enjoyed the moment. They were home. And Beginnings could take a little time to forget in the excitement of their return, and in the celebration event Andrea planned. But the next day they would have to remember the cold reality. Ellen and Frank's return did not signify the end to a bad situation. It signified the beginning to something even more challenging and hurdling . . . the battle they had to face.

DO UNTO OTHERS

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The couch in Frank and Ellen's house always seemed so hard to her. But Ellen sat upon it, it felt soothing. Just like the warm shower she had taken. She sat against the arm, legs bent up, Brian cuddled close to her, while she slowly devoured an orange. The house was so quiet. The twins were in their room playing. They seemed somewhat happy to see her, but then they ran with enthusiasm to Frank. She would have let that bother her, but she figured they'd really get to know him one day and he would eventually sink to the bottom of their favorite person list. Ellen heard the thumping of Frank's footsteps as he came down the stairs, quickly she grabbed a blanket, brought it up to her chest, covering the baby completely.

"O.K. El, times up. Hand over the baby." He snapped his fingers and held out his hand.

"I don't have the baby."

"El. You've had him long enough." He pulled the blanket off of her, exposing Brian.

"I had him while you were in the shower. Come on Frank." She struggled with her husband over the sleeping infant, but lost. "He's the only one who's glad to see me."

"That's because he's sleeping." Frank cuddled him close to his chest. "Way to go El, you bored the kid to sleep . . . Hey Brian get up."

"Baby hog." Ellen moaned as she stood from the couch. "I have to wash my hands." She moved a little to the kitchen and stopped. "I want to yell at you, but I won't. I wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't been with me."

"Oh El, stop with the mushy complements. It's not like you. You're scaring me. Insult me . . ." He looked to the knock on his door. ". . . please. I'll get that. Turtle your way to the kitchen to wash your hands." Frank adjust the baby and walked to the front door. "Let's see . . . Hey, Dean."

"Frank." Dean placed his hands in his pockets. "Can I come in?" When the door opened wider, Dean stepped inside. "Johnny's doing well. We got the bullet. Sorry I didn't bring the kids myself, but duty calls."

"That's all right." Frank shut the door. "I'm glad you're here."

"Glad? Glad *I'm* here?"

"Well . . . glad someone's here. Ellen's being weird. Excuse me." He walked to the kitchen. "Hey El, I'm taking off, my Dad needs to see me. I'll be back before Andrea's dinner. Brian's coming with me." Frank left the kitchen doorway.

"You can't take the baby, Frank." She followed him. "I need . . ." Ellen paused when she saw Dean. "It's about time you came to see me."

Dean lowered his head and raised his eyes.

Ellen hobbled past Dean. "Frank, I can't believe your leaving. We just got back."

"El." Frank stopped reaching for the door knob, a few more steps and he would have gotten away. "I just spent four solid days straight with you. Straight. I love you with my whole heart, but . . . please El, please, let me have just a brief break. Uh . . . uh . . . Dean will keep you company. Yeah." Frank smiled and darted out.

Ellen turned from the just slammed door to Dean who kept his distance. "You're not happy to see me are you? I knew it. No one is. Not my kids, no one. No one has even stopped by to say hi."

"Oh, I'm very happy to see you."

"Then why are you . . . I smell don't I?" Ellen lifted her shirt and sniffed. "I took a shower and used lots of soap. I smell like a survivor."

"You don't smell, Ellen. At least I don't think you do." He leaned into her and whiffed. "No, you smell like you."

"Then why are you acting like a stranger to me?"

"Because if I showed you how happy I am to see you. I probably would knock you over." He reached his hand out to her. "I missed you." He touched her cheek.

"Thanks for the warm welcome."

With a shy smile Dean stepped closer and did what he had waited to do, he took Ellen into his arms and held her. "I am so glad you are back. I was so worried. No . . ." He took a deep breath and broke the embrace. "Worried is an understatement. I was nuts." He ran his hand through his hair. "No one bitched at me or drove me crazy. Joe tried, but it just didn't have the same effect."

Ellen laughed and grabbed his hand. "Sit with me on the couch. I'm tired of moving."

"I bet." Dean followed her and sat down, he noticed her legs. "What happened?" He touched her injuries. "And to your face too? Was this the outside world or the installation."

"Both. I'll tell you about it another time. Right now . . . how's Johnny and Os-Oscar?"

"Johnny's great. And who is Os . . . Oh, El, don't tell me you're making fun of him because he has a stutter."

"No, that's really his name."

"It is not." Dean smiled and ran his hand over her leg. As his finger tips grazed the top of her thigh, he noticed them. They nearly made him breathless. The bruises on the inside of her thigh, bruises that extended up past the edge of her shorts. The smile fell from his face. "Ellen?"

Ellen shook her head and grabbed his hand. "No. Just . . . just sit with me, talk to me and make me feel normal again. Make me feel . . . at home."

Dean slipped his fingers in between hers and relaxed, he would do just what she asked.

^^^

"Frank!" Joe snapped his finger to his son who sat at his diningroom table with him. Frank kept his attention on Brian. "Are you with me? What do you think?"

"About?" Frank tapped his finger on Brian's folded arms that snuggled close to his chest. "Wake up."

"About the plan! Christ this is a debriefing, I can't believe you brought the baby. Let him sleep."

"I missed him. I needed to see him."

"Don't you think his mother would like to see him also."

Frank fluttered his lips at his father. "We're talking about Ellen."

"Anyhow . . . stay with me on this one. I need you to pull a group together for it. You pick the men, you decide how many we need, and you get them ready."

"We're not attacking with guns right?" Frank lifted Brian's hand. "Wave to Pap . . . basically I need a tactical group to see this plan through. How long until Dean gets the shit ready?"

"He said about a month."

"Plenty of time. I don't think that those soldiers will be up here, but on some outside chance I'll get a few men ready to look out for them. Question. I'm not gonna want to be talking about this tonight at Andrea's dinner. Do we know . . . what is it Brian?" Frank's attention was on his son. "You getting hungry? You starting to fuss?"

"Frank!" Joe rubbed his hand over his face. "Finish what you were saying."

"Oh . . . Do we know the lay-out good enough to know how to infiltrate their air supply?"

"We don't . . . Dean does. He spent two years down there."

"Then I'll speak to him. I'll work tomorrow on who will be in my group. I'll approach them and work with them . . . look at Brian, he's smiling. God, he got big."

Joe knew they were at the end of their strategical conversation, perhaps Frank would be less enthralled with his son by the next day. "Yeah, he's getting big all right. About time. We'll make him into a Slagel yet."

"And what is that supposed to . . . No, no. Don't even go there." Frank pointed. "I know what everyone in this community thinks, since Ellen pulled her sperm search. This is my kid. Not Dean's. Right Brian? You're my son." Frank looked up at his father. "Besides, Dean will probably have his own baby before long, then everyone can shut up."

"Who in the hell is Dean going to get pregnant. All the women are taken. Especially . . ." Joe shut up

and immediately stood from his seat. He walked across the room and grabbed his cigarettes. "Christ Frank, don't tell me you're considering that."

"What am I suppose to do . . . and don't smoke around my kid."

"Oh shut up." Joe lit his cigarette anyhow. "Frank, anyone else I can see doing this, but you?"

"Dad. I don't want her to. But how in the hell do you suppose I stop her if she decides to anyhow. At least if I give the approval she seeks, I can have some control over it." Frank stood up, adjusting a fussy Brian.

"So your mind is made up?"

"Not completely. Like I said I'm beating myself up about it. What do you think?"

Joe stuttered at first, then murmured before giving him his true thoughts. "I think a baby being born is good. We need them. And we have to remember, it's a different world now Frank, people are doing things different now because it's just the way things have to be. It won't be a bad thing if you do."

"Thanks. I mean that. I'm uh, heading home." Frank moved to the door. "I appreciate you letting me talk about this with you."

"Keep in mind, it doesn't have to be such an earth shaking decision. This is a dead world that needs life." Joe followed him and opened the door. "Sometimes you just have to look at the whole picture and not just a certain portion. And the whole picture is . . . going on."

"You're absolutely right. And, if we want to go on in peace. I better get my ass to work on everything tomorrow." Frank stepped back in, kissed his father on the cheek, then stepped back out. "Thanks Dad."

Joe smiled as he watched his son leave. He smiled because it wasn't very often that he got to give his son advice, and his son actually wanted to hear it. Joe closed his front door, and stepped into his living room. He paused, looked back at the door and scratched his head. "Did we actually accomplish anything?"

^^^

Ellen's face was close to Andrea's as they hunched over in the kitchen staring into their reflection on the side of the toaster. "Andrea, what do you think?"

Andrea, smacked her lips together. "Definitely this one." She stood up and lowered the lipstick into the tube. "Is it really for me?"

"Yeah. I picked that shade out for you special. I have more too. I took like twenty-tubes. It got heavy after awhile. I got all the originals and the pseudo originals something."

"Even Jenny?"

"Well, Frank won't let me give her the diet book." Ellen giggled with Andrea. "So I stopped by her house and gave her this really awful shade of pink lipstick. I didn't want it anyhow. I'll pass the rest of my gifts out tomorrow. You got yours because I wanted us to look good tonight." She nodded and stuck her tube in her pocket.

"We do, too." Andrea bent back to the toaster, running her finger on the corner of her mouth to fix it. "Miguel loves lipstick."

"And he'll be home to see it." Ellen rested her hand on Andrea's arched back. "Andrea, I want to tell you something. Your husband watched out for me, he did. You'd be really proud of him. I was. He stayed behind so Frank could get me out. I'll never forget that, ever."

Andrea stared at Ellen, her eyes welling with tears. "I *am* proud of him Ellen. I miss him."

"I do too. He'll be home soon. Our men will get him home."

"Hey!" Frank's abrupt entrance into the kitchen caused both women in their emotional moment to jump. "Are we eating yet? I'm starved . . . Oh, El." He marched over to her, still holding Brian like the baby was a body extension of his. "Quit wearing that shit. It makes your lips look bigger than they are."

"What do you want, Frank?" Ellen snapped at him, tightening her lips so they looked smaller.

"Food. Soon?"

Andrea answered him. "Yes, now go."

"I'm leaving" He kissed Ellen on the cheek, tried to wipe off her lipstick but failed when Ellen ducked.

Ellen rolled her eyes and turned to Andrea. "The nerve. Do they look big?"

"No, he just doesn't want you looking good."

Ellen and Andrea couldn't seem to find a moment to be alone, not ten seconds later, Ellen's favorite person, Jenny came into the kitchen. "Ellen?" Jenny smiled brightly and tucked her red hair behind her ear. "I want to thank you for the gift. I see you're wearing some too. Would that be the right shade for your lip size?"

Ellen folded her arms. "Probably not. But I have to say to you, Jenny, what a lovely shade that pink looks on you. It makes your face look . . . thinner."

Jenny smiled snidely. "John and Frank are comparing babies again. You may want to stop them, you know how upset Frank gets when he sees how much bigger Caroline is."

"Having a big girl isn't always a blessing, you should know that Jenny." Ellen acted pleasant enough.

"Did I tell you Ellen, Caroline is rolling over. Imagine that, already."

"Really? Well Brian's reciting fuckin' Shakespeare.." Ellen grabbed hold of her shorts and drastically pulled at them. "I want to go sit down before I lose my pants. Gosh, if I wasn't skinny enough before I went away." She grinned her colored lips at Jenny and walked around the bend into the diningroom. Still glancing back at Jenny cursing, she walked right into Dean.

"Ellen." Dean caught his balance. "Hey, you're wearing lipstick?"

"Are you gonna tell me my lips are big too?"

"No, I think they look . . . pouty, sexy."

"Thanks, Dean." She kissed him on the cheek leaving a lipstick mark. "Don't go pester Andrea, she has her hands full right now trying to keep Jenny out of the food."

"Actually, I was finding you. Frank left. He handed the baby to Joe and said he needed some air. That alone told me something was up."

"Do you know why?" Ellen asked.

"I think it has something to do with Dan rambling on about how Frank saved you."

"Thanks, Dean. I'll find him. Tell everyone we'll be right back." She kissed him on the cheek leaving another mark--on purpose--then left the house. As she stepped down the single step she saw Frank. He stood in the street. One hand behind his head, the other on his hip. "Frank?"

He jumped. "Oh hey, El."

"What's going on?"

"I needed some air." Frank took a deep breath. "Fresh."

Ellen smiled and neared him, she kept her arms close to her, as she kicked her feet about on the ground. "Not real happy with Dan's story?"

Frank closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "No."

"Why?" She reached her hand to his face. "You should be proud of what you did."

Frank grabbed her hand. "What did I do? I brought you home . . . But look at you." His hand ran from her face to her thigh. "You don't even look the same. What did I save you from? Something I let you walk into? They beat you babe, they nearly raped you. I let soldiers drag you through the woods."

"Frank, just stop." She pulled down his hand. "You have to let this go. I went down there on my own. What happened to me was out of your control. We're home now. Can we just, please, put this behind us?"

"I can't. Because every time I look at you, I'm reminded of it."

"Thanks, Frank. Thanks a lot." Ellen started to walk away.

"No, El." Frank moved to in front of her to stop her. "Stop." He reached for her.

"No, you stop." She pushed his hand away. "I have scars on my body now that will never go away. Are you telling me that for the rest of our lives every time you see them you'll be reminded?"

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It’s not?” Ellen lowered her head. “Well that’s what I’m hearing. I want to forget this.” She brought her hand to her chest and pointed. “I want to let it go. You brought me home. End of it.” Ellen stood silent for a minute. “I won’t let what they did to me, lessen what *you* did for me. And don’t you ever . . .” Ellen closed her eyes with anger. “Ever, view what happened to me as your failure. Don’t. I’m not anyone’s failure. I’m a success story. I’m home alive.” Saying no more, Ellen went back into the party.

Frank’s head lowered. He took a few moments before going back in. He hated the feeling he got when he thought about what happened to Ellen. An unsubduable anger brought on by a situation that was out of his control. He knew he could never take away what happened, just like he knew he could never take away how badly he had just made her feel.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

August 20

With the first buzz attempt, the door didn't open. Ellen kicked the door, buzzed it again and made her entrance into the cryo-lab. "O.K. I'm here!"

Dean looked at his watch, he had a counter full of supplies waiting. "A little late." He reached over and grabbed her hand leading her to his counter of supplies. "I need you to sit down."

Ellen sat and continued rattling on. "First . . ." She didn't notice Dean grabbing her arm and extending it. "I go to containment to see my survivors, you know, say hello. Then I go to put my lunch in the fridge . . ."

Dean wiped the space between her forearm and upper arm clean. Ellen paid no mind.

". . . and what does Greg of all people tell me? He tells me that I'm not eating lunch in containment. He and Henry are working there, I'm to work the clinic.."

Dean looked at Ellen through the tops of her eyes as he adjusted the tourniquet and cleaned her arm again. He waited for her to acknowledge what he was doing---she didn't.

Ellen continued. "So, O.K., I go to the clinic thinking it's some special arrangement. I find Andrea. She tells me, everyday for a while, and that I have to work in the lab with you."

Dean punctured her skin with a needle--still no reaction. He placed in the first tube.

"Then I go to the lab, and who do I see? Jason. Sitting in your spot." She nodded as Dean looked up to her, making eye contact. "I told him I'm supposed to be there with you. And he says that I am supposed to be on a long term project with you . . . but . . . you're now down in the sub levels of hell. The cryo-lab. What a descriptive guy he is." She stopped talking long enough to take a deep breath. "Guess who else I saw this morning. Care to comment on Melissa to me?"

"Oh, shit." Dean beckoned the tube to fill faster releasing her tourniquet.

"Oh shit is right. Either I figured I stepped through one of those imaginary time machines Jason says he invents, Or . . . G.A.F. actually stands for Growth accelerated fetus like the sheets I found in their embryotic lab. Not Genetically altered fetus like *some* people insisted."

"You know?" Dean placed in the third and final tube.

"Yep. I snatched up all kinds of sheets from their lab."

"My first reaction was to abort." Dean shook his head. "We don't know how her body will react. But Melissa wouldn't." Dean laid that final tube to the side and placed a piece of cotton on her injection site. He bended her arm. "We're going to do a 'C' section early."

"Kind of go by the ultrasound and keep your fingers crossed?" Ellen slid from the stool. "I guess every one knows she's not pregnant to Mark now." Ellen took off the cotton and tossed it in the trash. "Oh , I almost forgot." She began to reach in her pocket and hesitated. "Dean? Why did you just take three tubes of blood out of me?"

"I didn't think you noticed." Dean spoke with sarcasm. "It's for our work."

"Anyway I almost forgot . . ."

"Don't you want to know what we're working on? You're here with me for awhile."

"What are we working on?" Ellen sat back down.

"Now don't get upset. I'm sure you know that they were the ones responsible for doing this to the world right? Well, in a taste of their own medicine, we're creating a biological weapon to use on them. They have too many soldiers and it'll be easy to just drop it in their air supply. I'm going to use your blood and mine to create the anti-bodies for it, and as a basis for the weapon."

"So in a sense you and I will definitely be immune should you create a monster?" Ellen asked. "This isn't some sick warped plan you have to eliminate everyone so you can have me all to yourself is it?" She joked. "You aren't going to screw up and we'll have to be trapped in here dying some horrible death, banging on the windows while everyone watches will you?"

"El, this is no joke."

"I'm sorry." She stopped her laughter. "In all seriousness Dean, you doing this is gonna let out your

‘I was a killer in the army’ secret.”

“Seems Joe knew and blackmailed me with it to get me to make the weapon.”

Ellen snickered. “Joe’s so cool. Anyhow . . .” She stood up. “I got something for you. When Frank and I were out, he gave me fifteen minutes in K-Mart. I got everyone something.”

Dean stood also. “What is it?” He smiled.

“It’s not much.” She placed the small white box in his hand and cupped it. “For you.”

Dean slowly opened his hand, his eyes widened and a huge smile fell on him. “Ellen, real dental floss?” He asked excited. “Wow.” Dean opened the cap and closed it. “Wow. This is so great, I’ll use it tonight. I love it. Thank you.” He placed his hand on the side of her face and leaned in to kiss her, he paused before her lips, then moved in slowly, touching his to hers softly. Pulling away slowly. “Thank you.” He clutched the floss.

“Whoa.” Ellen touched her lips. “Nice thank you.”

“It wasn’t just for the floss.” Dean kept flipping the lid. “It’s for never judging me.”

“I’ve judged you. Maybe not as a doctor, but definitely in bed . . .” Ellen lowered her head. “Can I be serious with you?”

“Something’s up.” Dean looked in her eyes. “What is it?”

Ellen walked over and closed and locked the lab doors. She made sure all the blinds were closed. “You have to promise me something. You have to promise me that what I’m going to tell you stays in this room. Promise me. And you have to be Dean the doctor.”

“I promise. Ellen, what’s wrong.”

Ellen walked back to him and lifted herself in the counter. She pulled her tee shirt from her shorts, then lifted it over her head, holding it against her chest. “I need your help. I need you to fix something for me.” With a deep breath, Ellen laid her shirt next to her. She undid the front clasp to her bra and slowly pulled away the cup to expose her left breast. “This.”

Dean swallowed deeply then blinked with a pause. “Oh, Ellen.”

“Dean the doctor remember?”

With a breath, Dean reached his hand out slowly to examine her. “Who did this to you?” His fingers touched the still unhealed wound.

“It’s not important. Can you fix it?”

“You mean plastic surgery?” Dean shook his head as he examined. “I don’t know. I’d have to read. Why don’t you go to Jason or Andrea they may . . .”

“No. I don’t want anyone to know this. I want you to fix this. Please.”

“I could screw it up.”

“How much more can it be screwed up.”

Shaking his head, Dean lifted his eyes. “I don’t feel any hard masses.” He closed her bra and handed her the tee shirt. “It will heal and you may not see that much of it.” Dean stepped back running his hand on his forehead.

“I want as much of it gone as possible. It’s a bad memory I don’t want.”

Dean slowly swung his head to her. “What kind of bad memory Ellen? What happened?”

“Nothing Dean.”

“Nothing?”

Ellen noticed his emotions. “Dean, you’re supposed to be rational. To be a doctor right now.”

“I’m finding it very difficult to do. As your friend it is killing me to see this. As a doctor I see bruises on the inside of your thighs, a bite mark on your breast. These are signs and evidence of a very violent rape. Ellen, my God. I’m not blind, I’m not stupid.”

“I know you’re not.” Ellen stayed on the counter putting on her shirt. “That’s why I think I came to you. I guess I need to let someone know what happened.”

Dean could feel his blood pressure begin to rise, his fears begin to generate. “Ellen, did someone rape you?” Dean moved to her. “Tell me. Did someone rape you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly?” Dean’s heart sunk, he could feel the lump in his throat. “What is, not exactly. Was there penetration?”

Ellen lifted her eyes. “Dean please. Don’t tell anyone.”

“There was.” The blood rushed to his ears, his heart beat faster and he could barely breathe. He ran his hand violently across the top of his head. He laid his hands next to her on the counter. “My God. You should have told someone, what if you got pregnant, what if . . .”

“They didn’t get that far. I got away quickly.”

“They?” Another emotional blow to Dean. His lowered head swayed back and forth. “I’m sorry.” He lifted it. “I’m sorry this happened to you.” He looked into her eyes. “Frank doesn’t know, does he?”

“I can’t tell him. He won’t handle it. There’s no way he can get justice. So he can’t know. I know he’s going to wonder soon why I won’t let him touch me.” She slowly slid from the counter.

“He has the right to know this. He has to know. You can’t keep this inside of you.”

“I’m not, I’m telling you. And I told him I got away.”

“El.” Dean took hold of her arm and stepped closer. “I can’t believe how strong you’re being.”

“Strong?” Her words squeaked out. “Look at me, Dean. Look what they did to me. I’m trying to be strong. That’s what everyone wants right?” She raised her fist as he held on to her arm. “I can’t be.” Her eyes began to well up. “As much as I’m trying. I can’t.” She shook her head trying to hide her emotions from him.

“Ellen, you don’t have to.”

“Tell me it’s all right.”

“It all right.” He pulled her into him and the moment they touched he felt her body let go in an emotional exasperation. His arms held tighter as she buried herself into him, her sobs muffled with in his chest. Her knees buckled, but Dean held her up, bracing her, allowing Ellen--who was always so strong--let go in his arms.

^^^

“You gotta be shitting me!” George blasted causing Joanna to step a foot back. “Beginnings wiped out that many of our men? These are supposed to be our protection. What the hell is wrong with them.”

“What’s wrong with them is they are not ready. You can’t expect them to go into battle and know how to handle themselves. You just can’t.” Joanna defended.

“You should have trained them prior to the freezing.” George scolded.

“We didn’t have the time.”

“Then train them now.”

“We can’t. Our strategist is working the field in Beginnings. The best we can do is send them with the fifty survivors we have for implantation to New Mexico. We have Dr. Gafsky. He was in the military for ten years. I want to send him to New Mexico to train them. He’s the best we have. Aside from you.”

“I can’t go, not on the outside chance they come down here.” George rubbed his eyes. “All right. That’s what we’ll do, but leave twenty here. I’ll work with them. Anything else?”

“We have four women ready for implantation. We’d like to send them also to New Mexico to begin as a trial.”

George waved his hand at her. “Go on. Do what you have to. Just get this goddamn plan going.”

Joanna stared at George before she got up from her chair. She understood why he wanted things to move fast, but she need him to understand why they couldn’t. To do things right takes time. The faster they move, the more the odds stay with Beginnings. That was something she could not tell George. Because that was something he didn’t want to hear.

^^^

It was fortunate for Dean there was nothing deadly flying about the cryo-lab or it would have been

sucked into his open mouth with his gasp.

“Dean.” Frank snapped his finger before him. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Shock.” Dean answered. “Let . . . let me get this straight. Elite group going to Colorado to drop the weapon, fight the soldier, and rescue Miguel and George. Dan, Greg, Cole, Pete, Hodges, you and . . . me?”

“Yeah, now what I . . .”

“Frank.” Dean held up his hand. “I am not even in the same league as far as fighting goes with these guys. I’m not a fighter, I’m a . . .”

“Don’t say lover.” Frank interrupted.

“Scientist.” Dean stated. “I was in the military, yes, but that was years ago. Sorry, I have to pass.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. You’re picked. Now back to what . . .”

“Have you seen the size of you guys. Of course you have.” Dean argued. “You guys all get extra rations. Look at me. I’m small.”

“Exactly.” Frank’s hand slammed on the counter with his heavy word. “Now if you’ll shut up I can explain. God, you’re giving me a headache.”

“You’re doing this to get rid of me, aren’t you. Eliminate me. Kill me off. It’s an excuse. It’s because of the baby isn’t . . .”

“Dean!” Frank snapped. “Shut up! We’ll talk about the baby thing at another time. Right now. I need you to tell me when you can train. We’ll adhere to your schedule. As far as why you’re going. One, most important, you’ll know your weapon. Two, you know that installation better than anyone. And three, you’re the only man in this community, other than Os-Oscar, that is small enough to crawl through a ventilation system. So Dean.” Frank stood up and smacked him on the arm. “You’re in.”

“But I’m needed here, Frank. I’m a doctor.”

“Oh quit making excuses. Jason is here now.” Frank looked down at his watch. “And I want to go prep for my meeting with my dad, so I’ll be in touch.”

Dean rose up to plead one more time but Frank had made his quick departure. Still stunned by the direct, non-rejection invitation Frank just gave him, he sat back down. “He’s gonna kill me out there, I know it.”

^^^

Ellen stared down to the bottom of her shirt. The small stain that was the result of her clumsiness at dinner. The same stain that was worse because she rubbed it and rubbed it. It bothered her as she stood in her bedroom. Probably more than it should have. As she grabbed the edge of her shirt, she paused, wondering if Frank saw her hands shaking at dinner. Did he notice that her trembling caused her fork to fall from her hand? Did he buy her outburst over the shirt as being caused by her lack of clothing? It was something so innocent Frank said at the dinner table. Joking around with the twins, and Josh, saying how they’ll all have the huge wrestling match before Pap got there. Then saying how they wanted to drag Mommy into it. The word ‘drag’ sent her muscles into involuntary release. The blood rushed to her ears, she heard her own scream and then pulling herself from the memory, Ellen found herself a mess.

She wished that she hadn’t said anything to Dean. Before she opened her mouth it was all a bad dream. Talking about it made it a reality. The reality made her feel something she just wanted to punish herself over . . . weakness. And being a Slagel in a Slagel World, Ellen knew weakness was something she just couldn’t show. Especially to Frank.

^^^

Frank handed the ‘Joe clipboard’ that he carried all afternoon with him to his father, then unrolled and smoothed out the map on the dining room table. He used glasses to hold down the edges, and pulled out the red marker that was always saved for special occasion. “Take a look Dad, that’s the plan. What do

you think?"

Joe lifted the sheet, Brian perched against him. "I think that . . . What!?" Joe peered up at his son. "Dean? You chose Dean to go? Dean? Christ Almighty Frank, what are you up to? Are you putting him on this so you can eliminate him? Don't do it Frank, just don't . . ."

"Dad!" Frank banged his fist. "I asked him to go because that is what the plan called for. Read. Just read." Frank pointed his marker. "And don't question my judgement again."

"Don't you take that tone with me, I am your father."

"Sorry." Frank, shaking his head returned to his map. "Well?"

"O.K." Joe set it down. "I see your point. At first I . . ." Joe looked at Frank as he bent over, the ceiling light in the diningroom reflecting on his hair.

Frank felt his hairs being gently moved around. With glaring eyes, he lifted them to his father. "Why are you playing with my hair?"

"I just can't believe that you're getting gray hair. No one in the Slagel family history has ever had any . . ."

"I'm not getting gray hair!" Frank hit his father's hand away, stood straight and ran his fingers through his hair. "And if I'm the first Slagel getting them, then it's only because no other Slagel had to deal with the end of the world shit that I have to."

"I do." Joe leaned his head forward. "Not one gray hair." he snickered at how perturbed Frank was. "All right, show me the route." Stepping forward to the table, he felt the rush of someone darting in the dining area, and felt the touch of lips to his cheek. "Hi Kiddo. How ya feeling."

"Better now." Ellen reached out for the baby. "Let me take Brian." She took Brian. "I'll lay him down before social skills class. Frank, are you going to be all right with all the kids tonight?"

Frank's head swayed over to Ellen as he diligently tried to work. "I'll be fine. Dad and Josh are here to help."

"O.K." Ellen laid the baby down. "Just don't let Josh change his diaper again, he forgot to put a pin in it." She walked back into the dining room. "And . . . I'll finish cleaning up later."

Frank dropped his pen and rubbed his eyes. "El, I'll do it. Don't worry about it." Shaking his head he looked to his father. "Between you and her I'm not going to get this done, am I?"

Ellen looked sharply at him. "Sorry I bothered you. You dropped this." She grabbed his pen and threw it at him. "Asshole."

Frank fumbled with the pen as it rolled down his chest. "What'd I say?" He leaned back over laying his navigator ruler on the map and lifting his pen to the edge of it.

Ellen folded her arms. "It's not *what* you said." She bumped, on purpose her hip into the table. "It's how you said it."

"El!" Frank stood up. "You made me fuck up my nice little line."

"Good. I ask for ten seconds of your time and I get attitude off of you."

"What attitude, I didn't give you attitude." Frank was trying to stay under control. He thought he was, his tone showed he wasn't. "You're the one with the sudden Sybil attitude . . ."

The loud clearing of a throat caught the attention of the three of them. Dean stood in the opening of the dining area. "Sorry to interrupt. Josh was outside, he said to come in." Dean pointed backwards as he stood with one hand in his pocket, his eyes focused on Ellen the whole time. "But I was uh . . . I was wondering if I can steal Ellen before her social skills."

Pen between his hands folded in a praying manner, Frank looked up. "Yes. Please. Take her."

With a gasp from Ellen, she stormed out. Dean followed.

Letting out a heavy attention catching breath, Joe placed on his glasses, and peered across the table to the map, mumbling. "Nothing like passing off your responsibilities."

"Excuse me?" Frank asked.

"Oh, nothing." Joe tapped his hand on the table. "Map. Route."

"Thank you." Frank shook his head and turned his focus back on the mission.

^^^

“Talk to him.” Dean pleaded almost to Ellen’s back as she paced in small circles. They seemingly hid between the containment and social hall buildings.

“I can’t.” Ellen faced him. “I can’t.”

“Then you’re going to let him think you’re just being a bitch.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “That is where Frank is wrong. Whether he knew the extend of what happened to me or not, he should know I went through a lot. That alone should award me some compassion from him.”

Dean chuckled. “I’m sorry. But we’re talking about Frank. Frank isn’t being insensitive. He’s being Frank. He doesn’t know how to be any other way unless you tell him the way he should be.” Dean looked around and finally realized where in their walk they ended up. “Why are we between these buildings?”

“Oh.” Ellen tossed out her hand in frustration. “Nosy old lady Josephine. Always in everyone’s business. You saw her peering her beady old eyes bet her and Jenny . . .”

“Ellen.” Dean stopped her.

“I’m sorry. I just feel so pent up. Angry.” She moved to him. “Guilty. Guilty because not only am I losing it on my husband, I won’t let him touch me in anyway further than a quick kiss or hug.”

“That is understandable.” Dean spoke with compassion. “Listen, you may not want to hear this. But maybe you need to talk to someone who’s gone through what you went though. You know and I know over half of these survivor women were violated more than once. Melissa for example. You get along with her, talk to her, she knows . . .”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I don’t want anyone but you to know.”

“But I’m at such a loss. I want to help, but I don’t know if I will help you out the right way.”

“You will.” Ellen’s voice softened. “Just be there for me, Listen when I need an ear, Try to make me feel . . . normal.”

Exhaling loudly, Dean reached out and pulled Ellen into him. “You got it.” He laid his lips to her forehead.

“Hey!” The elderly female voice yelled into the alley way causing the abrupt separation of Dean and Ellen’s embrace. “What’s going on here?” Josephine asked. Her fragile frame barely seen. “Does your husband know you’re doing some hanky panky in the alley. And do you know all hell is breaking loose in your containment. Henry ran out screaming.”

“Shit.” Ellen bolted past Dean. She skid to a stop turning around when she realize in her run she blasted into Josephine knocking her down. “Sorry.” Turning again, she ran into containment.

No guard. Silence. Ellen buzzed her way in, raced down the hall and with worry, opened up the skills rom door.

“Surprise!” Was shouted in unison by the residents of containment.

Henry who was standing center walked over to Ellen. “Hey.”

“Oh, my God.” Ellen grabbed her chest. “For me?”

“For you.” Henry kissed her on the cheek. “We wanted to welcome you home. We missed you.”

Smiling and blushing Ellen basked in the moment. “And here I thought you were going to teach children’s songs again.” She giggled in happiness over her surprise and turned when she felt a hand on her back. Dean was standing there. “Dean, did you know?”

“Of course.” He smiled. “Henry asked for my help.”

“Thank you.” Ellen looked at Henry then Dean. “Thank you.”

Henry tugged on Ellen’s hand. “Come on over, we have cake. Josephine baked one. They all want to talk to you.”

Ellen nodded and faced Dean when Henry moved into the small crowd. “Dean.”

“Go enjoy your party.” Dean grabbed her hand. “See, El, a lot of people missed you. And Josephine baked you a cake. What did you call her.”

“Nosy. And she is. I’m gonna go . . .” Ellen pointed to the survivors.

“Go on.” Dean winked. His hand slipped from her’s as she moved toward the group of survivors. Talking with them, it seemed, a lot differently. And Dean realized at he watched her that somehow, Ellen knew and understood them all, just a little bit better.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

August 27

Dean dreaded it as he made his way up the hill. Frank's training field. His home territory, given to him, that huge area of land, as a training area for his security people. Frank trained them all the time. Snow, rain, heat, all on a regular basis. The other six men designated to go, were used to it, Dean wasn't. He wouldn't have even had known where to find them in their secluded spot if it wasn't for the gun fire that regularly bellowed from the area. Frank worked the guys to go on the mission and he was in his glory. Dean knew it. He could hear Frank shouting over the grunts, as he drew closer up the hill.

"Get down!" Frank yelled. "You can't dodge a hit like that. Son of a bitch!"

Dean watched Frank hammer into Dale. Then fear struck Dean. Frank saw him.

"You're late!" Frank marched over to him.

"I was busy. So . . . what are we . . ."

"Dean!" Frank placed his hands on his hips. "I am working these drills around your schedule. Not ours. All of us would rather do this at six in the fuckin morning rather than two in the afternoon! Now would you rather us do these at six!"

"God, Frank." Dean put his finger to his ear and squinted. "Don't yell. I'm sorry."

Frank brought his hand to his own face with a slap. "All right. You ready to work?"

"What are we doing today?"

"Lines."

"Lines?" Dean laughed. "Like drugs?"

"Dean!" Frank glared at him. "Grab a gun, make sure it's not loaded, and go stand between Cole and Dan."

"When do we get to shoot?" Dean asked.

"An hour ago! Go by Dan!" Frank looked at his watch. He knew he'd be pulling his hair out when they got closer to the time to leave. He saw Dean walk over grab a gun, and walk up to Dan, standing next to him and Cole. Dean looked at the rifle then Dean turned to Dan, then to Cole, who just shook their heads at him. Frank readied himself when he saw Dean walk back. "What Dean?"

"They won't tell me, they're acting like I should know. What are we doing?"

"If you would have been on time you would know."

Dean was annoyed for having to be there as it was, his tone showed it. "But I wasn't, so quit acting the drill Sargent with me and tell me what we're doing."

"O.K." Frank nodded his head and spoke slowly like he was talking to a child. "You Dean, will go and stand between Cole and Dan. You are the front line. You are the gad guys, the new soldiers. Greg is going to pretend he has to make it through them. Them, meaning you. Then he's going to try to get through Dale, Hodges and Pete. Are you following me Dean?"

"Sort of. What am I, supposed to try to block Greg, like a linebacker?"

"Sure. But he's gonna to try to get through. Got it?"

"This is really dumb. What's the point, Frank? If these soldiers see an unarmed Greg running they are going to shoot him. End of story."

Still remaining an imitated calm, Frank continued nodding his head. "Yes Dean, I know that. It's to help build your physical stamina. All right?"

"All right." Dean headed back to the line. "Should I hold my gun up or not?"

"However you're comfortable. Oh and Dean, after Greg." Frank smiled. "You're next."

"Swell." Dean took his position and stood there. He held his gun up, just because no one else did. Greg hadn't even made it to the second line and Dean knew, by Frank's yell, he did something wrong.

"Dean!" Frank marched up to him. "What are you doing? You're suppose to block Greg. Not move out of his way."

"What, and let him knock me over?" Dean laughed. "Right. He weighs two hundred and sixty

pounds Frank. Realistically, out there, if I see a man who weighs nearly three hundred pounds heading my way like a bull. I'm moving."

"Fine." Frank turned his back to Dean and yelled to the field. "Hey Greg. Stand where Dean was." Frank, smiling turned back to Dean. "You're up."

"What am I suppose to do?" Dean asked. "Run through those guys?"

"Yep." Frank took Dean's rifle, set it down, then marched to the field.

"Wait!" Dean called. "Where are you going? Aren't you supposed to stand here and yell?"

"Supposed to." Frank walked backwards. "But just on the outside chance your skinny ass whizzes by these guys. You have to get through me."

"Shit." Dean knew he was in trouble when he saw Frank take his place, like a football player way in the back.

"Whenever your ready, Dean." Frank yelled to him, grinning from ear to ear.

Speaking in a whisper, Dean shook his head. "Yeah, right." He waved his hand up and took a starting runner's position. He looked at the six big men before him, and Frank holding up the rear. "I'm a dead man."

^^^

Ellen kept peering at her watch, waiting impatiently in the lab for Dean's return so she could go over the experiments and go home. What she saw walk into the lab, was not what she expected. "What happened to you?"

"Your husband." Dean's clothes were filthy, his hair totally messed up, and his face hard to see through the sweat and the dirt. "Don't ask."

"What did he do to you?"

"I said don't ask." He hobbled to the sink and turned it on full blast, instead of splashing his face, he let the sink fill. "I won't be able to walk tomorrow." As the water rose in the basin, he emerged his head in. He felt Ellen hand him the towel. "Thanks." With his eyes partly closed he grabbed it, ran it over his face then his head. "How did the experiment go?"

Ellen shrugged. "It's waiting for you."

"What do you mean 'waiting'?" Dean walked over to the counter. "Didn't you do it?"

"Nope." She stopped his reaching hand for the container. "And don't touch anything I just cleaned in here."

"Ellen, you weren't supposed to be cleaning. You were supposed to be placing the tissue samples inside the sealed container with the compound."

"I wasn't opening that container. What if something went wrong and I'm not really immune. I would die in here. Alone. No way, I was waiting for you."

"Ellen." He tried to stay calm. "You stood not two feet from me when I placed a drop of it in there. You didn't die then."

"I wasn't taking any chances." She began to leave. "I'm going home."

"We have to do these samples."

Ellen stopped at the door. "We'll do them at seven. See ya." She stepped from the lab, rounding the corner in her own little world, not seeing Frank standing right there. His soft, 'hi El' startled her, making her scream in surprise. "Frank!" She yelled at him. "Don't do that!" She smacked his chest. "Don't you ever do that to me again! Ever!" She brushed by him harshly and ran off through the tunnels.

"What happened?" Dean ran from the lab. "I heard Ellen scream."

"I don't know. All I did was say hi to her and she lost it on me." Frank was baffled. "Did something happen in the lab?"

"No. Maybe you should go after her." Dean suggested. "She said she was going home."

"Yeah, I think I will." Frank still stunned by Ellen's behavior, went down the tunnel the same direction she did.

^ ^ ^ ^

“El!” Frank walked into his house. “El.” It was empty. “Where in the hell did she go?”

His answer came when the front door opened. Ellen, Brian in her arms, Josh and the twins walked in. “Hi.” She said like nothing was wrong.

“What’s going on?” Frank bent down to greet the twins and took Brian.

“I don’t know what you mean.” She walked to the kitchen.

“You beat me up in the tunnel.”

“I didn’t beat you up.” She laughed. “God you’re so dramatic.”

“El, this isn’t a joke.” He followed her. “You lost it on me and all I did was greet you. What’s going on? Are you all right?”

Still laughing, Ellen shook her head as she opened the refrigerator. “I haven’t the foggiest idea what you are. . .”

“El.” Frank barked. “You screamed. You beat me up. You freaked out.”

The refrigerator door slammed as Ellen spun around. “You scared me all right! You scared me!” She brushed by him out of the kitchen.

“All I did was say hello!” He jolted when the front door slammed. So helpless, Frank looked down to the faces of the twins and Josh standing in the kitchen doorway looking for answers, then he peered to Brian. “All I did was say hello.”

^ ^ ^ ^

Dean knew he shouldn’t have. The long hot shower, washing away all the dirt that gathered on his body after being pummeled several hundred times by Frank and his band of merry men. His knee, the one the Frank shot none-the-less, aching even worse. He hobbled out of the shower, putting on his jeans. The bed looked so inviting as he stepped into his bedroom. He still had an hour before he had to get back to the lab to meet Ellen. What would it hurt if he just sat there, fifteen minutes, and he’d feel a hundred percent better. Dean didn’t even lay down completely, he let his head rest against the headboard as he semi-sat up. And that’s exactly how he woke up--two hours later.

“No!” Dean glanced at his clock. “No.” He jumped from the bed, slipped in his shoes and ran to the lab, finishing dressing all the way there. If he could feel any worse, he’d allow himself to. Ellen counted on those talks, she was starting to make progress, and Dean had to go and stand her up.

He could see as he ran down the tunnel, the light from the cryo lab shining into the dismal tunnels. The door was open. He flew in. Ellen was drying her hands over the sink. “El, I am so sorry.” He ran his fingers through his hair that was dry, in what frame it dried itself into, Dean was clueless.

“What did you do, fall asleep?” She walked over to him. She fiddled with his hair. “God, Dean, what happens to your hair when you sleep.” She tried to straighten it.

“I thought I’d wake up. I’m sorry. I feel really bad. Really bad.”

“Don’t worry about it. However if I come knocking on your door at three in the morning you’re not allowed to get mad at me.” She fussed at his hair like it was a mission. “This is awful.”

“You really aren’t mad?” Dean grabbed her hand. “I let you down.”

“No you did not. You’ve been more of a help to me than you know. It’s all right. Really it is . . . you know, you should stick your head under the sink again.”

Dean smiled in relief. “Thank you.”

“Oh.” Ellen snapped her finger. “I did the tissue samples for you.”

“You did? Did you record the results?”

“They’re right next to the glass container. I opened the container like you said. Boy, let me tell you my heart was beating, and I placed the tissues in. I believe they were Clint’s buttock tissue samples. How gross. Recording the results were simple enough. Take a look.”

Dean walked over and picked up the glass container. "Did you take the tissue out?"

"Nope." Ellen answered.

"But I don't see anything." Dean picked up the jar.

"You won't." Ellen took the jar and set it down, then handed him her report. "The tissue sample, and it was a big one, disintegrated before I could even pick up my clipboard."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

September 7

George patted his stomach, a gut that once protruded over his belt, now was flat. “This, Joanna, is one more reason to get back to Beginnings.”

“We’ve all suffered weight loss. But we are surviving and we do have food.”

“Terrible food.” George sat down. “I did bring you here for something other than a culinary complaint. Beginnings hasn’t tried anything yet. This tells me that they are planning something big. I want to get back to Beginnings try to divert whatever it is they’re planning. I have Joe to take care of. I’m giving them two more weeks. If they don’t make a move, I want two of our men to take me on the back roads up to Montana. Drop me off just past Miles City, I’ll walk the rest of the way, and tell them I made my escape weeks ago.”

“And Miguel?”

George folded his hands across the desk. “Miguel was killed by savages on our way back.”

“How can you be so sure they’ll believe you?” Joanna asked.

“Because . . .” George leaned back. “It’s me. I’m George. The trusted Original.”

^^^

Dean had a sort of gloating look on his face as he watched Frank walk up toward him. Dean would look at his watch, then at Frank, and he’d keep doing it until Frank noticed. “Now look who’s late. I could yell, like some people, but . . .” He took a deep breath. “I’m a nice guy.”

“I know, I know. I had things to get ready for our war games shortly.”

“Oh, those. So . . . what are we doing?”

“You can’t tell?” Frank indicated to the equipment on the ground. “I realized yesterday that you are the only one who isn’t versed in this. At least I don’t think you are.”

Dean glanced down. “Archery? Are we playing cowboys and Indians today Frank?”

“No Dean. Now take this serious. This is how we’re going to take out anyone who is around the installation when we arrive. We don’t want to alert anyone inside. Besides, I dragged Brian all the way up with me to get this shit laid out for you.”

“You brought Brian up here?”

“Yep. Might as well get him used to seeing it now. When he can, all this shit, is what he learns first.” Frank picked up the bow and two arrows.

“What about reading, Frank?”

“That’ll come.” He handed the bow to Dean. “Have you ever shot?”

“No, but I’ve wanted to.”

“Then let me show you first. It’s pretty simple.” Frank raised the bow. “Pulling back will be difficult for you at first. See your target and adjust your level.” He pulled back and released the arrow. It hit dead center of the target. He placed in another arrow. “The trick is . . .” Frank released the second one. “To see if you can hit the same spot twice.” He watched the arrow land directly on the other one and split it. “Here, you try.”

Dean stood amazed. “You want me to follow that.” He held the heavy bow.

Frank walked to the target. “Don’t shoot until I’m back.” He grabbed the arrows and ran back to Dean.” He handed him the one that wasn’t split.

“Is there anything you don’t do well, Frank?”

“Uh . . .no.” Frank helped Dean. “Raise up. You see your target?”

“Yep.” Dean pulled back. “This is hard.”

“You’re O.K.” Frank stood behind him checking. “Try.”

Dean’s released the tension and sent the arrow to sail. Not only did it hit it’s mark, it hit dead center.

“Yes.”

“Good job.” Frank handed him another arrow. “Try it again.”

Dean tried again, he didn’t split the first arrow, but it landed right next to it.

“Dean.” Frank smacked him on the back in good gesture, sending him a foot forward. “I think we’ve found your niche.” He handed another arrow to him. “Here, try again.” Frank was impressed, he really was. And not very often did Dean do something to impress him.

^^^^

There wasn’t a soul to be seen in Beginnings, the war game on the hill left it a ghost town. All but the women. Women didn’t get to participate in the games. That didn’t bother Ellen much, but she always thought, if the feminist movement would still be alive they would have a fit to see how far Beginnings had set it back.

The streets were empty, and that was better than perfect for Ellen. No one saw her go into the clinic. Walking with her hands behind her back, head held high--whistling as she checked each room in the hall.

Seeing no one around Ellen walked into the lab. Hurriedly she made her way to the specimen fridge. “It’s here, somewhere.” She checked every labeled specimen tube. “Yes.” She found what she wanted and stuck it in her pocket.

“Ellen?” Questionably, the voice called to her.

Her hands shook a little as she turned around, keeping her hands in her pockets. “Jason. You aren’t playing the big war game?”

“No I’m not.” He walked to Ellen suspiciously. “Someone has to watch the clinic.”

“Oh that’s too bad . . . see ya.” Ellen tried to dart past him, Jason held out his arm.

“You took it. Didn’t you?”

“Took what?” Ellen looked to the ceiling.

“You know what I’m talking about. You and Dean have been asking for days for it.” Jason held out his hand. “Give it back, it’s ours.”

“I don’t have anything. I was um, putting something in the fridge. Ours is full.”

“Ellen, give me Melissa’s amniotic fluid. We need that.”

Ellen slowly pulled it from her pocket and stuck it back in. “Come on Jason, we’re all on the same side here. We need this. It’s the only baby who isn’t immune.”

“*We* need it.” Jason stayed calm, hand held out. “I can’t believe you and Dean have resorted to this. My sample please.”

Ellen, moping placed it in his hand.

Jason laughed, and took the sample to the refrigerator, “We’re finishing testing it tomorrow. You can have what we don’t use.”

“Ellen!” Melissa cried out painfully from the doorway, her hand sliding across the counter causing a huge crash. “Help me.” She held to her stomach.

“Shit.” Ellen ran over to her. “What’s wrong?”

Melissa’s knees began to bend. “The baby. I’m in labor.”

“No, you can’t be. We’re doing the ‘C’ section in two days.” Ellen placed her hands on her stomach, it moved violently. “Shit.” She lifted Melissa’s shirt and flew back. Watching the roundness of it distort and noticeable limbs moved about. “It looks like Alien.”

Jason took hold of Melissa’s arm. “I’ll take her to the back, and send Patrick out for Andrea. Go to the field and get Dean.”

“I’m on it.” Ellen looked one more time at the obvious agony on Melissa’s face. She gave a reassuring smile to Melissa, turned and panicked as she ran down the hall thinking the entire way how screwed they were.

^^^^

Frank wasn't happy at all during the games. Standing next to his father in what they called the 'free space.' He shuffled his feet, holding a clipboard, watching the games, and John Matoose referee.

"Quit being a baby, Frank." Joe scolded.

"I was looking forward to this."

"I know, but you take all of the fun out of it for everyone. No one gets to shoot or get shot when you're in the game." Joe snickered as he talked. "As for now, you'll just have to play strategist with me, and watch your men come in." Joe checked out the statistics. "We're winning."

"You wouldn't be if I was in the game."

"No we wouldn't, but now we're having fun. You're not, but every . . ." Joe looked past Frank to the jeep pulling up. "Why is your wife up here? And Christ, she can't even put the thing in park."

Ellen finally succeed in her parking task, and jumped from the jeep, nearly tripping as she did.

"Frank." She ran fast.

"El, why are you here?" Frank kissed her on the cheek. "You could get shot."

"Where's Dean?"

"Dead." Frank pointed to him. "He's with the casualties, why?"

"Melissa is in labor." Ellen ran over to Dean who was seated on the ground. "Dean. Melissa's in violent labor." Ellen looked concerned. "Repeat of Sarah. Only worse."

"Shit." Dean jumped to his feet. "Did you bring a jeep?"

"Yeah, this way." Ellen followed Dean, they jumped in the jeep with Dean driving, and sped off to the clinic.

^^^

As they scrubbed quickly, they could hear Melissa's cries from the operating room. Informing Patrick to keep Mark as far from the O.R. as possible, Dean and Ellen flew inside.

Melissa's body convulsed on the table, it lifted and fell rapidly, side to side. Jason and Andrea tried to hold her down, they were failing.

Dean could not believe his eyes as he set them upon her even larger stomach. A stomach that had grown since he had seen her just the day before. The baby moved under the skin, like some kind of animal kicking its way through a plastic bag. "Andrea." Dean neared the table. "Why haven't you started yet?"

Andrea shook her head. "We can't knock her out. We can't even numb the sight. She has rejected everything we've given her. Dean, her cervix is tight. It's closed tight."

Melissa threw her head back, arching her neck and tensing her jaws. "Cut it out of me! Cut it out!" Her legs kicked abruptly and blood filled the table beneath her. "Oh God Help Me!"

Dean grabbed the surgical tray and took it to her side. "Ellen, you and Andrea hold down her chest. Jason. Hold down her legs. Use your body if you have to." Wiping her exposed and moving stomach with an anti-bacterial, he lifted the scalpel.

Andrea looked in horror. "Sweet Jesus, Dean, she'll feel it."

"She'll die, Andrea! We have to get this baby out." Dean cringed as Melissa's anguish filled screams engulfed the room.

Jason held tightly to the kicking legs. "A natural anesthetic will take over."

Dean lowered the scalpel and stopped.

Ellen, held all of her weight against, Melissa. She saw the hesitation in Dean's eyes. "Do it Dean. Just do it."

With heavy breathing and a steady hand, Dean reached his arm around the stomach to hold down some of the motion that emanated from the infant inside who tried to be free. Dean found his spot, then quickly, inserted the sharp edge of the instrument into Melissa sending a searing, burning pain into the woman. She screamed with painful tears as Dean cut straight through and across. Dropping the scalpel on the tray he began to separate her skin. "I'll worry about the sac after we cut open her . . . Oh my God."

Dean looked up. "It's ripped the uterus."

"Get it out of me! Please." With one more cry out, Melissa stopped convulsing, yet her stomach did not.

Dean was horrified. "Is she alive? Someone tell me, is she alive?"

Andrea felt for a pulse. "She passed out." She closed her eyes and said a prayer.

Dean reached his trembling hands into Melissa's open flesh toward the violently moving sac covered infant. Before he could secure the sac, a small hand struck forth, and the infant shook itself in an emerging roll from its mother's body. "Ellen, help."

Ellen flew from Melissa's chest, and in just enough time, her hands, with Dean's grabbed the infant. "I got him. I got him. We need the anti-serum."

"I'll get it." Dean bumped into the surgical tray. "Jason, you and Andrea work on Melissa. We'll deal with the baby."

Ellen flew with the heavy infant, still rolled up in a ball and shaking, to the table with Dean. "Inject him."

Dean tried gently to insert the syringe. He lifted his eyes to Ellen, "It won't go in."

"Nail him, he's dying."

With all he had Dean pounded the needle through the skin, and injected the serum they called Hope. "Put him on this table."

"He's huge." Ellen laid the slowing infant down. As she did, she got her first real glance at him. She didn't say anything, she looked at Dean.

A sickening look was on Dean's face as his hand touched down on the child who was actually bigger than Brian. It's skin was not the normal pinkish blue it should have been, but a brown, looking as if the skin had scales. It felt like leather to the touch. His huge body, almost sculptured, gave the appearance of muscles. "Look at his face, El."

Closing her eyes first and taking a breath, Ellen looked to the face. Pug in nature, its features pressed beneath the weight of the extra skin that engulfed it. "He's breathing, Dean."

"And that's good?" Dean banged his hand on the table. "We should have let this die."

Ellen wrapped the infant in a blanket. "What should I do with him?"

"I don't know right now." Dean raised his hand and shook his head to leave the operating room. He glanced at Andrea and Jason who worked diligently on Melissa. The moment Dean reached the double doors he paused, as did Andrea and Jason, to the deep chesty rumbling moans they heard. For when Ellen lifted the baby into her arms, he released his first cries into his new world, and they weren't an infant's cries. *They* were the sound that made everyone stop.

^^^^

If it wasn't for the hallway light reflecting off of his high top white tennis shoes, Ellen would never have seen Dean in that hospital room. She had looked all over for him and he was no where to be found. But, she had him in her scope. He sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. His knees brought close to him. "Dean." She called out softly stepping into the room, being a shadow figure in the door. "I have to tell you this is the last place I looked."

"I really want to be alone."

"Really?" She walked in. "Tough. Melissa is doing good." She took a seat on the floor next to him. "Andrea and Jason had to remove her uterus. She's awake."

"What have I done?" He rested his head on his arms again. "I was so wrapped up in the science of it. I failed to think of the human side of it."

"That's not true. You didn't know. Melissa knew what she was getting into. You tried to stop this." Ellen wrapped her arm around his back and placed her chin on his hunched shoulder. "Besides, Melissa is in her room now holding the baby. Not rejecting him."

"Did you look at him, Ellen? Really look at him."

“Yes I did. So he’s not the most attractive child in Beginnings. I’ve seen worse. Look at Jenny Matoose’s baby.”

That made Dean smile, he rubbed his forehead against his arm and lifted his head, resting it on the bed behind him. “What kind of life is that child going to have?”

“The same kind of life every other child in this community has. He’ll be loved. The children in this community will not see him any different. Our society won’t allow that. And another thing, we don’t know what will happen to the baby. He may grow to look normal. We just can’t make those judgements now.” Ellen reached for his hand. “Come on, why don’t you get out of this room. Walk me home.”

Dean shook his head. “I’d like to stay here just a few minutes more.”

“All right.” Ellen smiled at him. “I’ll leave you alone. But Dean, if you need me, just find me. I owe you.” She started to get up and his hand reached out to her.

“I need you, El.” He felt her sit back down again. “Can I . . . just . . .” Dean fiddled with his fingers as he stared at them. “Can I just sit with you for awhile?”

Ellen quietly smiled. Slowly she ran her hand down his arm to his hands. His fingers slipped in between hers and he gripped them tight.

“Thanks.” Dean lowered his head, bringing his lips down, and softly pressing them to the back of her hand. He rested his face against his knee as they sat, in silence.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

September 15

It was a nod of approval from Frank that lasted most of the walk back to town from the living section. “Not bad. Small. But not bad. But I can’t believe you’re moving out on me.”

“You’ll love it.” Johnny smiled, walking with his father. “All those names in the hat and I won the drawing for the one bedroom house. Cool huh?”

“Cool.” Frank grinned. “Well, I’m gonna leave ya. I wanna stop to see Brian before El. I got that big meeting this after . . .”

“Can I talk to you for a second. Please?” Johnny asked.

Frank saw the seriousness in his son’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Not really wrong, probably a good thing. I wanted to tell you first. Brace yourself.” Johnny took a deep breath.

“Christ.” Frank griped sounding so much like Joe. “Who’d you get pregnant?”

“Wow.” Johnny smiled. “That’s good. How did you know.”

“Oh, my God. It’s true. John. I’m too young to be a grandfather. You’re too young to be a father.”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Too young. Who?”

“Denice.”

Frank had to think. “Denice? Isn’t she involved with Curt?”

“Yes.” Johnny answered.

“Is she leaving him.”

“No.” Johnny shook his head. “She’s staying with him.”

“So he doesn’t know.”

“He knows.”

“Who get the baby.”

“We share.”

So confused Frank looked. “Wait. She’s having your baby, but staying with Curt. And you’re sharing the baby. Doesn’t any of this bother you?”

“No. We have an understanding, Dad. We understand that we both are involved with Denice.” He chuckled at his father’s cringe. “It’s a great situation. I’m happy with it. We’re all happy with it. With men outnumbering the women by four to one, it’s the way things are now. And in a community this small, we do what we have to do so that we’re all happy and get along.” Johnny peered to his watch. “I’ll let you go. Tell me you’re happy for me.”

There was no hesitation on Frank’s part. “I’m happy. Not that I’m going to be a pap, but I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks Dad.” Johnny smiled and pointed backwards. “I’d better go.”

“Me, too.” Frank said. “I’ll talk to you later.” After giving Johnny a proud father’s swat to the arm, they parted ways. He knew where he was off to next, to the nursery to see the baby he didn’t share with anyone. His child. As he walked in and went to the back. He slowed down when he saw Dean holding Brian. “Dean?” He stepped closer. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, Frank.” Dean handed Brian to Frank. “Raz sent word to the clinic that Brian was sick. But he’s fine. I checked him out. And you have perfect timing, because he’s up. He’s usually sleeping this time in the afternoon.”

“How do you know?” Frank took his son.

“I stop in and see him too. I’m sorry, maybe I’m overstepping boundaries. I got kind of used to him.” Dean reached out grabbing Brian’s hand.

“Nah.” Frank cradled Brian’s head. “That’s all right. He’s a great kid.”

“Yeah.” He’s a . . . he’s a really great kid.” Dean’s demeanor slipped as he slipped his fingers from

Brian's. "I'm heading back to the lab. It was uh . . . it was nice talking to you, Frank. It was." Dean waved and backed up. "See you at the meeting."

"Hey Dean." Frank called to him. "Thanks for checking on Brian."

"No problem."

Frank had a few more minutes he could spend with Brian. He paced around the nursery talking to him, playing with him. But for some reason, his eyes just kept peering up to the door, the door that Dean had left through. He kept seeing Dean's face. The look he had, sadness, maybe some jealousy, as he held on to Brian's finger. Frank didn't know why, but it made him feel bad.

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It made Joe's ears ring the snap that Henry did under his nose. Joe merely raised his eyes.

"Joe. Pay attention to me." Henry stood before Joe's desk with a clipboard.

"Henry. Do you see me reading this stack of papers. The Caceres plan?"

"Yes. But do you see me trying to rehearse what I'm going to say at the meeting?"

"I could care less about your rehearsing. I feel like I have to find something in here and I haven't a clue what it is." Joe lifted a sheet.

"And I feel like I have to be effective." Henry stated. "You really don't seem to care how I sound, do you?"

"No."

"I wish George was here." Henry pouted. "He always listened to what I said. Well, with the exception of the wall. But I then again, I was right."

"Yes, you were." Joe tried pacifying him. "Now, if you'll . . ."

"He should have listened instead of trying to stop me all the time."

"He was trying to be . . ."

"Following me around. Yelling at me. Always sneaking behind to see where I was going. It was a complete lack of trust. He was . . ."

"Stop." Joe held up his hand. "He followed you?"

"Yes." Henry said. "Why do you think me and Ellen came up with that story. He was always there. No matter what time."

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

Henry gasped in irritation, nearly stomping his foot. "Joe." he heaved a breath again. "Why would I tell you if you're the one that told him to do it."

"I never told him to follow you." Joe said.

"Yes, you did. Ask him when he gets home."

"I will, but I never . . ." Joe shut up. His mind immediately took off and he didn't feel like explaining his mind's destination to Henry. "I . . . remember now. I did tell him." Joe lied.

"Joe." Henry shook his head. "You better get in the mind set for this meeting or you'll be no good. Here, listen to my tactical plan." He held up his clipboard.

Pen to mouth, eyes on Henry, Joe looked like he was paying attention, but his mind was elsewhere.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“May I, Joe?” Henry stood well rehearsed and ready, waiting for everyone to settle into their prospective seats in Joe’s office. He spread out a hand drawn blue print. “Infiltrating the installation. This is the compound.” Henry showed. “Now Frank, you need to know how you and Dean are going to get into the air filter system. I have it mapped out for you. You will enter through the main air duct. That runs parallel to the elevator shaft. That’s you in. Open the elevator, make sure that it is lowered, and climb up approximately two stories.” Henry’s hand glided across the map.

“Wait a second!” Dean interrupted. “Are you telling me we have to climb up two stories in a shaft, with twenty-seven, below us. I’ll fall.”

Henry, very serious ignored Frank’s rolling eyes and spoke to Dean. “No you won’t Dean just don’t look down. That’s your easiest part. Now once you get to the vent.” Henry showed them. “You climb through. Frank, this vent is big enough you shouldn’t have a problem. Crawl fifteen feet and you will see a floor vent. That is where the main fan is. Lift that grate. Lower Dean down to approximately ten feet before the fan and wait. Simple enough. The blower should come on every fourteen minutes. That’s when you release it. When you have him by the rope, hold tight, Frank, so Dean doesn’t fall. Because if he does, he fall right onto that main blower fan and that weapon he made won’t be the only thing spraying through their ventilation.”

Dean cringed. “Oh that’s gross. And Thanks Henry, you just gave Frank a better way to off me.”

“Sorry.” Henry shrugged.

Shaking his head, and see Henry sit down, Joe couldn’t believe the lame bland instructions were what he pretended to listen to. “Dean. You’re up.”

Dean slowly stood before the room. With a gulp Dean pulled out his notes. “I hate going last. I have to follow Henry, and Joe, and loud Frank. And everyone wonders why they think I’m boring.” He heard everybody moan and shuffle, and mutter ‘come on with it’. “All right, all right.” Dean cleared his throat. “The weapon is done. After many successful tests, Ellen and I feel we have our potency and all we have left to do with it is mix the final batch. Which we will do tomorrow and fill the gas can grenades, and attachments for the 203’s. We increased its strength and rapidness to three and one half minutes. So just to prepare you for the visual, I want to let what are to expect . . .” For the first time ever, Dean saw he had Frank’s complete attention. Frank leaned forward seemingly enjoying and waiting on the weapon news. “Immediately they will develop a massive headache. They will start to sweat, blisters and lesions will appear as the blood burns them. They will convulse, vomit, and probably excrete blood from every known body cavity. Their internal organs will turn to mush, and they will die after only a short three minutes of hell.” The room went dead quiet, except for Frank who had that gloating laugh.

Frank loved it. “Oh excellent. We get to use grenades with that stuff in there. That’s better than blowing them up. And it won’t hurt us?”

“No.” Dean answered. “I built it around a mutated form of our virus, so we’re immune and they aren’t. Also, it isn’t airborne incase anyone is wondering.”

Joe was. “How can you be sure?”

“Tests. Ellen and I worked with tissue samples, and figured out the lasting exposure to be forty five minutes. And just to double check, we brought those three field workers into the lab for a tour. You know to see if it was airborne.” That was the one thing that brought moans from everyone. “Please, like you gentleman care about them. That’s all.” As Dean folded his notes he noticed Henry raising his hand. “Yes Henry?”

“What did you call it?”

“Call it?”

“Yeah.” Henry said. “What did you name it. It has to have a name.”

“No it doesn’t.”

Joe stood from behind his desk. “I disagree. It should. What do you want to call it.”

Dean shrugged, really not knowing because he hadn't given that any thought. However, before he could say anything when his mouth opened, a conversation erupted among the men about what it should be called. Dean threw his hands in the air and re-took his seat, allowing them to have their fun.

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"Phase out." Dean stated in such a complaining manner. "Do you believe that." Ahead of Ellen he led them into exam room three. "God!" He stopped cold.

"Dean." She shut the door. "It could have been worse, they could have voted to name it melt down."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." He set the clipboard on the counter. "Next time *I* will name my weapon. Name it. Who thought to name it. Frank. You know, when I finish the carbo bomb, it's gonna be called Dean-ami."

Ellen snickered. "And you don't like the name phase-out?"

Dean only looked at her through the corner of his eyes. "All right. Let's do this inventory. Inventory." He huffed. "Why are we doing inventory? Aren't we busy enough. Don't we . . ."

"Dean." Ellen stopped him. "You have everyone believing we aren't done with . . . Phase-out. We haven't done anything but sit around for three days pretending to work. Inventory is not that bad."

"My last days on this earth." Dean opened a cabinet and bent down. "My last days and I have to count supplies."

Ellen lifted herself to sit on the examining table. "What are you talking about?"

"Frank's killing me." Dean proceeded to count. "Killing me out there. Eight bags of sutures." He looked over his shoulder at her. "Why are you sitting down?"

"Actually, I'm preparing to release your tension." She giggled. "It's all making sense to me now. At first I thought it was a ridiculous notion that Frank would kill you. But after what he said."

"Twenty-seven syringes. Are you writing this down? What did Frank say?"

"No, I'm not and he said, that since everyone is doing this share thing, I should hook you up one last time. I guess by saying 'last time', he was all but admitting he's killing you."

"Thanks a lot." Shaking his head, Dean returned to his counting. He had to wonder if she really thought he believed her.

"So are you ready? Let's go. Hop on . . . up." Ellen laughed as she patted the table.

"Seeing how I value the meaning of my life, I'm just gonna have to pass on the opportunity. But thanks anyhow."

"That's what I figured. But I just want you to know, I was more than willing to do it. I knew you couldn't though. It's all right if you're not up to it. Excuse the pun."

"Ellen . . ." Dean turned back around and looked at her. That smug look on her face. That know-it-all smile. "O.K."

The smile left Ellen's face. "O.K.?" It was replaced suddenly by shock. "O.K.?"

"O.K." Dean walked over to the examining room door and locked it.

Ellen knew at that instant he was calling her bluff, and knowing Dean as well as she did, she could more than easily, call his.

Over to the examining table Dean walked and stood before her. He undid her belt, slipping it from the loops and hanging it over her neck.

"Dean, these are Josh's shorts, they'll just fall right off of me if I stand up now."

"Exactly." Dean raised his eyebrow and lifted her shirt to hang outside her shorts. Any second, he thought, and she would stop him.

Like two cars playing chicken on a highway, she knew she wouldn't be the one to veer off first in the game of who could make who fold. "Kind of makes it easier for you?"

"Kind of." Dean grabbed the belt. "How do you want to do this? You want to go straight into it. After all, it is my last romp, right?"

"I'm leaving that up to you." Ellen said smug. Feeling, for sure he'd back up.

"All right." Dean took off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. "We'll at least warm up some."

Thinking, how to get her to break, Dean, still holding the belt, pulled her neck to him. He released the belt and gripped the edges of the table. Jokingly he pecked lightly at her neck. He could feel Ellen giggle, and her trying not to be audible and give it away. He could feel her squirm and Dean laughed to himself knowing it was enough.

Just as he was about to quit, just as he was about to tell her he was kidding, the sides of his hands brushed against the nakedness of her thighs. Almost like a warm shock, the touch of her skin went through him, and his once tight lips parted to her neck. Ellen stopped laughing.

He slid his lips softly across her neck, as his hands moved to her legs. Fingers spread wide, his grip extending as far as it could across the tops of her thighs . . . clenching. The heaviness built in his chest as his heart beat faster. His lips moved more sensual, his head told him to stop. But he couldn't. And Ellen wasn't stopping him either. He knew they had crossed the line from a joke into a reality when he felt her finger tips move slowly up his back and to his hair, pulling him closer.

Gliding his hands behind her, he edged her to him, just a little. He felt her legs part as they brushed against his hips. He pulled his mouth from her neck, cupped her face with his hands and brought his lips to hers. Pressing them to hers, he parted them, wider and harder, kissing her deeper, and breathing in the every moment. All he could think of was kissing Ellen, feeling her, his hands roaming more about as did her's. Soon the space between them, the edge of the table, had disappeared as their bodies pressed together.

The point of no return.

Ellen's hands moved to his jeans, undoing them, loosening them, allowing her hands to slip in the back. He slid her from the table, bringing his lips from her face, to her neck. Grazing them downward, his mouth touched and tasted every inch of her exposed body as he brought himself to his knees, slipping off what she wore to the floor. Bringing himself up, Dean began kissing Ellen as he lifted her, and he entered her with intensity as he backed her down to the table.

Not a single sound was heard from that room. Moving bodies, pressed together so tightly nothing could slip between them. Fingers gripping, intertwined. And then the only noise, were the sounds of breathing. Slow, shallow. Building, deeper, heavier, and finally growing in synch. All leading to that one final moment, the one breath holding moment, when they stopped moving.

Dean's hand pressed tightly to her back from under her, his fingers dug, as their bodies froze in that single, tense instance.

Releasing the breath he held, but not Ellen, Dean lifted his head and laid his lips to her's. As he kissed her in that just-after time, his mouth hesitated at the same time as her's when the reality of what just happened, hit them.

With a sinking heart he raised his head and looked into her eyes. He saw it there. She felt what he felt. "Oh God, Ellen, what have we done?"

Ellen's hand trembled as she brought it from his back to her face. She closed her eyes tightly. An unthinkable situation transpired without any thought.

Filled with anxiety, Dean lifted himself from Ellen and hurriedly, and nervously, began to dress. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry."

Ellen, slowly, got from the table and picked up her clothes. Shaking her head in disbelief she too began to dress.

"I'm sorry, Ellen." Dean, who's back had been turned, faced her.

"I was here too, Dean." She took the belt that still hung from her neck and looped it through the baggy shorts. Ellen's whole body shook and a knot formed in her stomach. She rubbed her eyes. "Please tell me this didn't happen. Please tell me I didn't just cheat on Frank."

"It did. You did . . . we did." Dean frantically ran his fingers through his hair laying it down. "This was the last thing I meant to happen. I swore I'd never make this mistake. God!" Dean's hands moved up and down. "How could I have been so irresponsible?"

"Thanks a lot." Ellen's head lowered. She turned to the table, gripping it.

Dean swallowed, the lump in his throat made it difficult. "El." He walked over and stood behind her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.” His hand rested on her shoulder. “I just, I just always told myself, if you and I ever had the opportunity, I would never . . . while you were with Frank. No matter how I felt about him. I wouldn’t put him through that.”

“Frank.” Ellen’s eyes closed. “This would crush him.”

“We have to tell him.”

“What!?” She spun and faced him. “He’ll kill you. Physically kill you. And I can’t deal with this right now.” She brushed by him and moved to the door.

“Wait.” Dean reached out and grabbed her arm as she opened the door. “We have to talk about this. Where are you going?”

“Home. We’ll talk when I can think straight. I can’t do that right now. All I keep thinking is I haven’t let my husband touch me since before Colorado. I didn’t think I’d ever let a man touch me again. But I let you.” She breathed heavily. “And you know why.”

Dean released her and turned his back to her. He knew, he didn’t want to verbalize it.

“You were there. I started to depend on you to make me feel normal. But I should have listened to you. After the rape, I should have just gone to Frank.”

The heart dropping effect hit both Ellen and Dean when Frank’s voice, deep and saddened seeped into the room. “Yeah, you should have.”

Ellen spun around, all of her air escaped her when Frank was standing in the doorway. White as a ghost she looked to a shocked Dean, then Ellen, saying nothing, blasted past Frank, out of the examining room and she raced down the corridor never stopping.

Frank, after a brief glance at Dean, chased her.

Dean raced to the door to follow, but he stopped. Holding back his hair he turned into the room and it all came in clear, the vision, and all the sensations and feelings that transpired. Breathing slowly through his nose, he ran his hand harshly down his face. The locked door, the innocent joke that took them by surprise. *The table*. He closed his eyes and swallowed. “What have I done?”

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It didn’t wash it away, the shower’s warm water. It hit against Ellen’s chest beating everything from her to the surface. Standing there, just standing there, she leaned into the tiled wall. Forearm resting above her. Her head resting on the arm. Her other palm flush against the light brown squares, helping to hold her up. The water went unnoticed as it hit against her, her mind deep in thought. It was her body cleansing. Her soul cleansing would come when she stepped from the shower to face Frank.

He was there in the bedroom waiting when she walked in. Sitting on the edge of the bed, hands folded. Ellen’s heart ricocheted through her body, beating loudly in her ears, taking away her breath.

“Frank.” It was the only thing she could say.

“I’m sorry.” He looked up. “I am really sorry.”

“What?” Shocked laced her one word. “Not you. Me. Why would you apologize to me? I was so wrong. So wrong . . .”

“And I knew. It hurt me to know what they did to you. I knew when I saw the bruises on your thighs. I could have told you. But I didn’t. I was afraid to hear it. If I heard it, it would make it true. And a part of me just couldn’t handle that. And by the time I could handle it enough to help you, it was too late.”

Ellen blinked several times, waiting for him to say more. Frank didn’t, she had too. “Frank, whether you knew or not isn’t the issue. I betrayed you. I went to Dean. That is why . . .”

“You’re smiling and getting better.” Frank nodded. “He helped you. I owe him my gratitude.”

“Gratitude?” Ellen questioned. “You feel you owe him that? Is that why you didn’t say anything or hit him when you overheard?”

“Hit him?” Frank chuckled emotionally. “What did the man do wrong? He helped my wife when I didn’t. No.” Frank held up his hand. “He helped her when I couldn’t. I just hope you aren’t mad at me for

not being there. I'm not mad that you went to him."

"No. I'm not mad." Ellen whispered out. "Never." She stared at him and realized Frank had no idea what had transpired in that examining room. And she stood there with a choice. Tell him the whole truth or say nothing. Debating only briefly, right or wrong, Ellen chose to say nothing.

CHAPTER FORTY

September 16

It was a semi-day off as Frank called it. Finish the stocking for the trip and then spend the rest of the day with his family. Even though it wasn't even eight in the morning, it was Frank's last stop. The cryo-lab, to see Dean. Frank needed it to be the final place he went.

He looked inside the open lab door held open with a brick. The sounds of explosions and gunfire rang out, as Dean sat before the computer playing a game. Frank knocked once on the archway before walking in. "So this is what you call hard work?"

"Breaks the monotony." Dean engrossed, paused his game and turned around. "Frank." If the coffee didn't work as a jump start, seeing Frank did. "What's up?"

"A couple things. I need the rest of those grenades. You didn't give them to me."

"Uh . . . they're right . . . I'll get them." Dean trying to stay calm, breathed slow to hide his nervousness. He hurried over, grabbed the sack and handed it to Frank. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Frank threw it over his shoulder. "Be at the garage five a.m. sharp tomorrow."

"I'll be there." Dean was antsy, it was starting to show.

"And the other thing, I want to talk to you about you and my wife."

"What . . . uh, what about us?" Dean reached for a stool and sat down.

"Ellen and I talked last night." Frank too pulled up a seat. "A lot came out. I know what happened."

Dean's heart pounded. He was facing the firing squad. "Frank, please let me explain."

"No. There's no need to explain." Frank held his hand out. "I've accepted the fact. And the fact is, I denied it. I couldn't handle her being . . . see I can't even say it. You could. You faced it with her."

Dean let out a long breath. "We should have let you know. You had the right to know."

"It doesn't matter. I want to tell you I appreciate you helping her, I do."

"Don't thank me, Frank." Dean stood up and moved away. "Don't. I don't deserve that. We went behind your back with this. We were wrong. In fact, I owe you an apology. A big apology for everything. The whole situation. I took that opportunity away from you."

"I would have liked to have been the one to help her. But I wasn't, you were. And even though you don't want to hear it . . . thank you." He stood. "One more thing." Frank paused before leaving. "I gave it a lot of thought. We've bridged a rift between us. And with all you did, not now, but in a little while, if you still want that baby, I won't stand in the way of Ellen carrying it for you."

Dean's eyes closed painfully. He turned to tell Frank he couldn't accept that, but no words emerged from his mouth. He could only lift his hand in a wave goodbye when Frank walked out. He felt lower than he ever thought he could. It would have been easier if Frank would have nailed him. Flattening him would have bothered him less than treating him with the respect Dean knew he didn't deserve.

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As a friend and confidant, Andrea felt it her duty to investigate. She knew exactly where to find Joe. Right where the last person saw him three hours earlier. She went to the near vacant warehouse and walked inside without announcement. The rumors were true. Something was wrong with Joe. He sat on the hard floor amongst a pile of cloths, books, posters and other personal belongings. "Joseph Slagel."

"Andrea." Joe calmly said her name taking the cigarette from his mouth. "What are you doing here?"

"I would like to ask you the same thing. I thought it was a rumor." she stepped closer. "People, people have been saying since five this morning you were running around this community collecting all of the Chester items back."

"I did."

"Why?" she asked with worry.

"Because I missed something. Maybe. I don't know."

“What did you miss?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can I ask what you think you missed something on?”

“Yeah you can ask.” Joe stated examining the items. “I don’t know. But I know I did. I think.”

“You sound like Frank.”

“I feel like Frank.” Joe shook his head. “But I’m right.”

“In missing something you know you missed, but don’t know what it is?” Andrea nodded when Joe did. “Are you stressed, Joe?”

“Very.”

“Is this helping?”

“I think.”

Nodding once more, Andrea stepped back. She would leave Joe alone with his items. His own personal therapy, no matter how much sense it didn’t make.

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How many times did Dean have to tap his fingers on the counter loudly to let Ellen know he was antsy. He listened to her ramble about blood work, pap smears, urine samples, and finishing up requisitions so she could head home early. She acted as if it was a normal day at the clinic. That nothing out of the ordinary had even transpired between them.

“And I’m out of here.” Ellen said chipper. “See ya.”

Snapping out of his daze, Dean jumped from his stool, bolted in front of Ellen and bodily closed the lab door. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Why are you trapping me in the lab?”

“Because we have to talk about what happened last night.”

“What uh, happened last night.”

Dean grunted and stepped away from the door. “Oh, don’t play dumb. You know exactly what happened. And you and I have to talk about this. Right now.”

“What is there to talk about. It happened.”

“Ellen.” Dean gasped out her name. “We crossed a line you and I. I’m emotionally a mess here. Frank’s being nice. He’s allowing you to carry that baby. I can’t face him. I can’t. We have to tell him.”

“And I will.” Ellen’s voice raised a little. “But not yet. In time. But I won’t tell him yet.”

“Waiting will only make it worse.”

“Sorry. That’s the way it has to be.” Ellen tried for the door again.

“You can’t ignore this.” Dean charged for her.

“I’m not!” Ellen yelled.

“You are. You’re ignoring it and trust me, El, we can’t take it back.” Dean pointed.

“I don’t want to take it back!”

“What?” Dean stepped back, his words breathy.

Ellen softened her words slowing them down. “I don’t want to take it back. I feel so bad for cheating. And I feel horrible for lying to a man I have never lied to. But I don’t want to take it back.”

Dean stuttered in his words before he got only one out. “Why?”

“Because I still love you, Dean. More than I realized and last night . . . last night was one more moment with you I so desperately needed.”

In the midst of Dean being barreled over by her words, stunned to the point he couldn’t move, Ellen had left. Her final words etched not only in his head but in his heart.

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The calm before the storm. The quiet darkness of the September night, along with the brisk coolness of the air brought a serene feeling to Beginnings. The dawn of the next day would bring a lot of worry and hope. A rescue mission thought out well enough, deadly enough, it was without certainty in Beginnings' mind, going to be a success.

But Joe couldn't sleep, not only were his men going out into the world, but also his son. Settling on a walk to his office, Joe heard it as he approached the edge of the main part of town. A clinking, it came from the garage. A light shone through to the street, a crease of a light through a partly open door. Joe followed its lead and walked into the garage. "Frank?" His son leaned under the open hood of the truck. "Something wrong with the truck?"

"Hey Dad." Frank grabbed a cloth and wiped his hands. "Nah, I'm just giving everything a once over."

"Again?"

"Yep. Almost done." Frank tossed the cloth. "What's up, it's almost midnight."

"I should be asking you the same thing." Joe pulled out a cigarette. "I thought you would be home with your family."

"My family is sleeping." Frank waved away the smoke and walked to the side of the truck to check the harness on the extra gas tank. "Except for Ellen. She'll be up for a while. So what's your answer. Why are you here?"

"Couldn't sleep. My mind is all over the place. I don't know if I'm just reaching or if it's my gut speaking to me."

Frank gave a puzzled smile as he moved from the side of the truck. "Should I ask about what?"

"Nope." Joe shook his head. "I sound nuts. I'm in a thinking phase."

"Yeah. Me too." Frank stated. "I was thinking, you know we aren't getting them all tomorrow."

"I know." Joe said.

"Should we search out that other site mentioned in those Caceres plans?"

"Not right away, no. Wait until you guys do a body count in there, come home and we'll decide if enough of them are left alive to start trouble."

"One of them left is enough to start trouble." Frank closed the side door to the truck. "Just one is all that it would take." Frank grabbed his cloth again and wiped his hands. He shut the hood to the truck. "Now I will go back home to my wife."

"Why did you leave in the first place? This couldn't have waited until morning?" Joe asked.

"I wasn't taking any chances. No repeat of the helicopter story I've been told. If something was going to be wrong, I'd rather know with enough time to do something about it."

"Why would you say that, Frank? Who in the world would do something to sabotage *this* mission?"

"If I learned anything, I've learned you just don't know. You never know. Like I said all it takes is one of them. And you never know where that one person is. Or who for that matter."

All the walking, thinking, reading or searching in the world didn't give Joe the confirmation Frank did at that moment. Joe knew all along inside of him what he missed, or rather who he missed. He guessed he need justification for his thoughts. Frank gave him that. All that was left was finding the proof to back it up.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE
September 17 - The Mission

Pulling over just past Denver, signified it was time to change drivers. Frank needed the break and wanted to rest and clear his mind for the rest of the trip that wasn't that far from over. It was smooth driving down, no militant groups canvassing the roads like zombies from a 'B' horror flick. Just the overgrown wilderness and the animals that sometimes, curiously peeked from the hiddenness of the trees to see what the strange noise was.

Jumping into the back of the truck, Frank knew it had been a while since he pestered and made Dean nervous. He took a seat right next to Dean and perched his rifle between his legs.

Dean looked oddly at Frank who smiled at him, his stomach twitched.

"Hey Dean. You've been pretty quiet most of the trip."

"I've been sleeping." Dean patted down his hair. "Why?"

"I'm just being concerned." Frank hid the smile that crept up from Dean's nervousness. "I thought something was bothering you. Would you like to talk about it?"

Dean peered at Frank through the hand that covered his eyes. "Oh you have this all planned don't you?" He scooted further from Frank. "I know Frank. Others do too."

Frank shook his head and laughed. He smiled a huge smile watching Dean edge more away, and he knew he could relax. He laid his head against the back of the truck and closed his eyes.

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George knew the end to his time in that installation was near. Lowered belongings and equipment to the twenty-seventh floor would soon be raised back up on the next days light when George left the installation. He was packed already. His small bag containing the few items he brought, plus the one he didn't, the case containing the drug he fully planned on giving Joe. In a sense George, couldn't wait to get back home. Plan or no plan there were actually people in Beginnings he missed. Henry for one, Andrea, he had the best story to tell her, and a couple of the survivors. That was it. The rest he really didn't care much for.

George made it back to his room, the late breakfast, or what ever it was he ingested, not setting right with him. He had a meeting with Jeffrey and Joanna in the early afternoon, and he wanted to be in top shape for it. He didn't want to sound like a sick old bird barking out orders on how not to screw things up while he was gone. He would be much less than threatening if he began gagging in the middle of his speech. An after meal nap would help. And that was where George headed.

^^^

Frank hustled up the grade not far from the installation to the secluded area where the others worked diligently to conceal the truck. "Gather round." Frank called to them, as he sat on the ground waiting. As soon as the other seven encircled him, Frank began to talk. "All right. There are two at the front gate. One at the guard station and two at the tunnel entrance. Now Dean and I are going to make it down the brush near the front. We'll hold ground there. Wait until you see us down by the gate. Once you do, I want them taken out. Try to get them in one shot. Arrows only. After we see the coast clear, Dean and I will head on in, and take it from there. I want all of you to stay put until we give you an all clear signal. Got that?" He saw the agreement of everyone. "Now lets do one more weapons check and head on out." Frank stood up. "It's show time, ladies."

^^^

Ellen walked into the calm quiet of the chapel. It would have been a perfect place had it not been for Henry standing on the ladder fixing that ceiling light he never could get right. And there was Andrea perched in a pew directly under him. She was who Ellen sought. Avoiding walking under the ladder--not a good time to do that--she slid in the pew next to Andrea. "Joe said I could find you here."

"I've been here all morning." Andrea's eyes were closed, a bible on her lap. "It's very comforting." A pattering sound and plaster fell on her bible, Andrea wiped it away.

"Under Henry?" Ellen brushed off her arms.

"I was here first. I wasn't moving. Besides I don't even notice him."

"How could you not." Ellen looked up to the clanking fix it guy, her face greeted with white stuff. Ellen ran her hand across her mouth. "What's going on?"

"I was thinking and talking to the Lord."

"Concerned about Miguel?" Ellen rested her hand on Andrea's knees. She felt the plaster again, she bit her lip and disgustingly looked up and shook her head at Henry.

"No I know he's in good hands."

"That's right." Ellen patted her knee. "Our men will bring him home."

"That's not the hands he's in." Andrea rested her hand on her bible.

"No Andrea, you're wrong."

"I don't believe so. I've feared it for a while, and now I feel it." Andrea spoke somberly. "I truly feel it. Ellen, do you think that, if God forbid, something happened to Frank, do you think you would sense that?"

Ellen lowered her head. "Yes, I would."

"Then why don't you believe me when I tell you what I sense."

"Because I don't want it to be true."

"Neither do I." Andrea placed her hand over Ellen's. "Stay with me Ellen. Stay and pray with me."

"I'll stay Andrea, but I'm not going to pray. I think I annoy Him." Ellen looked up. "And none of us need to have Him annoyed right now. We need Him on our side."

Andrea smiled and leaned closer to Ellen, she sat there with her, taking comfort and hope with her friend.

^^^

Frank and Dean hid down in the brush not fifteen feet from where the front gate guards stood. They laid on their stomachs, crossbows aimed, and they waited.

"Dean." Frank whispered. "See that box on the corner of the fence on the left? Set your aim there, tried to hit that, that's a current box. Take that out and I'll head for the lock box control. When you hear the arrows, shoot."

"Got it." Dean found his target.

Frank, though aiming, kept his sight toward the hill. He waited for his men to shoot. He knew it was coming when he saw the thin flash of light, like a shooting star in the woods, as the sun caught the silver tipped arrow head. With a whistling sound, the arrows sailed downward, like the rain of an Indian attack, two sets from above, and Dean and Frank fired their own. Sparks flew from the current and lock boxes as the guards, all five of them fell to the ground.

Rushing forward on Frank's 'Now!' Dean and Frank hit the fence.

Using the butt of his cross bow, Frank knocked against the metal fencing to open it. And they ran toward the tunnel opening. "Gas cans, three Dean."

Dean as he ran, handed them one by one to Frank. "You should only need one."

"Have to be sure." Stopping at the opening, Frank pulled the tab on the first can and threw it as hard as he could inward. He did the same with the next two. When they heard the safety sound of the three popping cans they knew the gas was released.

Dean watched his watch. "Thirty seconds to take effect. Twenty . . . ten . . . time." Following Frank

who ran fast through the semi dark tunnel, Dean could hear the cries, painful cries emanating toward him the closer he drew. As he reached the end of the tunnel he saw the source of those cries. Four uniformed men lay on the ground, pools of blood engulfed their shaking bodies. "Whoa." Dean slowed down.

"Come on Dean."

"It works Frank. Let me just stay and watch the effects."

"Come on!" Frank grabbed and tugged his arm. "Elevator's this way." He slowed up at the silver doors. He saw the digital display above the elevator. "It's on its way up. Flush against the wall." Frank pressed the button and pulled Dean to his side. Pulling out his knife he waited.

The doors opened and the first unsuspecting guard darted off, he never made it far, Frank grabbed him by the hair, yanked him back, and slit his throat. The second guard saw Frank, but fumbled in his attempt to grab him weapon. Frank clenched his fist, connected with the guard and grabbed him before he could fall backwards. In one motion, Frank swung the guard's back to him, braced his forehead, and in one quick jolt, snapped his neck. "Let's go." Frank snuck his hand in the elevator and pressed twenty-seven. He let the doors start to close and he stuck the thin metal bar down to stop it. Using his strength, he pried the doors back open and held them that way. He leaned against the doors watching the elevator lower. "A long way down." He whistled. "So don't slip."

"You're an asshole." Dean grabbed another bar from Frank's backpack and secured the doors.

Frank smiled and held his hand out in a point to the shaft. All yours. Ladder going up is to your right."

"Where are you going to be?"

"Right behind you."

Dean began to step through, he made one mistake, he looked down. "Shit, I'm dead if I fall. Frank, you're not gonna shove me are you?" He stepped through grabbing the rungs.

"I'll just wait until after you released the weapon."

"Funny Frank, really funny." Dean climbed up all the way up. Adjusting his projection gun behind him, Dean lifted himself into the vent, he crawled down some and waited on Frank. "Here it is." He spotted the main air shaft and pulled on the grate. "It's stuck."

"Watch out." Frank pulled out the thin metal bar again and jarred it open. He dropped the rope from his shoulder, unraveling the end. "Let's get this around your waist."

Dean felt the rope. "This will hold me, right?"

"No. I'll hold you. Ready?"

Dean peaked down the vent he was to crawl down into. "I just know I'm going to be claustrophobic in there."

"Will you please quit whining? Now get down there. I have the end so if you slip, I got you."

"Are you sure?" Dean lowered his legs in.

"I'm sure. Now yell up when your about ten feet from that fan. Brace yourself against the wall like I told you. Got that?"

Dean nodded nervously. "Back against one side, feet on the other."

"Aim between your legs."

Dean began to use the robe to climb down, he muttered softly as he did. "Aim between my legs. I can't breath. It's too cramped." He saw where he was. "I'm there, Frank." Using his feet Dean pushed himself back. He thought, easy enough, as he tried to crouch in a suspended squat, the slickness of the walls took him by surprise and he slipped. The tension of the rope saved him.

"Dean, what are you doing?"

"I'm bracing myself. It's slippery." Dean finally found his position. He aimed the projection weapon between his legs. "Come on fan turn on so I can get out of here. Are you sure you're all right holding me up. I'm not too heavy right?"

"No Dean you're not. God it's like holding up my wife, and trust me, I've suspended her for longer than fourteen minutes.

"Spare me Frank." Dean rolled his eyes.

Sounding about as frantic as he could, Frank called down to Dean. "Oh Shit Dean, the ropes breaking."

"Pull me up, hurry."

"Just kidding." Frank laughed.

"God, are you an asshole." Dean tried to slow his heart beat that raced within him. He could hear Frank laughing above him, that big-shot laugh. "You're real cute, Frank." Dean's finger held tight to the gun.

"What's the matter, Dean?" Frank teased him as he leaned with his back against the vent wall, the shaft Dean was in, between his legs. The rope wrapped securely around his wrist. "Don't you trust me?"

"No I don't." Dean glared up. "I can not believe I'm allowing my life to dangle in you hands. Your will."

Frank took an offense. "I'll have you know other men would feel trusted with me holding this rope. Other men would not be this much of a pansy."

"Pansy!" Dean grew annoyed and his voice raised higher. "Frank, other men have not had sex with your wife!"

"What!?" Frank looked down. "What did you say?"

"I mean, you know what I mean." Dean breathed heavily.

"Hey Dean!" Frank called down. "Tell me right now, are you having an affair with my wife?"

"Frank, what are you stupid? If I was or wasn't, do you really think I'd tell you right here while you have me dangling above the killer fan." Getting ready for more Frank backlash, he heard it, the humming. "Frank, I think it's time."

Changing his tone, Frank gripped tighter, just on the outside chance the fan had more suction than they anticipated. "Brace yourself and get ready. I have you, don't worry about it."

Dean wiped the sweat that formed from his eyes and laid his finger on the trigger. With the whoosh of the fan, the sound of a slow motor started and grew faster and louder. The spinning blades not ten feet below him were his sign. It was time to begin. No turning back. Dean aimed his weapon.

^^^

Jeffrey Barnett handed George the small wrapped up package. "Now secure this in your bag. You'll need this data. I left instructions on how to download this onto the main cryo-lab computers."

George took it and placed it in his small bag. "It will work?"

"Oh sure." Jeffrey spoke. "Just incase they access the hidden files in the computer. They have to get past the password, but if they do, this ensures that what they see, they won't see very long."

Joanna added to it. "Make sure you access the networking between the systems down there. When one goes, the others will go at hour intervals."

George zipped up his bag. "How much damage will be done? I can't take a chance of the underneath of Beginnings being wiped out."

"Not much." Jeffrey answered. "That's why you have to network the software. The first will be a subtle explosion. If there's such a thing. Now the cryo lab section, sits on a shaft about ten feet deep. It should be enough to knock the floor out, then the second explosion will just ensure the entombment of anyone there."

George liked what he heard. "Of course the likely hood of them even breaking the password to that info is slim. But just on that chance . . ." He patted his duffel bag. "They won't know bout me for very long.."

"That's correct." Joanna's nose crinkled. "What is that smell?"

Jeffrey looked around. "I don't smell . . ." With a loud cry out, Jeffrey grabbed his head. He pressed his palms tightly to his temples.

Joanna did the same. Within seconds, sweat formed on both of their brows and they started to

tremble.

George's eyes shifted, he was confused. "Are you two . . ." He cut his words short. Joanna and Jeffery both began to shake where they stood as if they were being electrocuted. The sweat beads that were forming on their brows, turned into bubbling blisters on their red flushed skin.

Jeffrey fell to the floor screaming cries of agony. Joanna held firm to her stand a bit longer.

"Holy Christ!" George in a panic looked at them. "Were you working on something in one of the . . . I'm getting out of here." As he stepped over Jeffrey, Joanna buckled to her knees.

She gripped with dear life to George's leg. "Help . . . Help me." Her head twitched violently. Blood flowed from her eyes, her ears, her nose and her mouth. The blisters that formed grew bigger, oozing, exploding with blood and puss. A substance that acted as an acid burned the skin more as it flowed from the wound that expelled it. "Help . . . please."

George felt her grip weaken, but still holding him back. Without pity, without remorse, he looked down to her. "Get off of me." He could have shaken her free, but he choose not to. He pulled back his foot blasting a fierce blow to her face to remove her. Instead of kicking her off like he intended, his foot sailed right through her head as if she were Jello. After cringing and pulling back, he shook off his shoe, opened his door with fury and ran out. Up and down the halls were the same vision. The same horrifying vision. Anyone who could still move, tried desperately for the elevator as if it was an escape from the death they seemed to face. Anyone who lay on the ground, their bodies seemingly disintegrated before George's eyes.

^^^^

"Time!" Dean yelled up to Frank. "Lift me."

Frank pulled on the rope, quickly, as Dean used his feet and hands to help with Frank's efforts. Once Dean had made it up, Frank allowed him to crawl ahead first. "As soon as we get up there, let's go signal our guys. You think it worked?"

"I know it worked." Dean reached the end of the vent and looking less than agile, he reached over to his right for the ladder down. He could see the doors to the elevator still open. They were his guiding light. When he reached the bottom he looked up. Frank still sat in the vent. "You coming?"

"I'm adjusting, I'll be right there." Frank tightened and secured his belongs against him.

Standing solid on the first floor, Dean stuck his head in the shaft to watch Frank take the first rung. As Frank's foot extended to the second, a loud buzzing echoed through the hollow shaft followed by a clank, with it brought a sizzling crack, a zapping and sparks. Frank flew backwards. His hand releasing the ladder for a brief second before he caught himself again but only with a loud cry out in pain.

"Frank?" Dean hollered in panic. "The elevator's coming!"

"I'm caught up!" Frank held on with one hand, his face scrunched up as he reached desperately behind him.

"Frank you have . . ." Dean peered down to the slow moving elevator. If it made it to Frank before Frank freed himself into the vent right next to him, it would kill him. "I'm coming up."

"No!" Frank's words were painful, he tried hard to loosened what had not only caught his clothes, but a portion of his back as well. "Too dangerous."

"Tough." Dean, without fear of falling, leaped out to the ladder in the shaft and quickly, in a race against time, crawled up.

"Get out of this shaft!" Frank looked down. "Now!"

"No!" Dean, his body pressed nearly to Frank, held on with one hand as he maneuvered his to see where Frank was stuck. "I can get this."

"No. Dean. We'll both get killed, get out!" The top of the elevator came into clear focus.

"Hold still." Dean's hands moved about in the blood that flowed from Frank's wound, and the metal object that injected itself into his skin.. The elevator drew closer. "You think I'm leaving you here? If you

go . . .” Dean looked him in the eyes as his hands worked. “I go with you.” Pulling Frank, the feeling of relief hit as the elevator approached ten feet from them. “Got it!”

Frank felt his mobility and he shoved Dean to the ladder. Up the two rungs they flew. Dean into the vent first, Frank second. The huge carriage screeched to a crunching halt a split second after Frank shot himself into the vent for safety.

Grabbing his back, Frank leaned against the vent wall, he huffed, out of breath, the excitement still with him. “You . . . you saved my life.”

“You’re cut.” Dean tried to see his injury. “Let me take . . .”

“Dean!” Frank stared at him. “You saved my life.” Frank looked over to the elevator that blocked their way out. “I’ll never forget that. I owe you.” He closed his eyes. “I owe you.” His head turned sharply as he heard the elevator move again. “Wanna jump on it?” Frank smiled.

“Why not?” Dean crawled past Frank and to the ladder. Frank lowered him down to on top of the carriage. Then jumped down himself.

They lifted the escape hatch on the roof, and climbed in. Frank first. As his body emerged into the car, he gasped a loud gagging sound. “Oh, man bad idea.” He reached up for Dean’s swinging legs and helped him down. “Watch your step.”

Dean touched down into the steaming, reddish mounds that lay in the elevator. “Worked better than I thought.”

“You can be really cold in the name of science.”

“You can be really cold in the name of war.”

Frank reached out and pressed sixteen. “In this case, it’s all the same difference.”

“Why sixteen?” Dean asked.

“Because that’s where they had Ellen. I hoping Miguel and George are there.” Frank waited impatiently for the doors to open, when they did he stepped out. “Man, Dean.” He shook his head at the mess that sprawled about the floor. “How we gonna count these?”

“They’re piles, Frank. Count the piles.” Dean followed Frank in a maze walk down the hall. He saw Frank stop. “What’s wrong?”

“Ellen’s room.” Frank stood in the open door way of the empty room, a huge blood stain on the floor from where he had shot the guard. “Empty. Where are they?”

George pounded his hand in frustration on his bed, when he heard Frank and Dean’s voices. He thought it when he saw the elevator descending, he hoped it wasn’t true. What did Beginnings do? As a safe guard in his plan, he locked the door and stayed behind it. Waiting for his anger to subside some, he opened up his bag, ruffled up some of his clothes, then reached with total disgust to the door. He clenched his fist and took a deep breath. “Is someone there? Anyone. Help!”

Frank looked quickly to Dean. “George.” He raced to follow the cries. He found the locked door. “George, that you?”

George rolled his eyes. “Frank, thank God. Get me out.”

Frank tried the knob, it was locked. “Stay back.” He backed up and barricaded down the door.

George, hair tossed, looking in total disarray, flew out. “What . . . what happened? I heard screams.”

Dean smiled when he saw him. He braced his hands on the arms of the older gentleman who looked so frail, so thin, so shaken. “We’ve come to take you home.”

Frank stepped out of George’s room. “We brought them down, George. But . . . Where’s Miguel?”

George closed his eyes and lowered his head. The moment he did that, he sent a sinking heart feeling through Dean and Frank. And they both knew.

^^^^

Frank finished looking through Ellen’s duffel bag, it was still open. Almost as if once she had left,

they only removed the guard and left everything else the way it was. Broken bits of rice cakes, an open bag of medication, a few sunflower seeds laid on top of her clothing still folded so neatly. He zipped up the bag, along with Miguel's. With sadness he held Miguel's bag across his lap. He felt the canvass of the bag, his heart near breaking. Frank wanted to go through Miguel's bag also, but that wasn't his place. That was for his wife. He would have liked to have been the one to hand it to Andrea, and tell her, but George insisted he wanted to do it. Frank agreed. George felt bad enough of about being there, telling Frank it happened moments after he rescued Ellen. How Miguel placed his life on the line for George and lost.

With closed eyes and tilted head, Frank stayed there. They were there for hours, sifting through what was left of the people there, destroying valuable equipment. Frank's back pulled a bit as he sat there. Dean took a few moments to stitch him before they undertook the grueling mission. Pushing four o'clock, Frank wanted to just leave, head home, get as close as he could before they stopped for the night.

"Frank?" Greg stepped into the room. "Pile counting done."

"How many did you get?"

Greg blew quickly shaking his head. "It's hard to say. We think we counted eight."

"We counted fifteen. That's eighteen unaccounted for."

"Maybe they disintegrated completely."

"I don't think so." Frank took hold of both bags and stood. "I think they're elsewhere."

"We leaving now?" Greg asked.

"Yep." Frank took one more look around. "Let's, uh . . . let's go home." Slowly he walked from the room. A mission completed with success and they were heading home. But they were heading home without one very important thing . . . Miguel.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

She didn't do it well, but Ellen gave it her best shot. Even though she knew Frank would complain about, Ellen did the laundry. And she felt she did it well . . . for once. She worked hard at it. It kept her mind occupied. A mind that started to take off with thoughts the moment they had taken off for the mission. The simple knock on the door as she folded a tee shirt made her drop the garment from her hands. She turned around. "Joe."

Joe stepped in the bedroom. "Josh said you were doing laundry. I rushed up. What's wrong?" Ellen shrugged.

Moving to her, Joe laid his hand on her shoulder. "You worried?"

"Do you think they did it?"

"Oh, yeah." Joe sat on the bed. "I know they did."

"Andrea . . . Andrea doesn't think Miguel is coming back."

"I know how she feels."

"You too? What about George, what are you're feeling about George?"

Joe tilted his head and gave a thinking face. "George is fine. I'm sure of it." He answered he with one eye closed. "Am I easing your mind?"

"Not really." Ellen halted her reach for another shirt. "Joe, can I ask you something. I need you to swear to secrecy, because I need some fatherly advice. You can lecture me after you hear." she took a deep breath. "I did something. At first I thought about just not saying anything to Frank. Now I think . . ."

"Don't." Joe stopped her. "If you're thinking about telling my son you had an affair with Dean. Don't you do it."

"Oh, my God. How . . . how . . ."

"First." Joe held up his hand. "The lecturing you clued me in. Second, I saw it coming a mile away. What you and Dean had was unresolved. And the amount of time you spent together . . ." Joe shrugged. "I just think you shouldn't say anything. Let it go. Frank loves you Ellen. Don't hurt him like this. Put it behind you and move on."

"I swear, Joe, I never meant for it to happen."

"I believe that." Joe reached up and grabbed her hand. "But it did. I think you were spending so much time atoning for your sins of the past with Dean, you didn't see the creation of sins of the present. You'll get through this." Joe released her hand. "Now finish your laundry and . . ." he looked oddly at the bed.

"What?" Ellen panicked. "What's wrong?"

"You worry about telling Frank about Dean? You have more immediate concerns he's gonna kill you over."

"What's the matter?" Ellen was confused.

"Ellen, Christ." Joe stood up lifting a sock and a tee shirt. "Everything is pink."

^^^

The slips of paper with work details on them were passed around the site where Frank and his men stopped a third inside of Wyoming. Work details, used as bets in a wager that some had lost when they saw Dean was still alive at the end of the mission.

Frank thought the bets were funny. Laughing as he drank his water, he saw Dean sitting by the small campfire. Frank approached him. "Hey." He sat down next to him.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Dean scooted over. "You make me nervous."

"That is not my intention." Frank picked up a stick and poked the fire. "George seems all right, doesn't he?"

Dean looked over, George sat alone. "Not as traumatized as I thought he'd be. Frank, why are you

sitting with me?”

“What? I’m trying to be civil to you. I’m trying to be nice.”

“Please don’t.” Dean stood up. “I liked it better when we fought.”

Frank laughed as he lifted himself to his feet. “Yeah I did too. But . . . you saved my life out there, big time. Not as a doctor . . .”

“Stop Frank. Not right now all right.” Dean turned and faced him. “I’m sorry. I’m just tired, and after today there’s nothing more that I would love than to see my family and hold them. Or does that sound like a wuss idea to you?”

“No. That sounds like a great idea.” Frank walked away from the fire and gathered the attention of the men. “Listen up! We have about three more hours driving ahead of us, I know it’s pushing midnight, but anyone else besides me and Dean want to chance driving in the dark and just go home now?” He looked at Dean. “See our families. I think we need to. We can unpacking the truck tomorrow. Anyone?”

Frank didn’t get a verbal answer, he got reaction. Immediately, without hesitation, the men began to gather the gear they had set out for the night. They were going to chance it, they all just wanted to head home.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

September 17

Andrea cried as she stood in George's living room. Expected tears. She knew they would come, yet she kept them under control and wiping them away with her handkerchief. Joe and George had awoken her in the middle of the night to tell her they were back, to bring her the tragic news. She held Miguel's belongings, crying herself to sleep. But with the new day brought questions and she sought George for the answers.

George brushed his hand down her face, staring at her puffy eyes. "You would have been so proud of him, Andrea."

"Did he suffer George?"

George shook his head. "He died instantly. They had me Andrea, at gun point. Ready to shoot me and Miguel stepped in. A hero. My hero from now on."

"Thank you, George, for saying that." She kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for being there. At least I know he didn't die alone."

"He didn't. I was with him."

Andrea shivered, rubbing her arms as she took a deep breath. "I'm going home now. You need your rest. You've had quite the ordeal too."

"I could use it." George patted his stomach. "After I've eaten."

"I'll leave you." Slowly and sad Andrea opened George's front door. "Thank you again." With a semi-lowered head, she closed the door and stepped out. She saw Joe. "Going to see George?"

Joe nodded. "How are you?"

Andrea shook her head. "I'm not good." She leaned into him and rested her head against his chest for comfort. "I'm not good."

Joe looked to George's house, then wrapped his arms around Andrea. His talk with his fellow council member could wait a few more minutes.

^^^

Frank hollered a lot at the garage as they unpacked. But it was good to be back. It was worth lugging that bag, when he saw the smile on Ellen's face when he returned it to her. She had her clothes back. She sat on the ground, like opening a present, checking all the contents.

Dean staggered in, his hair wet, rearing to go. "I'm here." He snickered and touched the pinkish shirt Frank wore. "Nice. Ellen doing laundry?"

Frank snarled, then regained his composure. "I'll let that go." He cleared his throat. "You saved my life."

"Frank, stop." Dean raised his hands. "Please stop. It's making me nauseous."

"I owe you. I owe you big time. I won't forget what you did."

"You don't owe me." Dean started walking away.

"I do. I just wish there was some way I could repay you."

"Well, there . . ." Dean spotted Ellen sitting on the ground with her bag. He turned back to Frank. "You know there may be some way to repay me." He smiled snidely. "If you *really* want to."

"I'd like that." Frank placed his hands on his hips. "What is it?"

Dean took one more look at Ellen and thought, 'the perfect payback' for all the joking around Frank did on the mission. "O.K., Frank, I would like for you and I." Dean pointed. "I'd like for us to have an . . . *understanding*." He looked for Frank's anger.

"An understanding?" Frank was clueless.

"Yeah an . . . *understanding*." Dean waited, still no anger.

"O.K., yeah, sure, we can have an understanding. Maybe that's what we need to put everything

behind us.”

“Great.” Dean smiled. “We’ll start our *understanding*, say . . . now?”

Frank agreed. “Sure, what exactly are we understanding?”

“El.” Dean called to her. “Come here.” He motioned, and waited for her.

As clueless as Frank, Ellen approached the pair. “What’s up?” she asked.

Dean looked smug. “Frank says it’s all right if he and I have an *understanding*.”

Ellen looked confused. “About what?”

Dean smiled, placed his hands on Ellen’s face. “This. Thanks Frank.” Dean placed his lips to hers and began to kiss her.

Frank’s eyes lit up, he stepped closer. Dean wasn’t kissing his wife, he had to be faking. He placed his face closer to the two who were interlocked. He studied for a second. Dean’s moving lips locked to Ellen, that indenting in his cheeks. Frank stopped peering and stood straight up. He understood . . . *understanding*. “Hey!” His yell shot through Dean like a knife. “I don’t give a shit if you saved my life or not. You have a three second head start pal.” Frank glared at him. “And then I’m killing you.”

Dean stepped back and smiled. “Frank, I was kidding.”

Frank held up his hand. “One . . . two . . .”

Dean wasn’t waiting for three, he took off running.

^^^

It was kind of ominous that George was peering in the black case when Joe arrived at his home. The same black case that held the vials that he would use to eventually bring Joe down. He held it in his hand when he opened the door and laid the closed case on the table in plain view. It was his own little demented tease to Joe. “I’m really tired.” George said as Joe stepped inside.

“I realize that. I do.” Acting very upbeat, Joe moved to the livingroom. “I’ll only keep you a minute.”

“Sure.” George placed his hands in his pockets. “What’s up?”

“Gosh.” Joe snapped his finger. “You look good. Son of a bitch. You lucked out.”

“I guess I did.”

“Yep.” Joe jingled his hands in his pockets with keys. “I was speaking to Andrea, she told me how you said Miguel laid his life out for you. When did it exactly happen?” Joe asked, reaching in his pocket for a cigarette.

“It happen as soon as Frank got Ellen out of there.”

“How soon?”

“I don’t even think Frank had left the compound yet.”

Joe took a deep breath and let it out slow, he lit his cigarette. “Who did it?”

“Why does this sound like an interrogation?”

“It does?” Joe shook his head and laughed. “I’m sorry. I just think it amazing that my son wipes out a few guards, leaves you two alone on that floor and Miguel ends up getting shot by two guards that come out of nowhere. It was two guards wasn’t it, or was it three?”

“Joe, it happened fast.” George walked to the livingroom. “And I’m beat.”

“And hungry too.” Joe followed. “You know you have to be one lucky son of a bitch.”

Growing even more angry, George just wanted Joe to leave. “Why is that, Joe?”

“Well.” Joe scratched his nose as he sort of bounced back and forth from heel to toe. “Miguel was shot, what, almost immediately? My daughter, well, my daughter, she was there four days, and in the course of that time, she was starved, beaten, tortured, drugged and, and let’s just say, worse. But you. Look at you. You were there a month. Not a scratch on you. And you look good, thinner but good. Why do you suppose that is? Do you think it’s because you were president. And they still saw you like that?”

George shrugged. “Don’t know.” He felt the heat began to grow beneath his collar, but he controlled himself. “I don’t know why.”

“Did they say?”

“They never spoke to me. I never saw them. A guard opened my door for food.”

“And they just locked you in a room? Son of a bitch.” Joe shook his head, then looked at his watch. “I have to go.” He smiled and walked to the door reaching for it. “Oh and one more thing.”

“What is it Joe, I’m tired.” George’s irritation finally showed through.

“Nothing much. I’m just finding it odd. You were the president. The land was leased to the Caceres society. They worked here and you didn’t know anything about it?”

“No I didn’t.”

“Now see, I find that really odd.” Joe shook his head. “Probably could have stopped the whole thing if you knew?”

“I would have. But they had a master plan. They were releasing the virus. Nothing could have stopped them.”

Joe nodded again. “That’s what I thought.” He smiled once more than finished opening the door.

“Thanks George you’ve answered a lot.” He spun his heels before he walked out, still smiling arrogantly. “*But* . . . Just one thing. I thought you said the scientists didn’t speak to you at all.”

“They didn’t. I never saw one.”

“Just needed to know that. Thanks, George.” With a deep breath Joe walked from George’s home. His mind was heavy with thoughts as he stepped into the street. He walked slowly, occasionally looking back at the house he had just left. Preparations were made for Joe’s talk with George. Preparations that included instructions to anyone who had contact with George, *not* to mention the society or their plan. Joe told them he wanted to be the one to inform the former president. And Joe’s preparations worked.

George had confirmed his every suspicion, his fear, when he spoke of the master plan. Something he couldn’t possibly have known unless the scientists had told him. And according to George, they didn’t speak to him at all. He was locked away in a room. Joe had the inner proof he needed, he just had to find the physical proof for everyone else. He would have to have that. To think that about George being the traitor that lived amongst them was one thing. To prove it to the community, that looked to him as a trusted council member, was another.

Joe was in his own world. Deep thought, a sense of loss, an overwhelming anger growing caused him not to be paying attention. If he had, he would not have been nearly knocked over by Dean who ran at a high speed past him. “Dean, what the hell?”

“Help me, Joe.” Dean kept running. “Help.”

As Joe turned his view from Dean he was nearly knocked over by Frank he was picking up the distance between them. “Christ Almighty . . . Frank! Leave him alone!” Joe tossed his still burning cigarette and took off running after them. “I’m getting too old for this shit.”

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