

In Retrospect

By

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Reflecting . . .

Once upon time, there was a little story. A story about a group of people who lived through a very tragic time. The world's end. They were survivors who pulled together, rebuilt and started their lives over with. However, a few years are missing from the story. The building years. The years that made the people of Beginnings who they are. Explanations are needed and given. But, just, just when you think you know the people of Beginnings so well, that a crucial story error has occurred, keep in mind a few books back it was Frank versus the Time Machine and Frank lost . . . sort of.

BEGINNINGS MONTANA

October 2
Present Day

Robbie Slagel's long thin fingers scratched then ran across his cropped, sweaty, messy blonde hair as he tried with diligence to keep the straightest of faces. His hand, smeared the hard work dirt of his day across his face as his fist stopped before his tightly closed mouth. His eyes, glossy, stared with a squint to his big brother Frank as they sat in Frank's security office.

Frank gave an odd look, closing one of his dark eyes. He looked as if the world had delivered him a mystery. He bent his tall body down, looked under his desk, then swivelled his chair quickly to the left and to the right. "Did you hear that, Robbie?" Frank placed his finger to his ear pushing on it. "Kind of high, squawky and really annoying."

"Ha, ha, ha." Dean Hayes stood next to Robbie, arms folded. "Are you listening to . . ."

"There!" Frank tugged on his ear. "There it is again."

"Frank!" Dean snapped at him.

Frank laughed and rocked back in his chair. "You know Dean, I'm trying here. I'm trying not to embarrass you."

"Embarrass me?"

"Yeah." Frank nodded.

"How do you figure, Frank?"

"Well . . ." Frank held out his hand. "You've obviously followed me Dean in some sort of dependancy need." Frank rubbed his own chest. "I knew it would happen. It's O.K., Dean." Frank held out his hands. "We're back in Beginnings. I'm still here to protect you." Frank leaned into his desk.

"You're an asshole Frank." Dean quipped. "And you keep forgetting I was the one who came out there after your big ass. But let me tell you something. You can't pretend you don't hear me."

"What?"

"Really funny. But I want you out of my house." Dean ordered. "Pack your things back up and out. You can not live there Frank."

"Dean. I'm crushed. You invited me."

"I did no such thing."

"Did too."

"Frank!"

"What?" Frank tried not to laugh.

"This is not a joke."

Frank cleared his throat, shifted his eyes to Robbie then back to Dean. "Living together Dean is always serious. I like the house. I'm staying." Frank cupped his hands behind his head and rocked back.

Dean nodded his head, ran his fingers frantically through his dark blonde hair and brought his hand down with a point. "Look . . ."

"Where."

"Frank."

Frank laughed. "Dean." He stood up towering over Dean. "I'm not going anywhere. I stay. So get used to it."

"You know, in that Frank pea size mind, you think it's a perfect way to interfere in mine and El's marriage then . . ."

"It is." Frank interrupted.

Dean growled at him in anger. "It won't happen."

"Already has."

"When?"

"I'm living there."

"So."

"So you don't think what happened yesterday between me and El won't happen again." Frank sat back down. "It will. How can she resist me." Frank huffed out, proudly and arrogantly to annoy Dean. "I *am* the love of her life."

"What happened yesterday Frank?" Dean asked. "You came home."

"Dean we had our little reunion." Frank winked at Robbie.

"You didn't sleep with her Frank."

"Did too."

"You did not. Ellen told me."

"She lied."

"Why would she lie." Dean grew more irritated by the minute

"To protect your Dean little-man sexual ego. She's sensitive like that."

"And you're being like this to piss me off."

"It's working."

"No." Dean held up his hand. "I won't let it. In fact . . ." Dean took a breath. "I'm not going to play this game." Dean looked to Frank who stared so smug, rocking back and forth in his chair, then to Robbie who stared ahead, red faced. "Frank." Dean calmed his voice. "You are more than welcome to stay at my home. In fact, my wife and I will be more than happy to have you."

"You mean . . ." Frank pointed. "My lover."

Dean flashed a grin. "What ever."

An interruption, a means to an end. The door to Frank's office opened and Hal Slagel walked in. "Hey Frank, I'm here for the brothers meeting. Hi Dean are you staying?"

Dean let out a short huff of a laugh. "No, Hal I don't believe I'm in the mood to be outnumbered and drown in a vat of testosterone produce by the over arrogant, over confident, oversized, Slagel men of this community." With a quick turn of his body and an air of hostility, Dean stormed by Hal, barging out of the office and slamming the door.

Hal tilted his head and looked curiously at the door. "What's up with him?"

"He hates you." Frank stated.

"He does not." Hal argued.

"Does too." Frank rocked. "He was just in here saying 'God Frank, do something about Hal, he sucks.'"

Hal rolled his eyes and sat down in a chair next to Robbie. "You're still starting trouble Frank."

"Me?" Frank laughed. "Tell him Robbie. Do I start trouble around here?"

“Never.” Robbie answered.

“See.” Frank held out his hand.

Hal swayed his head. “And you’re still defending him.”

“He doesn’t need to.” Frank said. “And . . . just for your information Hal. This isn’t a repeat of when we were kids. You can’t get me in trouble around here. So don’t think you can. People, love me here.”

Hal laughed. “I’m sure. And besides Frank. I’ve matured. Unlike some people.”

“Meaning?” Frank raised one eyebrow.

“Meaning you.” Hal told him.

“Now see, why would you say that?” Frank shook his head with an innocent look.

“Well, for one thing.” Hal held up his hand. “Cole, a man in this community just died an hour ago and you were more concerned with finding a new home.”

“Yeah. So.”

“Yeah so?” Another disbelief shake of Hal’s head. “So, should you show some remorse?”

“Frank?” Robbie looked innocently up. “He’s right.”

“He is.”

“Shall we have a moment for Cole?” Robbie asked.

“I think we should.” Frank folded his hands and looked at Hal. “A moment for Cole.”

Robbie lowered his head. “A moment for Cole.”

“Moment’s over.” Frank sprang his head up and grab a cloth sack. “Sunflower seed.” He held the bag out to Robbie and Hal. “We have lots to catch up on.”

Hal tossed his hand up in the air. “I give up.”

Robbie reached into the sack. “Hey Frank. I’ve been practicing.”

“Let me see.” Frank motioned his head up and grabbed the tin wastepaper basket sliding it more toward Robbie. “Go on.”

Hal looked at wonder to them as he watched Robbie shove a hand full of sunflower seeds in his mouth. “What are you . . .”

Ping . . . ping . . . ping . . . ping. Robbie spit the sunflower seeds in the trash can.

Frank laughed loudly. “Man, that sucks. Watch the master.”

Robbie nudged Hal. “Watch this, this is hysterical.”

Loud, hard and rapid. It sounded like a machine gun when Frank, released his mouth full of sunflower seeds into the tin waste paper can.

Robbie laughed with his whole body. “God, I wish I could do that.”

Hal seemed aghast. “This is the skill our big brother has taught you. Robbie, please. This is not amusing. It’s foul. And you . . .” Hal looked back to Frank. “You can’t find anything better to do than aim sunflower seeds into a trash can?”

“Oh yeah. Sure I can.” Frank grinned.

Hal closed his eyes when a sunflower seed, wet, landed on him. “Funny. Real funny Frank. I thought this was a brothers get together not a rehashing of

old 'pick on Hal' times. No wonder Dean was so upset when he left here."

"Dean was upset because you came in." Frank nodded. "I told you that. And besides, Dean has always been uptight. Since day one. Hasn't he Robbie?"

"Yep. I like him though. But he's always uptight. He has this thing about us." Robbie shrugged.

Hal shifted his eyes from brother to brother. "And I suppose neither of you two ever did anything to upset him."

Frank closed his mouth and shook his head. "Never. Not in my recollection."

Robbie held up a finger. "Yeah, but Frank, your recollections different than anyone else's. Remember, you fucked up time."

"A little. Not much. It couldn't have been that bad. You're here." Frank motioned his hand out.

"True." Robbie nodded. "And, in my recollection Dean has always been uptight."

"Mr. Know it all." Frank said.

"Yeah." Robbie agreed.

"Pitiful." Hal stated. "The man is a brilliant scientist and you two tear him apart."

Frank gasped dramatically. "We do not. Do we Robbie?"

"No, actually Hal we treat him with the utmost respect." Robbie explained. "He scoffs at our attempts at friendship. Has since day one."

Hal just looked so offended. "Robbie, you'll just say anything that Frank wants you to."

"I look up to Frank. He's my hero."

"I'm his hero." Frank grinned. "Have been since day one. In fact . . ." Frank pressed his finger to his own temple. "Aren't I everyone's hero?"

"Yep." Robbie nodded. "Have been since . . ."

"Day one." Hal finished Robbie statement. "Now are we going to catch up or are we going to praise Frank?"

Frank laughed. "Praise me."

"I have to." Robbie defended. "I missed him. He was gone a while."

"A month." Hal snapped. "A month. I was gone for seven years and you don't praise me."

"There you have it." Frank held out his hand. "He didn't miss you."

"I missed you Hal." Robbie reached out and patted Hal on the back. "We both missed you."

Frank smiled and spoke with seriousness. "Yeah, we did. It's really great to be together again isn't it? And . . . that's why we're here. To not only catch up, but just hang back and be brothers again. Because brother . . ." Frank winked and leaned into his desk with a proud look. "It's been a hell of a long time. Welcome to Beginnings. Or . . ." He leaned back in his chair. "As many people call it around here. Frank's world."

BOOK ONE

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE FIRST YEAR

The Arrival

CHAPTER ONE

August 20
The Plane

“Christ.” Joe complained, rubbing his eyes and adjusting himself in the seat of the plane.

“What’s the matter Joe?” Andrea asked as she glanced up from her bible.

“If I could have anymore of a headache, I’d swear I was having a stroke.”

“Stress?”

“You could say that.” Again, Joe shifted in his seat. “I have Ellen throwing up. Frank laughing because she’s throwing up. Dean getting irritated because Frank’s laughing and Robbie who’s instigating. Not to mention, that this plane has been taking a nose dive every few minutes causing Henry to scream. This is not . . . this is not a good start to our departure to our new home. Nor is it a sign of good things to come.”

Andrea reached her hand over tapping Joe on the knee. “Relax. Take a breath. It shouldn’t be much longer until we get there, Joe. Read with me.” She extended her bible over his way.

Joe shifted from the Good Book to Andrea. “No.” He swayed his head. “Excuse me.”

“Sick?”

“Yes. And tied.” Joe grumbled as he moved up the aisle and the plane tilted drastically to the right breeding a Henry scream. He paused when he reached the front of the plane and William sat alone reading a book. “How do you do it?”

William peered up. “Do what?”

“Stay so calm all the time.”

“Years of practice. I’ve learned to block everything out.” William told him. “Besides, I’ve got great incentive to stay calm.”

“What’s that?”

Lowering his half square glasses and peering over top. William shifted his body and pointed back to Dean. “You’ve not see it yet. *That* is so high strung, I just picture him in one of his hissy fits and I think to myself, do I want to look like that? No.” William shook his head and returned to sitting normally in his chair. “And I just calm myself right back down.”

Joe immediately glanced back at Frank and shuddered. He let out a breath and laid his hand on William’s shoulder. “Thank you for the advice, I never thought of that. I will now.” He moved onward to the cockpit. Reaching for the door he felt the plane shift to the left., Joe had to hold on. As he pushed the door open he heard the sound of laughing children, Johnny and Denny. “George.” Joe tried to not really snap his name out.

“Hi Joe.” George turned around.

“Pap!” Johnny called out excitedly. “Look, George is teaching me how to fly a plane.”

“Yeah.” Joe squinted and rubbed his eyes. “I see that.”

“He’s doing well.” George smiled. “He’s gonna be the next generation’s

pilot. I think I'll really start teaching him next year."

"If we don't crash in the mean time."

George laughed. "Were fine."

"You are. And I understand you're just trying to amuse the kids." Joe said. "But unfortunately, Johnny's 'I'm a kid who's flying a plane like my video game' antics isn't boding well with everyone back there. Can we just ease up on the tilting and nose diving please?"

"Sure Joe." George nodded.

"Sorry pap-pap." Johnny hunched.

George turned back around in his seat after Joe had left. "Sorry about that Johnny."

"That's O.K." Johnny sulked some in the chair, his hands reaching up and touching--barely touching--the copilot's controls.

"Probably was that last nose dive I did that did it. Don't worry about it."

George patted Johnny's knees. "We're getting choppers. Now those things . . ."

George smiled. "Those things are fun." He winked. "I'll take you up in one."

"Promise?" Johnny's face lit up.

"Promise." George smiled assuredly.

Miguel Sanchez was a burly man, not as tall as he gave the appearance of being. A truck driver for over twenty years. Long salt and pepper hair he always kept in a ponytail. The three hours of the flight had been a quiet one for Miguel. Sitting alone, thinking of his family, a new beginning in Beginnings. But his nerves started to twitch within his stomach, and after the silence, he needed to speak to someone. He weighed his options looking around the plane. He could have gone and spoke to Maggie, a motherly woman. But instead he chose Andrea. There was just something about Andrea that struck Miguel, had since he first saw her. But like with every woman he encountered, every time he tried to talk, he became tongue tied, and to Miguel, his English was bad enough as it was.

Taking a chance that it was a closed in place and Andrea had a window seat and couldn't easily get up and run from him, he made his way to her. "May I sit?"

"Certainly." Andrea smiled and closed the book.

"I know Mr. Slagel is sitting here."

"Oh Joe?" Andrea peeked up. "Looks like he's speaking to William now. Sweet Jesus, I hope a calm man like William can get through to Joe. He is so uptight."

"Mr. Slagel has taken responsibility. And I think he'll be better when we get there. Don't you?"

"Hopefully."

"Enjoying your read?" Miguel pointed to the bible.

Andrea moaned with a nod. "Always. Actually I'm reading from the book of Lamentations."

"Chapter three?"

“Why yes.” Andrea smiled. “You’re familiar.”

“Very. A story of starting over. I know it well. I know the bible well. It went with me everywhere I went.”

“Really?” Andrea spoke so impressed. “My husband and I used to sit and read to each other. Alternating verses. It was a closeness ritual that I think I’ll miss.”

“If you need that at all. Just let me know.” Miguel saw the stunned look on her face. “I’m sorry. I meant that . . . wait.” Miguel closed his eyes. “I did not mean that to be pushy?”

Andrea shook her head with a smile. “I didn’t take it like that. No, I would love for you to read with me.”

“I’m not a very good reader. I must warn you.”

“Heavens.” Andrea flung out her hand. “I believe when you read the Lord’s word you never read bad.”

“Thank you Andrea for being so kind to me.”

Andrea looked oddly at him. “Why on earth wouldn’t I be?”

Miguel slowly shrugged his big shoulders. “Most people are not. Well I have bother you enough.”

“You’re welcome to stay and talk if you’d like. Really.”

“Thank you. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for months.”

Curiously, Andrea looked at him. “Why haven’t you?”

Miguel wasn’t prepared to answer the why part. He didn’t expect her to ask. Why did Andrea have to ask? He didn’t have an answer. And just like in the eighth grade when he was in that spelling contest and he realized he didn’t know English well enough to speak it let alone spell it, Miguel freaked. With horror, he shifted his eyes to her. “Well . . . well . . .” He watched her nod waiting for an answer. “Well . . .” And before Miguel could do what he always did, ramble fast and in Spanish, he hurried from the seat, smiled with a nervous smile and quickly made his way back down the aisle to his own seat.

Finally Ellen had fallen asleep. Dean couldn’t recall ever knowing anyone who had to take three doses of Dramamine before it effected them. Though it probably wasn’t good for the baby, neither was how airsick Ellen had become. Dean must have watched Ellen sleep for at least twenty-minutes. Locked in a stare of her. Ellen’s head tilted to the side, almost resting on his shoulder. Peaceful looking and pouty she slept. And for as much as Dean had wanted to pull her close, against him, to try to make her comfortable, he was grateful at that moment he hadn’t because he would have had to disturb her. The tops of his thighs were starting to cramp up from sitting so long and it was time to stand up and stretch his legs. Of course, Dean dreaded that also, knowing full well as soon as he stood he would feel the overwhelming physical effects of all those Cokes he nervously consumed.

After trailing his fingers softly down Ellen’s face, Dean slid back and stood up. He shook his legs, feeling that ache slip away. And he turned to walk to the back of the plane. In his stride he saw yet another reason for the peacefulness on the plane. Not only did Ellen sleep, but Robbie did too, and

Frank was no where to be seen. Dean could only hope he was in the cockpit or perhaps Frank had changed his mind mid flight about Montana and jumped out some twenty thousand feet in the air.

After smiling at that thought, Dean had to snap back into reality when he saw Frank hadn't departed the plane early at all. He was just stealing a bag of peanuts from the kitchen area.

Dean stopped in the aisle in front of Frank, there was no way even at his little size he would be able to squeeze by huge Frank. "Excuse me." Dean said politely.

Frank removed the bag of peanuts from between his teeth. With ease he looked over Dean's head. "El sleeping?" Frank asked in a graveling whispering voice.

"Yes. Excuse me."

"Good." Frank lowered his eyes. "We need to talk you and I."

"I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to talk when we get to Montana, Frank."

"I want to talk now." Frank raised his eyebrow.

"Seeing how I'm not getting down this aisle because you've decided to take a big bully stand with me. Go on. Talk." Dean held out his hand.

"What is your problem?" Frank asked.

"My problem? How about what is yours?"

"You're my problem, Dean."

"Well, then now we're even. Because you're mine. Now if you'll excuse me."

Frank laid his hand on Dean's chest stopping him from passing by. "Look. I don't know anything about you. And I don't care to know anything about you. Who you are. What you do. All I know is that you came into a circle of people and worm your way into a situation you have no right to be in."

"What?" Dean nearly had to laugh in ridicule. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Ellen."

"You think I *wormed* my way into being with Ellen." Dean swayed his head. "I'm not going to stand here and discuss or argue over Ellen with you. What happens between Ellen and I on a personal level isn't really your business."

"Oh I beg to differ Dean. Ellen is my business. I will watch out for her."

"Somehow I think this chip on your shoulder towards me goes way beyond any protective instincts you have toward her."

"Oh you'd better believe it." Frank still kept his voice low. "You stepped in the middle of something you shouldn't have. You got her pregnant. And you Dean, are the last person, with the world like it is, that she should be with."

"Here we go again right? She's supposed to be with someone she knows."

"That's right."

"Who says Frank?" Dean questioned having a high edge to his voice. "Huh? As far as I'm aware there is no 'end of the world' rule book that states who you should or should not be with. And I'm not understanding this obligatory notion you've attached to your situation with Ellen because you have

been friends for many years.”

“We were more than friends, Dean. We’ve always been more than friends.” Frank leaned closer whispering in a hostile tone.

“Well that says a lot for your character then Frank, because last I heard, before the world ended, you were a married man.” Dean brushed by Frank quickly.

Frank stopped him. “Line crossed. You just started a war little man. One that you are ill equipped to fight. You know nothing. Nothing about mine and El’s lives. Nothing about the people we were married to or our marriages. And you, Dean, know nothing about me and Ellen. If you did, you wouldn’t be standing here with that smug fuckin look on your face.”

“Smug?” Dean remained calm. “It’s not smug Frank, it’s lack of fear of you. And I’m not buying into this insinuation that you have some type of hold on her. But if you do . . .” Dean took a slow breath and spoke softly. “Maybe you should let her go. Put the past behind her. Let her start a new life, Frank.”

“With you?”

“It doesn’t matter with me. With anyone. If it ends up being with me, then great. But the fact is Frank, she needs to move on. She lost everything.”

“So did I Dean.” Frank blasted in a low voice. “And I’m not about to lose her either. I want her in my life. Not yours. And I promise you this, as long as you’re with her, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way. If only just to make your life miserable . . . I’ll be there.” Frank gave a quick raise of his eyebrow, shitty grin and moved away from Dean.

Dean closed his eyes before moving onward to the restroom. It wasn’t his intention to have a verbal high altitude battle with Frank. And Dean’s gut told him that the encounter with Frank, like the name and place they were going, was just the beginning. And he received his proof of that when he returned to his seat, to find Frank sitting there, eyes closed and Ellen sleeping in a lean against this chest.

CHAPTER TWO

The Arrival - Montana

A tractor trailer and a minibus were already waiting on the runway when the plane landed. Left there weeks ago in the final preparatory stages.

The sun was warm and bright, the faces of those who stepped off the plane weren't. Tired from the flight, but more so a sense of depression hit a lot of them. They could have been standing in China, that's how far away from their lives they felt.

Standing on the runway, they gathered waiting for Joe to return from his opening the cargo hatch of the plane with Miguel.

Setting down a small bag was when it hit William how well he knew his son. The strong, almost stomp Dean had to him as he stood next to his father. William stood upright, looking at the glare on Dean's face, watching the wind whip about the hair that needed cut. "Dean? Are you all right."

"Yes." Dean looked over his shoulder to Frank. "No. No I'm not. I just don't under . . ."

"Dean."

"Yes."

"Are you going to start bitching?"

"Yes."

"Thought I'd ask. Excuse me." William picked up his bag and moved away calling out for Joe as he did.

Dean tossed his hands up.

"Listen up people." Joe called everyone's attention. "We're going to unload the last of the boxes now. It shouldn't take long. Then we're going to head down into Beginnings. I figure we'll be too busy at first unpacking, getting settled and pretty much taking in the new home. So we're going to meet tonight to discuss what happens next. There's still a lot to do. Right now, Jonas will explain the housing situation to all of you. Basically everyone but Henry and Ellen have been paired off with housing buddies. This isn't by their choice, this was George's and my choice. Just so there isn't any wondering why they get their own places, let me explain. The pair offs left a woman and a man. And we decided since those two probably would be the hardest to live with, we left them on their own. All right." Joe clapped his hands together once. "We might as well get started."

"Joe." Henry called to him, trotting up to Joe as he walked to the plane.

"Yes, Henry?"

"You didn't tell me I was living by myself. I'm really not that hard of a person to live with."

"Really?"

"Really."

"All right. John Matoose said you picked out which town house you wanted to live in. Why did you pick the one you picked. They're all alike."

“Well Joe. Energy conservation. It’s in the middle.”

“I see.” Joe nodded. “And what did you proceed to do before you slept in the house?”

“I sterilized everything.”

“Why?”

“Germs.”

“Henry no one’s lived in the house. Ever. What does that tell you about yourself?”

Henry scratched his head. “I’m meticulous?”

“No, you’re anal. And I for one, know no one that likes living with an anal person.” Joe moved on.

“Oh Joe that wasn’t nice. Joe . . .” Henry hurried to catch up to him despite the fact that he was being ignored.

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“And I’m really not understanding his reasoning.” Henry rambled in Ellen’s house, helping her in the kitchen put away the food rationing. “I’m not that hard of a person to live with.”

“Me either Henry.” Ellen reached up to place a canned good away.

Henry stopped her. “You really shouldn’t reach. Here.” He took the can from her and put it away. “I really thought that you and Dean would live together. You’re having a baby.”

“Well even though we’re having a baby, we’re still in that getting to know each other phase. I’d hate to ruin that by finding out things about him that I can’t live with, but could have easily gotten over had we’d gotten to know each other not living together during the getting to know each other phase.”

“Oh that is such a valid point.”

“Isn’t it.”

“And I’d better be going. I have lots of other food to distribute.”

Ellen followed him out of the kitchen to the livingroom. “They certainly work you so hard Henry.”

“I don’t mind. What else am I going to do?”

“True.”

Henry opened up the door and Dean stood there holding boxes. “Are you moving in Dean? You’re not supposed to be moving in. Maybe Ellen should explain her theory to you.”

The two boxes dropped with a thump from Dean’s arms. “No, I’m not moving in. These are her boxes. And are you teaching her the art of theorizing.”

“No why? Should I?” Henry asked.

“Could you?” Ellen requested.

“No.” Dean answered for Henry. “One theory man is enough.”

Henry swayed his head. “All my life I’ve been a target. I hope Beginnings is not the beginning to it starting all over again. Everyone picks on me. Except for you El, you’re very nice. Did you need some help Dean?”

“No I got it Henry, thanks.”

“O.K.” Shrugging Henry waved to Ellen and squeezed by the door blocked by Dean and the boxes.

With his foot, Dean nudged the boxes inside. “Want me to carry these up for you?”

“No. I’ll get them.”

“That man is the most hyper man I have ever met.” Dean closed the door. “He was when I met him, but then he slowed down some when everything hit.”

“Dean, the world was dying, what did you expect him to get like. I don’t think there was a person out there jumping around and having fun.” Ellen had a cold edge to her.

“What’s wrong?” Dean stepped closer.

“Nothing.”

“El.”

“I hate it here.” Ellen let out a slow breath and folded her arms.

“This house?”

“No this place. I don’t want to be here. I wanna go home.”

Dean was shocked. “El? We all agreed to do this, right?”

“Yeah.” Ellen’s head hung low.

“Did you talk to Joe about this?”

“Joe doesn’t care.”

“Yes he does.”

“O.K., yeah, he does. But he’ll just tell me ‘tough, deal with it.’”

“El.” Dean stepped closer to her. “Can I do anything to help?”

Ellen sadly shook her head. “I think . . . I think right now I need to be alone.”

“I can do that.” Dean, a little apprehensive stepped to her and kissed her on the cheek. “Can I check back later?”

“I’d like that.”

“All right.” Dean smiled and moved to the door. “El, you can say no. But, can we, can we have dinner tonight together. Before or after Joe’s meeting, you name it.”

“Before?”

“Great. I’ll be back in a couple hours.” Dean opened the door and smiled at her. “And El, everything will be all right. If you need me, just pound on the wall. I’m right next door.”

Ellen slowly nodded as Dean left, then as the door shut, Ellen, alone turned around and looked upon the first floor of her new house. And it would always be a house to her. It would never be home. Besides the lack of pictures and nick knacks that gave the place that ‘lived in’ look, it lacked the feel of memories that Ellen so desperately needed to see at the turn of every corner. Memories that would never be there because they were still at her home in Ashtonville. A place that to Ellen, was a million miles away.

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Robbie closed the bottom dresser drawer with his foot, bent down and

picked up his empty duffle bag. "It makes no sense to me Frank." Robbie turned to Frank who had three boxes on a bed and a duffle bag. "It doesn't. All of this housing and I stay with you and Johnny."

"Dad says they're conserving energy. And there's no reason why you can't live here." Frank stared at the boxes as if he were waiting for them to unpack themselves.

"But Henry gets a house."

"You heard what Dad said." Frank spoke as if in a daze.

"I could live with Henry. I don't see what the problem is."

"He doesn't think you'll get along."

"Please." Robbie fluttered his lips in sarcasm. "Who don't I get along with." He moved closer to the bed. "Maybe I should live with Ellen."

Frank quickly snapped his views to Robbie, then turned away.

Robbie held up his hand. "Maybe not. How about . . . maybe Ellen should live here and I . . ." He shut up when Frank, again, quickly looked with a glare then returned to his box staring. "Maybe not. Frank? What is it?"

"I can't do this." He backed up. "Not yet."

"What do you mean?" Robbie asked as Frank bolted across the room. "Are you tired?"

"No. I can't bring myself to unpack. Unpacking is starting over forgetting about everything. I can't do that. Am I the only one who feels that way? I must be, because everyone seems to be really fuckin enjoying this new start. And I hate it . . . I hate it." Rambling something un-interpretable, Frank charged from the room

Robbie tossed his hand up. "All right. And he wonders why I'm wondering why I'm living with him." He scratched his head. "Or maybe not."

^^^

The first row of townhouses on the left and the first row on the right was where everyone resided. A street ran between the first two rows and it wrapped around the center town, so empty. Joe walked with Miguel. They met up when they both walked from their homes at the same time. And together they decided to just walk around and talk.

"And you're a big man Miguel." Joe stated. "I really hate to lose your size when we unpack and stock the warehouses. But you have a level head. I need you to learn the farming off our farmers."

"I have no problem with that. I can even help in the evening with unloading if like you wish."

"I might like to wish. Yes." Joe stated and hunched when he heard the slamming of a screen door. It was followed by a soft sweet humming and Joe looked up to see Andrea stepping of her porch.

Andrea brightly smiled and waved when she saw the two men approaching.

But Miguel froze. His mouth opened and shut and he tried to wave his arm but he really couldn't lift it. So not wanting to appear rude, without saying

anything Miguel spun and took off running back to this house.

Joe did a double take seeing Miguel dart off. He moved to Andrea who looked just as shocked. "Christ Andrea. What the hell did you do to Miguel."

^^^

Ellen's hand had ran over the top flap to the cardboard box so many times, it had dried her hand out. Ran over the flap, lifted it slightly, but never all the way, and never did she remove a single item from her boxes in her bedroom.

"I thought I was the only one." Frank spoke softly in the doorway of her room. "I knew if anyone else felt like me, it was you."

Ellen turned slowly to him. "What are you doing?"

"I needed to see you." Frank walked into her bedroom. He looked at the boxes scattered about "And I thought we were only allowed to bring three boxes."

"We were. But everyone gave me one of theirs."

"Tell me you can't do it either. Tell me you can't bring yourself to pull anything from those boxes."

"I can't."

Frank stepped even closer. "I feel guilty."

"I know exactly what you mean. It's like we're moving on so far and so fast . . ."

"We forgetting about everything . . ."

"And we shouldn't." Ellen completed the unison thought.

"I'm glad I found you by yourself. I thought for sure . . . Dean would be here." Frank moved to right near Ellen by the bed, his hand playing with the box lid.

"I wanted to be alone."

Suddenly Frank looked up. "I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"You don't count."

"Gees, thanks."

Ellen smiled then spoke with such a loss. "Frank, what are we doing here?"

"I don't know El." Frank's head swayed.

"Frank." Ellen stepped into him. "Let's not unpack."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's leave. You, me and Johnny. Let's just pack up again and move somewhere. No, let's go home."

"El. We can't . . . we can't do that and you know it."

"I know." Ellen's head lowered. "I am at such a loss right now. I feel at such a loss. The reality has hit me again. I don't think I will ever be the same person."

"Me either. And I'm . . . I'm really down right now too. God." Frank closed his eyes painfully. "I never thought I'd hurt this bad. I never thought anything could hurt this bad."

"Even . . . even thinking about our families hurts."

"That's why I came to see you. Of course . . ." Frank gave a slight shrug. "I can't remember a time in my life since we've known each other that I didn't run

to you when things were bad.”

“And I ran to you.”

“Things are bad now El. Why . . .” He placed his index finger under her chin. “Why are we doing this separately? We shouldn’t just be running to each other, but be there, no matter what for each other.”

“We are.”

“And tell me where Dean fits into this picture. You don’t think he’ll run interference when you need me. He’ll want you to talk to him. And what about when I need you. You think he’ll just open up his door and say, Come on in Frank? No.”

“Frank.” Ellen closed her eyes. “He’s not living here. My door is open to you. Anytime.”

“But for how long? How long before he’s in and I’m out.”

“That will never happen.”

“Oh no?” Frank let out a small huff, running his hand over the top of his head. “You’re starting a relationship with this guy. You’re trying to see if it will work.”

“And do you think that will effect how I am with you. You know better. For fifteen years, over fifteen years, you have been number one in my life. I have dropped everything for you when you needed me, married to Pete or not. And that Frank, will never change.”

Frank softened his voice. “I need you now El. Right now. At this point in our lives, with all that’s happened, I need to know you will always be there.”

“I will. I need to know the same Frank.”

“Always.” Frank swallowed harshly. He reached out with painfully closed eyes and brought Ellen into him, wrapping his arms tightly around her, holding her against his chest and pressing his cheek to the top of her head.

There it was. Ellen searched when she walked into the door of her new house. She searched for something familiar. A memory around the corner. A feeling of the past that wasn’t painful, and she found it in Frank’s arms. Feeling the embrace weaken, Ellen pulled back, but she didn’t pull back far.

Frank’s cheek slid down and he tilted his head, bringing in his face so close to Ellen’s, lifting his hand and placing it behind her head. His breath that escaped from his slightly parted lips was warm as it hit against Ellen. So close his mouth was, so tight he still held on to her.

Eyes that were locked, but briefly before they closed and apprehensively, Frank touched his lips upon Ellen’s with a softness, a parting, then a simple tasting.

“Frank.” Ellen whispered his name her mouth still so close to his.

Frank didn’t say anything. His hand moved to her face and his fingers spread wide. Brushing his thumb against the corner of her mouth, he kissed her again.

“Frank.” Ellen pulled away some from the kiss. “We . . . can’t.” She felt his lips kiss hers again. “Frank.”

Frank shook his head and with each touch of his lips to hers his mouth widened more and more. He felt her hesitation to let go. “El. Please. I need you.” He hovered his lips over hers as he pulled her head back and arched her

neck. "I need you."

A single, soft moan crept from Ellen and she moved her body against him, bringing her lips to his. From that kiss on, there were no more words spoken, only bodies holding on and responding to a hurt that so desperately needed to be taken away from the both of them.

CHAPTER THREE

Sitting on the edge of the unmade bed, Frank watched Ellen through the tops of his eyes as he laced up his boots. She slowly combed her wet hair, almost too slow. Doing an adjustment stomp into his boot, Frank stood, picking up his shirt in his stride to Ellen.

She finished and set down the brush, holding it still as her hands pressed against the dresser.

“You all right?” Frank asked softly then put on his shirt. “El?”

She nodded.

Tucking his shirt in, Frank stepped even close. He reached around the front of Ellen and gently turned her to face him. “Are you sure?”

“I’m fine.”

“I have to go.” Frank kissed her softly. “I want to check on Johnny. But I’ll see you in a little bit right? At the meeting?”

“Yes.”

“Then how about after, we get Johnny settled for the night and you and I, we just . . . we just hang out and talk. We can talk about anything, but we’ll just talk like we used to.”

“That’s sounds good.”

Kissing Ellen again, Frank stepped away, he paused before leaving. “You sure you’re all right?”

Ellen took a shivering breath and swayed her head to him as he stood by the door. “I’m positive. I’ll uh . . . I’ll see you later.”

Mouthing the word ‘bye’ with a soft smile, Frank left the bedroom. He knew Robbie and Johnny were probably wondering where he had went. He left in the middle of unpacking. But he truly needed that unscheduled break with Ellen. Hitting the bottom of the steps, Frank didn’t expect to see what he did, Dean walking in. Frank slowed down on his last step. “Dean.”

“Is Ellen here?” Dean asked curiously.

Frank kept walking and he reached the door.

“Is she?”

Frank stopped and turned around. “Yeah. Yeah she is. She’s upstairs.” There was so much arrogance in the slight smile Frank gave with the motion of his head. “Why don’t you go on up.” With his suggestion, Frank walked out, pulling the door closed behind him.

Dean stared for a minute then walked up the steps. “El.” he called out when he reached the top and walked to the master bedroom. “El, are you . . .” Dean stopped cold. Ellen was making the bed.

“Dean.” She stood up surprised.

Quickly Dean’s head spun to the steps and back to Ellen. He couldn’t stop looking at the bed. “Frank said to . . . to . . .” A short breathy laugh escaped him and Dean tossed out his hand in disbelief, turning from the bedroom door and walking away.

“Dean wait.” Ellen dropped the covers and raced to him. “Wait please.”

Dean stopped. “Were you going to tell me.”

Ellen hesitated. "Yes. Yes I was. I feel . . . I feel bad."

"Is that the best you can do." Dean laughed. "Gee, Ellen, thanks."

"I'm sorry Dean. I really . . ."

"Ellen. No." Dean shook his head. "Don't apologize. Don't. We were just starting out. We were going to give it a try. I took that seriously. But I think, I think I took it a little, no, a lot more serious than you." Dean closed one eye and nodded his head. "I'm glad I found out early." He began to take the steps.

"Dean, can I just explain?" Ellen followed him. "Please let me explain."

"Explain what? Explain that you were with Frank? I could see that Ellen. I got the picture. Maybe a little bit better than you did."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was really convenient how I come over here and Frank, gloating, tells me to go on up."

Ellen eyes shifted as she cased Dean's face. "You think I set this up?"

"No, I think Frank did. And you know what El. You're too obliged to him to see it."

"It isn't what you think Dean." Ellen gabbed on to his arm. "Please listen. He came here, He was down. I was down. We've always been there for each other. I don't know why I let it happen, but . . ."

"It doesn't matter." Dean tossed his hand up pulling from Ellen. "I'm not discussing this. There's really no need to. We're having a baby and I will be there for that baby. As far as we go, No." He shook his head. "There's no way. So, now there's no reason to discuss this any further."

"I know you're hurt . . ."

"Hurt?" Dean shook his head. "No El, you don't know there half of it. Yeah, I'm hurt. I had hopes for us because I thought we had the makings of something. We do, and that's a shame because we'll never get that chance. Frank won't let us have that chance. And I feel really bad, not for myself, but for you. Because he just wanted to prove today that he could break us up . . . which he did. And you were so wrapped up in listening to him say he needed you, that you failed to see how much he was using you."

Immediate hostility took over Ellen. "Using me? How could you even say something like that. I have known him for fifteen years."

"It's the truth."

"Why after all these years would Frank suddenly decide to use me?"

"Who's saying it's after all these years. How do you know El he hasn't been using you all along? He's a user Ellen. It's a power thing with him. Like a spoiled kid with his toy. He wants no one else to have it, whether or not he wants it himself."

Ellen's mouth dropped open in a gasp. "You don't understand mine and Frank's relationship. You don't."

"Funny." Dean smiled as he moved to the door. "That's the exact same thing he said on the plane to me today, right before he told me he would get in the way of us even if it was just to make my life miserable. Not because he loved you, or wanted you, but to make my life miserable. And now that you're alone El, ask Frank where he'll be. Bet me he doesn't come full force into the picture until, like the past fifteen years, there's someone in your life."

There were stares of silence after Dean's words, and then, without slamming the door and without saying anything further, Dean left.

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Meat. Canned of course, but meat. It was something William could remember being quite versed at preparing in exciting new culinary ways. He peered at the brown squares bubbling with canned vegetables. And after removing the spoon, he checked the tenderness of the noodles that boiled in a pot just a burner away.

William had a flashback. Or at least he thought it was a flashback. The slamming of the front door, the heavy footsteps of a man light enough to be blown away by a good wind, the pulling out of a chair and the plopping of a rear-end down in the seat. William turned his head to the right peering at the scene he had witnessed many times before in his life. Something was wrong. Dean's head was down. He stared at his hands and that was William's clue that Dean wanted him to ask. William returned to his cooking.

"Ellen's not coming to dinner."

"She isn't?" Over his glasses William looked at Dean, stirring his substance. "Did you explain to her you were not the one cooking?"

"I don't think that would matter. Ellen . . . won't be having dinner with us ever."

"What did you do to her?"

Dean's eyes widened. "Me?" He shook his head. "No. Let's just put it this way. Romantically, I don't think Ellen will be dining with me."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

William, set down the spoon with an 'hmm' and reached for two plates.

"She was with Frank, Dad. With Frank. Already."

"Oh."

"Oh?" Dean stood up. "Just oh? No compassion. No, I'm sorry to hear that son."

"Well Dean." William sat down the plates. "I'm kind of used to it. It's been this way your whole life. You have an inability to keep people close to you. It's a deficiency."

"How can you say that?"

"It's true. You push people away. Unintentionally. But you do."

"I seem to remember having lots of friends when I was little." Dean held up his hand.

"And I seem to remember buying you lots of friends when you were little. Did you ever wonder why none of your friends were ever around very long? My patients would come into the office and say, sorry, Dr. Hayes, I know I promised I'd let you hire my child, but he just can't take the mental abuse any more."

Dean had to laugh. What else could he do. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not. Little Larry Stevens. I immunized him and his brother for free. But if I recall, Larry wasn't around much because you Dean called him a bumbling, neurotic, misfortunate mind. And you were only six. And that was the

early years.” William stayed calm. “How many girlfriends have you ever bought home.”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Dean argued.

“Really? Maybe it’s something you lack. Somewhere. I actually had a hard time believing you physically joined with Ellen to create this child she’s carrying. It had crossed my mind that you made it in a lab and tried to pul the wool over my eyes.”

“I can not believe you’re insulting me like that.”

“My apologies.” William carried the plates into the diningroom.

“And besides, you seem to be blaming me. How is Ellen cheating on me my fault.”

“I’m not saying it’s your fault.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I’m not.” William was firm. “You and Ellen decided to give this relationship a try. Ellen changed her mind, rather early, but changed her mind. What are you going to do about it. Nothing. Are you going to be bitter and stomp around. Probably. You always do,. And that’s part of your problem.”

If Dean’s mouth could hang open any wider it would hit the floor. “Dad.”

“No Dean, hear me out. You had high expectations. I’m sorry. Maybe you placed too high of expectations on it. The world just ended. You got involved with a married woman who was involved with a married man mind you. A habit she probably formed for many years. One she has to break. So you think that you’re so ‘all that’, whatever the young people say, that you can make her forget. You went into it with blinders on when you should have started the relationship eyes wide open and ready for anything. You wouldn’t have been so shocked. Now not only in this small town are we going to have dismay with everyone else, we’ll have it between you and Ellen as well. Which I’m hoping you’ll put behind you.” William went back into the kitchen.

“Put it behind me, like it never happened?”

“Exactly.” William brought back glasses. “I’m not saying run over there and push for the relationship, but start the relationship over again. You need to start it all over. I have a feeling it could work. Where it should have. From Beginning. From scratch. From a friendship., And not from the moment you lost your virginity in a hotel room.”

“Oh my God.” Dean plopped down in a chair. “You have this image of me as being . . .”

“Before you use any big words. Pompous is the word I’m thinking of.” William joined him at the table. “And Ellen is really your only friend here. You don’t make friends easy. You have to learn. Especially now. What have I told you all your life. You have to be at the level of the people you are dealing with. I have. And these people are no less than you are Dean. They just have an annoyance level with people like you who think they are better. Yes you’re smarter, but does that mean you have to be above them. No. This is just the first of many problems here if you don’t start being one of everybody, instead of the brilliant scientist over there alone.”

“You really hate me.”

“I don’t hate you. I love you. And this is going to be a lonely world.

Mistakes happen. Earlier than we would like, but they happen. Put it behind you, and start over.”

“You make it sound so simple. I’m kind of wrapped up in this woman here Dad.”

“And I was wrapped up in your mother.” William pointed. “But I got over it.”

“You make it sound like mom cheated.”

“She did. All doctor’s wives cheat. It’s a fact. So there goes another reason to get over it. You should have expected it for that alone.”

“This . . .” Dean had to chuckle. “Is a little different than the old world. And besides Mom never cheated on you.”

“She did too.” William insisted. “With the mailman.”

“Oh my God.”

“And the milkman. And her golf instructor and . . . Marv the Gardner.” William tilted his head. “Oh I can’t forget about . . .”

“Dad.” Dean said shocked. “No.”

“Yes. What can I say. I was never around. She stopped though eventually.”

Dean closed his eyes briefly. “If Ellen and I started out from the ground up again, like you suggested. I have a feeling, like always Frank will always be around. He has this hold on her.”

“Really?” William raised his eyebrow and stood up. “I have dinner to finish.” He walked to the kitchen and stopped. “But, just keep one thing in mind. No matter how much of a hold Frank has on Ellen, you my son, will always, be one up on the man. A bond only a child can bring.” He disappeared out of sight. “Oh now look, brown stuff has boiled over. Damn it Dean, you and your problems.”

Dean drew up a smile as he swayed his head, not only did his father make him chuckle, irritate him, but William made Dean think. And the words of advice William gave Dean would not go unheard. They never did.

^^^

It had stayed with Ellen, even though she didn’t want it to, everything Dean had said. She reasoned that he spoke out of anger, hurt, but she couldn’t reason enough to shake his Frank ‘using her’ theory from her mind. And though she should have just let it go, she couldn’t. She had to find out for herself. She knew Frank so well. So well. How could she not after all these years. Dean had to be wrong. And she was going to prove it.

Arms folded tight to her, Ellen walked down the street, pausing to look at Dean’s place, wondering how much he hated her. She saw Johnny playing with Denny when she finally arrived at Frank’s. “Hey, Johnny. Is your Dad inside.”

Johnny looked up from the toy figures he and Denny noisily moved about the ground. “Yeah. He’s unpacking.”

Ellen nodded a thanks, took a shivering breath and walked into Frank’s house. “Frank?”

“Up here. Come on up!” He yelled down.

Ellen followed his voice, up the steps and to his bedroom. “Frank?” She walked inside, he was unpacking.

“Hey El. What’s up?”

“I thought . . . I thought you couldn’t bring yourself to unpack.”

“I couldn’t.” Frank looked at her as he reached in an open box. “But right now, I’m feeling a little better.” He winked.

“I bet.” Ellen mumbled.

“What?” Frank asked carrying a stack of tee shirts to his dresser.

Ellen bit her bottom lip. Quickly she raced through her mind to choose one of the many ways she was going to approach him with her fears. “Frank?” She stepped to the bed. “What was this afternoon about?”

“Excuse me?” Frank placed the shirts in the dresser.

“With us. What was that about?”

“El? What are you talking about? I think you know.”

“I think I do too. I just need to hear it from you.”

“This afternoon was about . . .” Frank paused for the words. “Was about two best friends being there for each other.”

“And you said, you wanted us to be there for each other, Right. Together not separate?”

“Yes.”

“Like this afternoon? Is that the way you mean?”

“El?” Frank gave a quirky smile. “What’s wrong? Why are you asking me that?”

“Is that what you mean by together?”

“If that’s what it takes to help us. If that’s what we need, yeah.” He moved back to the bed and his boxes.

“Together not separate.”

“Yes. It would be a little difficult to do separate El.” Frank grabbed another stack of clothes from the box.

Ellen breathed out. “So does this mean, since you’re unpacking, that I should just get my stuff and bring it here?”

The clothes dropped from Frank’s hand.

“Frank?”

“Um . . .”

“I’m going to live here with you right?”

“El.” Frank bent down and picked up the clothes. “Look . . .”

“You said together, not separate. You meant as a couple right?”

“A couple?” Frank brought the clothes to his dresser. “Ellen, look I . . .”

“Be there for each other. Work through this together. We should be a couple. Don’t you agree? I’m expecting to be a couple now.”

Frank gave a nervous laugh. “Don’t you think that’s a little um . . . inane. El, the world ended. I would think the need for commitment would have too. I mean, where else are we going to go.”

“But you wanted to be together.”

“There are twenty people in this town, Ellen.” There was a spark of agitation to Frank. “You live down the street. How are we not supposed to be

together?”

“By not being a couple.”

“I don’t understand . . .” Frank put the clothes away and walked to her. “I don’t understand this sudden need you have for a commitment from me.”

“We slept together.”

“So.”

Ellen gasped. “So?”

“No wait. That came out wrong.” Frank held up his hand. “We were together because we needed that closeness. We needed to be close to help each other through a rough time. We did. I’m sure we will again.”

“How can we, if we’re not a couple. Doesn’t that make us a couple. I thought Frank, I thought you told me a few months back that you wanted to raise this baby with me. Be a family with me. And today you told me you wanted to be together with me.”

Frank closed his eyes. “El, look. I said those things. And if that’s what you really want. Then . . . then I’ll do it.”

“Oh.” Ellen shook her head and waved her hands. “Don’t do me any favors Frank.” She spun and moved for the door.

Frank reached out and snatched her back by the arm. “El, wait. You have to understand. There is more to being a couple than sleeping together.”

“I know this.”

“We can be close. We can be there for each other. But I just . . . I just can’t sit back and worry if I’m doing everything right enough to make you happy. I have my son to put first. He is number one. I can’t worry about if I made enough time for you. Am I meeting your needs. There are other men in this community that you can be with, I don’t want that on my mind as well. Not now. Not at this point in my life. My head is to fucked up to think about that.”

“And mine isn’t? I lost my children too Frank. My head is fucked up too. But that didn’t matter to you did it?”

“What are you talking about?” Frank asked.

“I was trying to move ahead, put the past behind me, but you took it upon yourself to fuck that up, to send Dean upstairs to see for himself that we slept together. Not because you wanted me, but because you didn’t want him to have me.” Ellen’s voice raised in anger. “How, after all these years, can you stand here and insinuate to me, that it will be all right to sleep together, to be there, but only when the need is there, And to hell any other time when things are fine.”

“No El. No. You got it wrong. God.” Frank grabbed onto his head in frustration, tensing up his hands. “Right now. Right at this moment I can’t deal with anything else but my son and getting my head straight. I can’t deal with you like that. In that way. Not right now. Can’t you understand that?”

“Oh I understand. I understand that you needed a quick fix for your hurt and you reached out to the easiest place to get it. Me! Just like you always have. Just like you did for fifteen years. Frank’s little whore. When the truth is, you really could care less about me. My feelings. You proved all that and the fact that you know nothing about me.”

“Bullshit!” Frank’s arm came pummeling down. “I know everything about you!”

“The hell you do. If you did Frank. If I was the so called best friend in your life, then you would know me well enough to know I’m hurting too. I need to move on. I don’t need to get into any head game relationships either.”

“If you’re not wanting to get into a relationship either, then why did you bring it up?”

“Just to see how much you used me today. To see what your intention were. And you showed me you just wanted to secure the fact that you had me at your beck and call whenever your body wanted to feel good enough to make your heart stop hurting. Well I got news for you Frank. Find someone else to lay down for you.” Ellen stormed through the archway, and before she even made it in the hall, Frank pulled her back, slammed the door and spun her around.

“You tricked me?”

“I tricked you.” Ellen said smug.

“Where do you get off, pulling shit like that?”

“Where do I get off? Shouldn’t the question be, where does Frank get off . . . Ellen.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, Fuck you Frank. From now on, stay away from me. Stay out of my life. I’m putting my past behind me and that includes you.” Ellen pointed, pushed him back, turned, flung open the door and charged out.

“Ellen!” Frank raced out after her hearing her fast moving footsteps on the stairs. Just as he descended them and reached the halfway point he heard the door slam. And with that, Frank filled with outrage, turned and delivered his anger through his fist into the wall.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Come on Dad, please.” Robbie begged Joe as everyone started to gather for the meeting.

“Robbie, no.”

“But we can.” Robbie followed Joe around the long table set up. “I can get along great with Henry.”

Joe looked to Henry who trailed behind Robbie. “Did you put this in his head?”

“Oh, no Joe. Robbie approached me. But I don’t see a problem with it.”

“I do.” Joe stated. “You too will clash, guaranteed. And Robbie what is wrong with living with Frank?”

“For starters I don’t want to sleep on the couch., Second. I was playing my guitar and he yelled at me.” Robbie nodded. “In all serious dad.” Robbie cleared his throat. “You can’t stop me from moving in with Henry.”

“No, I can’t.” Joe folded his arms. “You are absolutely right. You’re a grown man who is free to make his own decisions. But as your father let me say this, you move in with Henry. You have been warned. There are no laws anymore Robbie and I don’t have to deal with being irritated with you. So, complain once about living with Henry and I can kill you. Plain and simple. Kill you. Death doesn’t phase me anymore.”

Robbie blinked a few times and then his eyes immediately shifted when he saw Ellen walk in. “El.” He raced to her. “Can I move in with you? I’ll help clean. I’ll cook. I just want a bed. Please?”

“Sure.” Ellen shrugged. “That’s fine.”

“Yes! I’ll bring my stuff over tonight. Thanks.” Robbie grinned and ran to Joe. “I’m not moving in with Henry.”

“Good.” Joe showed his pleasure in hearing that.

“Yeah. I’m moving in with Ellen.” Robbie hurried away.

“Christ. Robbie I . . .” Joe felt the tug on his sleeve, he turned around and had to look down some. Maggie, red faced stood there. “Maggie, what’s wrong.”

“I’m hot Joe.” She said. “I am so hot.”

Joe’s finger went to his ear to rub it. He thought he felt a buzz but realized that was a annoying snicker. Slowly he shifted his eyes to Henry. “Knock it off.” He turned back to Maggie. “Why are you so hot?” Again, Joe shifted his eyes to the peep of a snicker.

“My air conditioning unit broke and that darned front window won’t go up. Can you get it up for me Joe. I’m too hot.”

Joe bit his bottom lip and looked at Henry. “Henry.”

“You know what?” Henry looked brightly. “How about I go over and look at your air conditioning for you.”

“Would you?” The elderly Maggie said.

“Sure. Joe can fill me in on the meeting. We don’t want you being a hot woman Maggie.” Holding back his snicker, Henry stepped to the side, gave a

smirk to Maggie and Joe and walked away.

So fussy baby Katie was in Andrea's arms, and she was a big baby for nine months too. Andrea bounced her, staying calm as the baby fussed and whined. She walked in to the hall with Denny and the baby. "Denny sweetie, I've got to get a break, I'll be right back." Looking around to see who could help her, Andrea spotted seventeen year old Jenny. Jenny stood with John Matoose and Robbie looking more like she was bothering them than talking to him. Adjusting Katie once more, Andrea moved to the trio. "Jenny?"

"Oh hi Andrea." Jenny said perky.

"Jenny would you be a sweetheart and hold Katie for a while. She's being fussy and my back is killing me."

"Oh sure." Jenny took the baby from Andrea bringing forth a loud sound of relief. "Go sit down I'll watch her."

"You're a doll." Andrea reached out, tapped Jenny on the cheek. Grabbed her back and moved to the tables.

Jenny held the fussy baby. "I like children. Do you like children John?" John opened his mouth to speak but Jenny rambled some more. "One day I would like to have children. But I'm going to have to find a man. And have sex. I'm a virgin you know."

Robbie walked away.

Andrea nearly staggered to the table. The three farmers sat there near Miguel. Everyone else that was there seemed to mosey about the big empty building. Andrea smiled, waved her hand a little to Miguel and walked over. "Mind if I sit here?"

Miguel looked at her and then looked ahead.

"Miguel?" Andrea pulled out the chair, just as she lowered to sit, Miguel sprang up.

"Excuse me." Rapidly he spoke and ran off like a scared child.

From behind Andrea, Joe leaned. "I think you should closely reexamine what you have been saying to people. I think you offended him again."

"There's Denny." Johnny happily pointed as he and Frank walked into the meeting hall. "Can I play with him?"

"Yeah., sure." Frank looked about everyone there as if there were a hundred people. "Be good."

Johnny raced over to the far wall where Denny was on the floor with George. "Hey guys."

"Johnny my boy." George reached up and took hold of Johnny's arm. "Join us. I'm teaching Denny a game here. It's called shooting dice. You can play each other for chores and things. That's called gambling."

"Neat." John sat on the floor, and excitedly waited to learn.

“El.” Frank made his way over to her as she stood with Robbie. Ellen ignored him and kept her back to Frank. “El.”

Robbie looked at them both, Ellen’s bitch look, Frank’s anger. “Hey Frank.” Robbie spoke upbeat. “Guess what? I know you may not like this, but, I’m not going to live with you. I’m gonna take the other bedroom in Ellen’s house until the baby is . . .”

“You’re what?” Frank’s voice raised and he laid his hand on Ellen’s shoulder turning her around. “Why is my brother living with you?”

“He needs a bed.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he needs a place to sleep asshole. And not just on your couch.” Ellen snapped.

Robbie swayed his head. “Really Frank it’s innocent, I just . . .”

“Stay out of it Robbie.”

“Don’t you yell at him.” Ellen blared at Frank.

“I’m not yelling at him. *This* is yelling at him.” Frank moved his views to Robbie. “Robbie! Stay out of it!”

Robbie’s mouth tightly closed in a sour pucker as he held back laughing. “O.K.” He shrugged. “I think I’ll uh . . . just sit down now.”

“Thank you.” Hands on his hips Frank looked at Ellen as he spoke to Robbie. He waited until he saw through his peripheral vision that Robbie was gone. “Now what kind of game are you playing here El?”

“I don’t understand what you mean?”

“Using my brother, asking him to move in with you.”

“I wouldn’t play games and use Robbie, Frank. Once again today you prove how well you *don’t* know me.”

“Bullshit. We fight. You run to him.”

“First off!” Ellen held up her hand. “I did not run to Robbie. Secondly, again, it’s my business. And it has nothing to do with you. Nothing.” Her head shook once. “I told you Frank I’m done with you. I mean it. I do. A lot of years I dealt with you . . .”

“Dealt with ne?”

“Dealt with you. And I’m through. Moving on with my life means not only putting the heartache behind me but my mistakes as well.”

“Oh you’re doing that real well by having my brother move in with you. Or don’t you consider sleeping with him a mistake? Probably not. Or else why would you move him into your house.”

“I’ll tell you what Frank. I’ll tell you what.” She pointed as she moved away from him. “That is the second time today you have proceeded to make me feel cheap. Do it again and see that gun Joe has, I swear I’ll shoot you in the fuckin head. I swear it.” She spun harshly, moved to the table and conveniently took a seat between Miguel and Robbie.

^^^

Joe's voice was the only sound in the big empty room with only two long tables joined together. "And I'll explain that to Henry when he returns. O.K." Joe set down his notes at the end of the table. "To rehash quickly. Besides all of us doing our share of field work. Henry will work with Robbie and John in what will be our mechanical division. A lot need fixed and up and running. Miguel and Jonas and Jenny will work with our farmers. Jenny in the greenhouse, Miguel and Jonas learning fields. George and I will stock and organize all that shit we picked up on the runs. Plus schedule more. Frank, you'll come up with a new security system, run checks of our perimeters daily. Keep out those who wonder over from the far mountain. Stan said about three showed up last month. One got violent because he wouldn't let him in." Joe watched Frank nod. "William will work with Andrea teaching her and getting the clinic up. Dean and Ellen are our medical future. They'll do research. Any questions?" Joe received silent stares. "All right. Listen." Joe lifted his leg and set it on a chair. "I know the feel is a somber one here people. I've been around you all day. It's normal. This is all new. But it will work. I promise you that. We'll survive, unlike those who are outside our walls. They may not. And after a few days I'd like to take a break in the work. I know we have a few of these buildings that need redone. I'd like to make this one the first." Joe looked around. "Make some short runs into the neighboring towns. I'd like to make this building into a bar type place. Social hall. So next week, we'll do it. At least we'll have a place other than out homes to relax. O.K.?" Joe took a breath. "All right, I'll let you all go. Any questions about anything. Any problems just see me."

Dean had waded patiently through the meeting. He couldn't remember a word Joe said. He was too busy going over in his mind what he would say to Ellen. And when he saw her stand up, so did he, and he followed her, catching her before she left. "Ellen. Can we talk?"

Ellen stopped and turned around. "You want to talk?"

"You seem surprised."

"I . . . I am." She moved closer to him. "I thought you wouldn't talk to me again."

"No." Dean swayed his head with a smile. "Come here." Taking hold of her arm, he led her over away from everyone. "I just want to say something. And I hope you won't tell me no."

"Go on."

"O.K., this is a small place El. Real small. We have a baby coming. And you and I are going to raise this baby together, one way or another. I would like for us to raise this baby on good terms. I'm not saying or asking you to be with me. In all honesty. I don't think I can do that with you. But I'd like for us to be friends. There is no reason for us not to be close, as friends. We'll be working together all the time, and with the baby, maybe being friends is the new start . . ." Dean took a moment to shift his eyes to his father then back to Ellen. "A new start that maybe we need."

"Oh Dean." Ellen softly breathed out his name. "I'd like that. I really would like that. And I am so sorry about today. I am."

“Let’s not talk about today.” Dean shook his head with one eye closed.

“All right.” Ellen smiled. “Just know that I am so grateful that you don’t hate me.”

“Hate you?” Dean chuckled. “Ellen I can’t hate you. I love you.”

Ellen’s arms folded even closer to her and she smiled more.

“And one more thing.” Dean said. “I know I said we wouldn’t discuss it, but this needs to be discussed. I was wrong for saying what I did today.”

“But you were right.”

“It doesn’t matter. Right or wrong, I shouldn’t have said those things to you about Frank . . .”

Whap! A hard banging sound rang out as Frank’s arm pummeled down, and he slammed his hand against the wall forming a separation between Dean and Ellen. Frank faced Dean. “You put that shit in her head?” his words were laced with rage.

Dean just looked up to Frank.

“Dean. My fuckin day has been miserable because you put that shit in her head?”

“Deal with it Frank.” Dean told him. “I told her how I felt.”

“Bull shit!” Frank screamed. “You did that shit out of spite. *You* were jacked off because me and Ellen slept together today!” Frank stared down at Dean long and hard growing more irritated at Dean’s shifting about eyes.

Ellen tapped Frank once on the back. “You were warned.” She marched over to Joe. “Excuse me Joe.” She reached out to his shoulder harness, and before Joe realized it, Ellen grabbed his revolver.

“Ellen!” Joe screamed. “Give me back my gun.”

Frank heard this in his stare down with Dean and as he lowered his arm from the wall and turned around he saw Ellen, gun aimed and pointed at him, marching his way. “El.”

“I told you. You asshole.” Ellen clicked back the hammer, held out the revolver. Frank ducked along with everyone in the room when Ellen depressed the trigger, fired a shot and seared a bullet Frank’s way. It hit hard into the wall behind where Frank and Dean stood. Wood splinters flew out.

In one smooth motion, Frank pivoted his body, stood up, took one step to Ellen and snatched the gun from her hand. “What the fuck is wrong with you!”

Ellen only glared at Frank then stormed by him to the door, she opened it and barged out the same time Henry walked in.

Henry looked around seeing everyone stand up. “What did I miss?”

Frank slammed the gun into Joe’s hand and turned in anger when he saw Dean following Ellen. He reach out stopping him. “Leave her alone Dean! You’ve started enough trouble!”

“Me!” Dean pulled away. “You Frank. And maybe *you’re* the one who should leave her alone not me.” Dean’s body flung with each word he said. “There’s a word Frank in the English language. It’s called tact. Learn it!” with a full pivot angry spin, Dean barged out passed Henry.

Henry shifted his eyes again. “Oh it was good what I missed, wasn’t it?”

Joe saw Frank lunging toward the door, With a charge for Frank, Joe

twitched his head. "Robbie."

Robbie hurried ahead stopping Frank.

Frank pulled his arms harshly from his little brother who held on with diligence.

Joe laid his hand on Frank's chest. "Settle down."

"I'm going after her."

"You will do no such thing. You hear me. You won't! Now calm down first The you can talk to her."

"Dad!" Frank tried to forge ahead.

"Frank!" Joe shoved him back some. "Sit down right now and calm down before I through your big ass in a goddamn chair and calm you down myself! Do it!" Joe waited. "Now!"

Frank whipped his arm from Robbie's hold with such a force his body actually turned. He ran his hand over his own head, looked to Joe, then to Robbie, then like a scolded child, stomped over squealed out a chair and harshly plopped down.

^^^

Three rows back in the darkness is where Ellen had to stop. Her schoolgirl type giggles carried through the deadened streets of the empty living section. She bent over some, one leg crossed over her other leg, and her hand on her stomach. "Stop." She told Dean as she caught her breath.

"You O.K.?" Dean asked.

"Yeah. I have to stop laughing or I'll pee my pants." She giggled again, took a breath and stood up straight. "O.K., I'm O.K., now."

Dean gave a weird look to her. "Is that normal?"

"For the women in my family yes. So if we end up having a daughter, get used to it."

"I'd like to have a daughter." Dean held his hands behind his back as they strolled slowly.

"Really? I would think you would want a son."

"A daughter." Dean shook his head.

"Of course, we could go into the lab and create one like how your father said we made this one." Ellen stopped walking. "Oh I can't talk about that anymore. It makes me laugh too hard."

"My father really doesn't like me."

"Yes he does. He loves you. William is wonderful Dean. He is going to be such a good grandfather."

"I think so too." Dean agreed. They neared their row of houses.

"Thank you for this walk. I really enjoyed it."

"I'm glad I could make you smile." Dean stopped between their two houses and faced her. "I think, I think I'm going to enjoy being your friend."

Ellen's eyes cased his face. "I would have enjoyed being more Dean. Really I would . . ."

"Ellen." Dean shook his head.

“Frank has such this control over me. He always has. But just know, I’m going to do everything in my power not to let him anymore.”

“O.K.” Dean nodded and spoke soft yet he really conveyed a tone of ‘yeah sure’.

“Thanks for this night.”

“You’re welcome for this night. And we’d better get in. I want to get an early start setting things . . . . shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

Dean’s head dropped.

Ellen looked behind her. Frank was walking toward them.

“Want me to stay with you?”

Ellen smiled. “How chivalrous. But no, I can handle him. Besides, Robbie’s in the house. He’ll beat Frank up.”

“You think he can?” Dean tilted his head.

“No. But Robbie thinks he can. So that’s half the battle. Good night.”

“Night.” Dean glanced up before stepping to his house. He took in the look of ‘waiting’ on Frank’s face as Frank watched them. “I’ll get you in the morning.”

“Sounds good.” Ellen began to turn and Dean grabbed her hand.

“Night El.” He leaned into her and kissed her on the cheek.

The words whispered from her. “Night Dean.” Ellen froze. She watched Dean walk back into his house. She reached up touching her cheek and she turned around.

“Aw how sweet.” Frank said with sarcasm.

Ellen ignored him and walked to her steps.

“El, I heard you laughing.”

“That’s because something funny was said.” She reached for her door.

“From Dean?” Frank mocked.

“Frank!” Ellen spun around. “What is it that you want?”

“In. Thank you.” He nudged her into the house as he stepped up behind her.

Ellen grunted and stepped into the livingroom.

“Hey Frank.” Robbie came down the steps holding his acoustic guitar. “Check me out. I can play as loud as I want. Wanna hear?”

“No.” Frank told him then saw Robbie getting ready to play anyway. “Robbie! Don’t play!” Frank pointed.

Ellen smacked down Frank’s pointing hand. “Don’t you yell at him in his own home.”

“Yeah!” Robbie reiterated. “My own home. My house Frank.” Robbie winked. “We’re living in sin. Jealous.”

“Robbie.” Frank snapped. “I thought you told me a few minutes ago you had someplace to be.”

“Actually I do.” Robbie moved to the door. “I have a date with the hood of a jeep. Gonna sit there, kick back, get into the apocalyptic mood and play ‘Eve of destruction’. Cool huh?” He opened the door. “Night. See you in a bit.”

Ellen stared at Frank for a minute. “So you told Robbie to get out of his own house.”

"I have to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Maybe you don't have anything to say. But I certainly do." Frank grabbed her hand and led her to the couch. "Could you sit down please."

"No."

"Fuck El, why do you have to be like this? Can you sit?"

"I'm not talking." She plopped down on the couch,

"You don't have to." Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out four sheets of notebook paper.

Ellen saw they had writing on him. "I certainly hope you aren't gonna say all that to me."

"I am. So shut up and listen."

"I can't believe you had to write it . . ."

"El!" Frank snapped. "Shut up!"

Ellen crossed her leg, swung it back and forth, glared her face and folded her arms.

"All right." Frank held the paper in front of him. He cleared his throat. "Your favorite color is black. You got your first period late in life at the age of thirteen. Your aunt Carla bought you your first bra. Your first boyfriends name was Greg Swanson. That was when you were seven. You lost your virginity to me at eighteen. You dyed your hair purple when you were fourteen. You graduated from Pitt with a 3.25 average. You love spaghetti sauce but you hate spaghetti noddles . . ."

"Frank."

"Shush. I'm not done." Frank shifted pages. "You love old movies but hate Westerns. All but the 'Horse Soldier' which you loved to watch with my brother Hal. You saw it last count, ninety-four times . . ."

"Frank." Ellen stopped swinging her leg. "What are you doing?"

Frank held up his hand. "You wear a size seven and a half shoe and a size three jeans. You'll say you were a thirty-six bra . . ." Frank winked. "I know better. In fact everyone knows better. Your favorite singer of all time is Frank Sinatra but your favorite song is 'He ain't heavy he's my brother'. You learned to dance by watching old episodes of American Bandstand . . ."

"Frank." Ellen leaned forward softening her voice. "What is all this about?"

"You. And I'm not done." Frank shifted to the next sheet. "In fact I ran out of paper, my dad wouldn't give me anymore." He held up the sheets. "For the longest time you had reoccurring nightmares about pygmies." Frank snickered. "That's funny. You still have a copy of 'the old man and the Sea' which you borrowed from the library when you were nine and never . . ."

"Frank. Stop. Why are you rattling all this off?"

"Cause I wanna show you El, that I know you. I know everything about you. I even know that you probably did that stupid 'I have to go to the bathroom' dance when you were out there laughing with Dean. You said I didn't know you. I want to prove I do. I need to show you I do." He handed Ellen the sheets. "If it's not on there ask me. Ask me anything El. Anything at all. I know it."

Ellen swallowed harshly looking at Frank as he neared her.

Frank dropped down to his knees before her, laying his hands on her legs. “There hasn’t been a day in my life that I didn’t think of you or remember something we did together. I could be a thousand miles away from you El, and I have, and I would know if your happy, sad. And I know . . . I know when I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry that things got messed up and I hurt you. I never meant that. And I swear to you, I swear with everything I am, I didn’t use you. I never had and never will. I just needed to be with you, because I need you.” Frank leaned his weight against her knees. “Tell me El, tell me you aren’t putting me behind you. Please tell me that.”

Ellen closed her eyes. “Ah Frank.” Her hand lifted and laid on his head, she ran her hand down his face. “God! What you do to me.”

So innocently, head down some, Frank raised his dark eyes with a puppy dog look. “I’m sorry we fought.”

Ellen hesitated as she looked at him. “And I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry I tried to kill you.”

Frank winked. “That’s O.K., I’ll let that one go.” He smiled slightly. “Truce?”

Ellen took a breath. “Truce.”

Bringing himself up some Frank moved more into her. He brought his hands to her face and kissed her softly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Keeping his lips close, Frank bred a laugh from Ellen when he nudged against her legs separating them some and then taking advantage of that. Laying his hands behind her head, gripping to the back of the couch Frank leaned his body into Ellen, mouth parted and they began to kiss. But not for long. Stopping, both Frank and Ellen’s head swayed to the door and they laughed when Robbie’s loud guitar playing and raspy singing in the distance echoed out. Following it, almost just as loud, was Henry’s bitching that he hated that song. And the more Henry griped, the more Robbie played and sang. Despite the fact that a ping pong match of ‘shut up, no you shut ups’ between the two men laced every verse and every chorus of the song.

*A Pause . . .*

## PRESENT DAY

Beginnings, Montana

October 2

Ping.

Frank nodded impressed to Robbie. "Good shot."

Ping-ping.

"Yes." Frank rocked in his chair. "See Hal, I knew you'd get it. Ha."

Hal licked his lips. "Those are salty."

Robbie raised one eyebrow up and down. "They're uh . . . sunflower seeds Hal."

Hal rolled his eyes. "Anyhow, getting back. So how did these bikers get into Beginnings that first day?"

"Fuckin Henry." Frank said.

"Yeah, fuckin Henry in mine too." Robbie added.

Hal looked lost. "Henry let them in?"

Robbie answered. "No. In my time frame he shut down the perimeters to save on energy."

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "And um . . . he knew they were out there but he said, Frank will protect us."

"Twenty of them?" Hal asked.

"Twenty." Robbie reiterated. "At least in my time frame recollection. Frank?"

"Thirty in mine." Frank winked. "Fuckin animals. Riding in here trying to pillage."

"How . . ." Hal seemed so baffled. "How did you get them all Frank, if Robbie wasn't there to take them on with you?"

"Alone." Frank sniffed. "Yep, every one else was afraid. Dean hid like a fuckin baby."

Dean's head swayed to his right to look at Frank. "God, Frank, could you lie any more?"

"What?" Frank looked clueless.

"You're lying." Dean said. "Hal, he's lying. Robbie is too. Go check history. I would think even without being history started, someone would have documented the fact that a pack of wild bikers came through and raided Beginnings Montana the first day."

"Really Dean." Hal tsked. "Why would my brothers lie to me?"

"They're assholes."

"Hey!" Frank blasted. "And you're lying Dean."

"I am not."

"Yes you are. You're trying to cover up the fact that your little man ass was hiding, shivering while I had to save the day."

"Frank!" Dean scolded and calmed himself. "If you're not lying, where was Joe?"

Very seriously Frank looked at Dean. "Hiding."

"Hiding?" Dean laughed. "Joe was hiding? Joe?"

“Yeah. Robbie? Did Dad hide in yours too.” Frank asked.

“In a closet.” Robbie nodded.

“See Dean.” Frank pointed.

“No, Frank, no ‘see Dean’. Joe hid? Right. Hal, when have you ever known your father to hide from trouble. If this so called bikers from hell story is true, Joe would have been out there with his sons enjoying that sick Slagel ritual of taking lives.”

“Dean.” Frank quipped his name. “What do you know.”

“I know as much as you.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “You do not.”

“How do you figure. I was there Frank.”

“Yeah but you uh . . . um . . . slept a lot.”

“I slept?” Dean asked.

“All the time. Yeah, we uh . . . couldn’t wake you up for days, so how would you know.”

Hal looked sideways at Frank. “I thought you said he hid like a baby.”

“He did.” Frank answered.

“But you said he was sleeping.”

“He was.”

“He hid and slept?” Hal asked.

“Uh . . . yeah.” Frank said. “He was sleeping and um William had to pick him up and carry him and hide him. He could do that, Dean’s like three feet tall.”

Dean laughed. “My father wasn’t alive in the time frame we remember Frank. Remember?”

“Huh?” Frank scratched his head.

“Yeah but Dean.” Robbie held up one finger. “He was in the time frame I remember. And he hid you. No one wanted to disturb you because they didn’t want to hear you scream.”

“Hal.” Dean turned to Hal. “Don’t believe these two. They’re making up tales. Nothing happened that first day in my memory at all. We arrived. We had some nervousness. We had a meeting and went back to our houses. Other than that, in my memory or in the time frame that actually happened, no band of bikers raided beginnings. There were no snakes that massively took over the buildings. The fourth farmer didn’t commit suicide when he saw Jenny Matoose, there *was* no fourth farmer. And Miguel did not slip into a comforting homosexual one night stand with Jonas . . .” Dean smiled. “Frank did.”

“Dean!” Frank yelled. He calmed himself down with a smile. “I believe I was with Henry.”

Hal looked horrified. “Frank you and Henry were . . .”

“Hal. I’m kidding.” Frank laughed. “Dean just can’t take it because he’s boring.” Frank took a moment to flip Dean off. “And what the fuck are you doing in my office. This is a Slagel meeting. Are you a Slagel? No. So why are you here.”

“I have nothing better to do.” Dean cleared his throat in nervousness. “And um . . . we’re bonding Frank, we’re living together now.”

“Ha.” Frank rocked back and forth some more. “There’s something up, I

know it. And if you're gonna do that little man intrusion, keep your mouth shut while me and Robbie catch up with our brother."

"Keep up with your brother Frank, but tell him the truth. Or have Robbie tell him the truth, he knows the real history since you screwed up time."

"You were there Dean." Frank tilted his head. "You screwed it up too."

"Oh I did not."

"Dean yes you did." Frank saw Dean's mouth open. "Did. Yes. Shut up." He pointed his finger.

Hal tossed his hands up. "Wait. So basically you guys did lie to me. Why?"

Robbie indicated to Dean. "Like *he* said. It was boring. But don't worry Hal, we have lots of good stuff to tell you. Like you probably have good stuff to tell us. Which we want to hear."

"You do?" Hal smiled.

"Yeah." Frank agreed. "We want to hear all about what happened with you. But not now. We're talking."

Again, Hal tossed his hands up in defeat. "Go on Frank."

"Thanks." Frank leaned into the desk with folded hands. "Now, the second day was just as eventful. A poisonous gas leak occurred and in both my memory and Robbie's. Him and I had to go in . . ."

Dean partially closed his eyes and slumped down in the chair listening to Frank's story. Of course Dean he had to admit, Frank's little stories were much more interesting than what really happened at first. Which was, in both histories, not much. So with nothing else to do but stay out of sight--Something he didn't tell Frank--Dean kicked back for a while, with all intentions of staying in Frank's office. If for nothing else, but to just annoy and intrude on the Slagel's.

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE FIRST YEAR

Situated

CHAPTER FIVE

October 28<sup>th</sup> - Beginnings, Montana

Andrea felt as if she were in school again. So many years it had been since she had went. But there she was again, in William 101. She dreaded the studying she had to do, and William, though a wonderful teacher, was not one to be easy on her when it came to learning medicine. As he put it to her, soon enough there will be people to doctor in Beginnings, and she might as well learn it all. And William wasn't joking.

Holding a cup of coffee in her hand. She moved to the little room near the front of the clinic. The room that one day would be her office. Joe had already given her a desk, but that wasn't for when she was a doctor, it was to hold all the books that William had stacked there.

She had a William-test on bilirubin, down to the most minuscule detail. And in order to do good and not have to retake the test if she scored below an eighty, Andrea was wanting to take a few hours for studying. William was going to be in Dean's lab with Ellen, getting ready for Dean's return, so she wouldn't be missed.

Like she ate something bad, the view of the books on the desk made her stomach knot. She winced as she walked around the desk and grabbed her chair. Just as she reached for the chair, she saw it on the top of her books. A single flower, a small piece of paper was wrapped around the stem. Smiling, Andrea lifted the flower, took the note from the stem and sniffed the rose. She unrolled the paper so carefully and tightly attached to it. The words were simple and typed, almost as if the sender wanted to remain anonymous. *'The beauty of this flower pales in comparison to you'* A long, sweet 'ah' came from Andrea as she kept her eyes glued to the note and sat down. Immediately her mood changed. She was ready to study. The brightness that the note and flower gave her took away the gloominess of the books. And that wasn't to mention the secretiveness of the sender intrigued her to no end.

^^^

If one were to aerial view them, Joe and George would look like specks of dirt standing in the fields that had been leveled out and dirt dug up.

"Potatoes." George stated as he stomped his foot.

"Christ." Joe rubbed his head. "How in the hell are we going to do this shit? Do you realize how big these fields are?"

"Most definitely, they're designed to feed a community."

"But they were designed to be started with fifty people." Joe shook his head.

"We could go out and find more people." George suggested.

"Then how do we feed and take care of them."

"Catch twenty-two."

"Catch twenty-two." Joe reiterated. "Well, you know what Stan said. He

said first harvest will be a sign but it'll take the second year before we know what we can bring in."

"But then." George held up his finger. "We'll be growing enough to feed more people . . ."

"To harvest more food." Joe rubbed his head. "*And* for Dean to experiment on."

"That's right, he comes back." George snapped his finger. "I just started to rejuvenate my blood."

"And he has that meeting planned. He needs to speak to all of us."

"For what?"

Joe tossed his hands up. "Haven't a clue. He merely hinted it has to do with the virus research."

"His way of preparing us to give more blood."

"Yep." Joe huffed out in disgust. "More blood. And trust me, my daughter is not gentle with me. We're gonna have to start calling those to Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee."

George laughed, Joe didn't and the two men continued to check out the field before heading back into town for Dean's meeting. A meeting that everyone referred to as nap time.

^^^

In the metal paper napkin dispenser in the lab, Ellen checked her reflection. She spun to William. "How do I look?"

"Ellen."

"No, William, how do I look." She hurried to him. "He'll be back in a few minutes. Miguel said he buzzed him in. I wished I could have been with him. I should have. I'm his research assistant."

"Your father was right in not letting you. You're pregnant."

"I know. And I can't wait to see him again."

"Ellen, the man was outside the gate. You saw him everyday."

"Yeah, but I only waved to him." Ellen said. "And he looked so sad and pitiful sitting in his little tent."

William chuckled. "All my son's life he looked sad and pitiful."

Ellen giggled. "You make me laugh."

"Thank you."

"How do I look?"

Giving up, William turned from his paper work. "Pucker up."

Ellen did.

"Smack your lips together, the lipstick is dulling."

Ellen rubbed her lips together. "Now?"

"Beautiful. Glowing. O.K.?"

"Thank you." Ellen smiled.

"But you're wasting your time. Not that my son doesn't want to be with you. I see it when he's with you, doing that friendship thing. But . . . He's being

stubborn. How many more times can you try to get his attention, in the enticing way?" William raised his eyebrows.

"And I certainly can't show up naked in his bed again."

"Why not? It's been a couple weeks try it again." William suggested.

"William, please. Look at me." Ellen opened her lab coat and showed her small stomach. "It's not large enough to make me look pregnant but its large enough to make me look frumpy. Oh yeah, I can see me laying on his bed like this, with my pot gut. Dean will whine."

William smiled with a shaking of his head. "You are carrying his child. That only adds beauty." William laid his hand on her cheek. "But, if you're feeling self conscious about it, try a big shirt. You know, be there, on the bed, leg bent up."

Ellen laughed while blushing a little. "I suppose." Suddenly with thought, sadness took over Ellen. "He's turning more and more away from me, isn't he?"

"No, he's just trying so hard to not let it work with you, that he's turning more toward his work. Which proves once again my theory that my son has the makings to be asexual."

Dean's gasp and squeaking footsteps rang out in the room. "I can not believe you just said that about me."

"Dean." Ellen smiled his name and rushed over to him.

"Hey El." Dean set his things on the counter. "Wow." He looked at her. "You look really . . . you look really . . .um . . ." Dean cleared his throat. "Rested."

William grunted as he walked by Dean whispering. "You're pathetic."

"Thanks." As Dean turned from looking back at William he saw Ellen so close. "El?"

"I missed you." She winked. "Could I give you a hug?"

"I think I would really like that." Ignoring his father's 'hurray' from across the room, Dean stepped to Ellen at the same time she stepped to him. He took her in his arms, holding her tighter and closer than just a greeting embrace.

"Dean." Ellen whispered his name, nuzzling her cheek near his. "It's been so long since you held on to me like this."

Dean's arms wrapped as far around Ellen as they could go. Her chest pressed against his. "I didn't realize until now how much I missed it."

Only slightly did Ellen pull back, she kept her lipstick colored lips close to his. "I'd love to have you kiss me right now, Dean."

"And I . . ." so close Dean's lips were to Ellen. "I would love to kiss you." He brought them closer, really wanting to touch his lips to hers. "But I can't." Dean pulled back. "We have work to do. Lots. I have that meeting planned in . . ." He looked at his watch. "An hour."

Ellen tossed her hands up and looked to William who shook his head to her in a 'don't worry about it; fashion. "All right. We'll work. What's the meeting on?"

"I have to talk to everyone. And we have things to get ready. Can I get your help?"

"Sure." Ellen nodded. "That's what I'm here for. Just the lonely, homely, undesirable research assistant, right?"

Dean reached for his box of research. "Right." He stopped. "I mean. I mean I . . . have to get some things from the back." Nervously, and quickly Dean fled from the lab into the back room.

^^^

"And this is going to be the coolest place to work." Henry told John as they walked around what would be the mechanics division building. "We'll have this set up the best." He nodded and went to move to his right, jolting. "Sorry."

John pointed around. "Will this be the main room where we do the work." John spun but came to an abrupt halt. "Excuse me."

"No." Henry answered. "It will be the main room, yes, but the way I figure is, we'll do menial work here. We'll have to do the main stuff on site. Did you see . . ." He walked across the room. "The size of this . . ." He grunted. "Sorry. Closet." Henry opened it.

"Huge." John moved to his left and then to his right to try to get a good view. "When are we taking those runs?"

"Soon." Henry answered and closed it. "The weather will be getting bad." He stepped to his right wide with a grumble. "That's the closet I want to put all those manuals we get."

"We'll get them all too."

"And I figured once we get everything . . ." Henry tilted his head to his right. ". . . set up." He tilted his head far to the left. "And we have survivors coming in, and the community builds . . ." To the right his head went. "We can run it like we did at the hospital I worked at. Requisitions for work, work orders and . . . Jenny." Henry reached out and moved her. "You are really getting in the way. We said you could come up, if you stayed out of the way."

Jenny pouted. "I only want to see."

"Unfortunately, I can't talk to John through you." Henry nodded. "O.K. so have a seat."

"O.K." Jenny went and sat down.

Henry looked down at his watch. "Shit we have that meeting and I wanted to try to find out ahead of time how much blood they're taking."

John looked at his watch too. "Why don't you do that. I'll finish hooking up the heating system here."

"Great. I'll do that." Henry moved to the door. "And I'll let you know."

"Henry?" Jenny called out from the chair she sat in. "May I stay and watch John."

"Sure." Henry smiled, opened up the door and left.

John quickly looked at Jenny, flashed a nervous smile and moved toward the newly installed work counter. "Tools. Tools. Tools."

"I can't stay long. I have to watch all the children for that meeting."

"That's nice."

"Did I tell you I want children some day."

John awkwardly looked at her as he lifted the tool box. "Yes. Yes you did."

"But I'm a virgin you know."

The tool box slipped with a loud bang from John's hand. "Excuse me." He raced for the door. "Henry!" He flung it open and flew out.

^^^

So boyish, handsome and innocent Robbie looked when he flashed the brightest smile in Beginnings. He spun on the stool in Dean's lab, round and round, lifting paper, trying to peek, and having them taken from his hand by Dean. "How much longer?" Robbie asked.

"Soon." Dean answered.

"O.K." Robbie ran his hand across the counter, then look up when he heard William's clearing of his throat. Ornerly, Robbie nodded. "So, like uh, gees, I hate when I'm done with my work for the day. I have to find things to occupy my time. Um . . . El? Do you want to finish where we left off, Dean says we have time."

Quickly Ellen looked to William who nodded his head to her. She was clueless. "Um . . . sure."

"Excellent. Because you look really good. Doesn't she Dean? She looks good. Of course." Robbie ran his finger over his top lip with a half smile. "She looks really good wet. Dean?"

Dean looked up, not really wanting to. "Yes."

"We took a shower together last night. Water conservation only." Robbie held up his hands. "We figured since my Dad said ten minute . . ."

"Robbie." Dean interrupted him. "I really don't want to hear this."

"Why?"

"Because."

"O.K." Robbie shrugged. "But it was an inventive idea. We figured since we could only take ten minute showers each, both of us together could take a twenty minute shower. And boy Dean we got clean."

"Robbie." Dean said his name. "I'm busy."

"Of course Ellen wasted a lot of our shower time soaping up my chest hair." Robbie laughed. "She likes a good hairy chest. Do you have a hairy chest Dean?"

"Robbie." Dean slammed his hand down. "Is there a point to all this?"

"I'm trying to determine if you have a hairy chest. Do you Dean?" Robbie flashed a wink at William.

William looked at an annoyed Dean. "Unfortunately for my son, Robbie, he's still in that prepubescent stage."

"Dad." Dean scolded.

Ellen quickly lifted a box. "I'm out of here. I'm going to take the surprise to the social hall."

Dean turned as she left. "And make sure you set up the chairs so I can see if anyone is sleeping."

Ellen gave a thumbs up, spun and nearly bumped into Henry. "Whoops. Hi Henry. Bye Henry."

"Hi El. Bye El." Henry walked in. "Hi Dean, hi Robbie, Hi William."

Dean looked up. "Henry."

"Henry." William rolled his eyes.

“Hank.”

Henry snickered. “So what’s the meeting about?”

“You’ll find out.” Dean stuffed a clipboard in a box. “With everyone else.”

“O.K.” Henry shrugged. “I would like to know now. I like surprises, but hate having to wait for them. And I really had to get out of mechanics, even though it really isn’t mechanics yet, but it will be. I had to get out of there. Jenny’s on that ‘I have to lose my virginity’ kick again.”

Robbie turned his stool some. “That’s because she looks up to Ellen. And since Ellen is the only woman here having sex on a reg . . .” Robbie quickly looked to Dean who snapped his views at him. “I mean, had sex. Had sex since the plague. That’s what I meant to say.” He stood up. “And I’m out of here.” He raced to the door. “See you at the meeting.” He nearly bolted over Andrea. “Sorry.”

Andrea smiled and laughed as she walked in. “William, I’ve finished the bilirubin quiz.” She held up the paper along with her flower. “And look what someone left me. With a note.” She softened her voice. “William?”

“Hmm?” William faced her, then shifted his eyes to the flower. “That’s nice.”

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Um . . .” William smiled. “Yes it is.”

Andrea handed William the quiz. “Here you go. Henry?” She turned around. “Did you see my flower?”

“Wow Andrea.” Henry stood up. “But why did someone give it to *you*.”

With Andrea’s gasp, William gave a scouring face to Henry. He shook his head. “Dean, when you check to see what the common factor in immunity is, can you see if it’s insensitivity. I’m believing the younger men in this community all suffer from that.” He laid his hand on Andrea’s back. “You were given that because someone finds you special.”

“Oh.” Andrea smiled. “Thank you William.”

William nodded. “Hope you find out who it was.” He walked, with her quiz out of the lab.

Henry saw the stare on Andrea’s face as William left. “It wasn’t William.” Henry told her. “Bet me it was Joe.”

“Joe?” Andrea tilted her head. “Really?”

“Yep.”

Dean laughed. “It wasn’t Joe. It couldn’t be Joe.”

“I’m telling you it was Joe.” Henry insisted. “It was Joe Andrea. He likes you.”

“Really?” Andrea grinned. “Joe likes me.”

“Oh sure. He’s always checking you out. Like this. Watch.” Henry shifted his eyes up and down her body.

Andrea blushed. “Joe?”

“Joe.” Henry nodded.

Bringing her flower to her nose, Andrea slowly left the lab. “Joe.”

Dean added another item to the already over stuffed box. “Henry?” He saw Andrea nearly mesmerized walk out. “You must be really observant.”

“Oh I am Dean. I’m Mr. Observant.” Henry nodded with one eye closed.

"You must be. I've never noticed Joe checking out Andrea."

"Neither have I."

"But you just . . . you just . . ." Dean flung out his hand. "Never mind."

^^^

Ellen smiled in oddity when she approached the social hall door. She could hear music seeping through. It had been so long since she had heard music. Opening the door, box in hand, the music grew louder and she saw the reason for it. A jukebox. It was moved out from the wall. "Oh wow." She set the box on the bar.

Frank emerged from behind it. "Hey El."

"A jukebox." Ellen pointed.

"Yeah. Robbie and I got it today. I think one more run and this place will be finished." Frank looked around.

"It's looking good in here. You've guys have worked hard." Ellen heard the song stop. A split second later it started again. "Why are you playing the same song. Don't tell me that's the only choice we have."

Frank chuckled. "No. I like this song. It reminds me of us."

"Oh look at you being sentimental."

"Dance with me El." Frank walked to her holding out his hand.

"No." She shook her head laughing.

"Come on." Frank grabbed her and pulled her into him. "Dance with me." He cupped her hand into his and began to sway with her. "Do you realize you were my first dance?"

"Yeah." Ellen smiled in remembrance. "I also remember you made me stand on a box."

"Well, that's because I wanted the chest to chest thing happening. Now . . ." Frank hunched down. "I leaned to do this."

"Quite well."

"You bet. So . . . how's the Dean thing going?"

"Going."

Frank nodded. "You know El . . ."

"Uh oh."

"What?"

"You softened your voice."

"And you know me." He pulled her closer, putting his lips near her ear. "You know El. I realize what you're trying to do with Dean. You wanna have the baby and do the natural parent thing, but . . ." Frank softly placed his lips on her neck. He glided them up. "You're going to need a little more."

"What are you doing Frank?"

"Seducing you." Frank kissed her.

"Your beard makes my neck itch."

"Tough." Small bites are what Frank delivered. "You look really good, El."

"Frank, we can't. I told you that last week."

"But . . ." Another kiss to her neck. "We did it last week anyhow. El?"

Frank softened it so much it graveled. "Dean will never know."

"Frank."

"No listen. He'll never, ever know." Frank slid his mouth up her neck and to her lips. Softly he kissed her then he widened his kiss, hunching down more and against Ellen as he danced.

Ellen pulled back. "What are you going to do when Dean and I finally get together?"

"Make sure that we're very, very careful." Frank brought his lips to her neck again. "El, I need to be with you. I promise I won't gloat or do anything that will give it away to Dean. Just say you'll come to my house tonight and make love to me." Frank buried his lips to her and made his voice sound high pitch. "Oh yes, Frank, I'll come to your house." He pulled back with smile. "Thanks El."

Ellen swayed her head with a laugh. "You are such a goof."

"And you are such my . . ." Frank lowered his head and widened his mouth near her neck. And like a vampire busted in the act, mouth hovering near the jugular vein, Frank stopped when Dean walked in. He bit his bottom lip and whispered "Fuck." He stepped back still whispering. "Sorry."

"For?" Ellen watched Frank twitch his head and she turned around to see Dean setting a box on the bar. "Oh, hey Dean."

"Ellen."

"We got a juke box."

"I see." Dean moved his eyes to the object across the room.

"Frank and I were dancing."

"You're very fortunate to have those Slagel brothers. They keep you entertained. Frank to dance with, Robbie to shower with . . ."

"Hey!" Frank shouted. "El, you showered with my brother?"

Quickly, Ellen shifted her eyes to Frank, giving him a 'no' look.

Dean opened the box and began to pull things out. "I wish I could entertain you so well."

"You can Dean." Ellen smiled. "You can be my lover and we'll both be entertained."

"El." Frank said strongly.

Dean hid his snicker. "You know what. Maybe I will." Dean looked at Frank.

"El." Frank grabbed her arm and pulled her away. "What are you doing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're gonna sleep with the guy?"

"I told you I want to make a go of it with him."

"Still. El. That doesn't mean you have to sleep with him."

Ellen laughed. "Did you think we were going to have a celibate relationship?"

"Partying and having a good time has nothing to do with it. I thought you weren't going to sleep together."

Ellen's mouth dropped open. "You know what Frank? We're not. Really."

"Good."

Rolling her eyes Ellen returned to the bar.

Frank followed. "So, what's in the box." He reached for the box Ellen brought in.

"You'll find out." Dean slid it away. "It's a surprise."

"For all of us?" Frank asked.

"For the men."

"Is it dirty magazines?"

Dean's top lip raised some. "No. But you're on the right wave length." He secured the top flaps of the box. "And don't peek Frank. El? Let's you and I get those chairs set up."

Frank kept his eyes on the box, shifting his views to Dean and Ellen who pulled chairs away from the tables and drug them to the back of the room. "El, set my chair up so Dean doesn't see me sleeping." Keeping his eyes on that box, Frank figured, with a fast turn and an accidental sweep of his arm he could easily find out what was in that box when it fell over. He laid his arm on the bar, leaned down . . .

"Frank." Ellen yelled out. "Don't you even think of knocking that over."

Frank looked over his shoulder, Ellen's back was to him. He mumbled to himself. "How the hell did she know."

^^^

*'The hills are a live,. With the sound of music'* were the words and melody that played through Andrea's mind as she swayed in a near waltz across center town to the social hall. Her flower, which began to wilt, sadly drooped in her hand. But like a reality ignorant mental patient, Andrea carried it and sniffed it as if it were in full bloom.

"Miguel." She called out with a smile when she saw him approach the doors to the social hall at the same time as her. "Hello."

He spun, Miguel did, in shock and faced her.

"Hello." Andrea smiled her words. "How are you today."

Wider his eyes grew. "A . . . A . . . A . . . excuse me." With a flinging of the social hall door, Miguel bolted inside.

"There you go again." Joe stated as he walked up behind Andrea, opened the door and allowed her to go in first. "What is it about you." He laid a light hand on her back and walked past her.

"Joseph." She mellowed out his name.

Joe stopped walking. "Joseph?" He turned around.

"Did you see my flower?" Andrea lifted it up, the top of it flopped over her hand that clenched around the stem. And a few peddles fell to the floor.

"Oh Boy Andrea. That's nice." Joe turned his head and raised his eyebrows and let out a soft whistle.

"Beautiful." Andrea gasped. "Don't you think Joe?"

"Um . . ." Joe scratched his head. "You know, that flower has nothing on you." He tapped her on the cheek, turned, rolled his eyes once more and moved

to where the chairs were set up.

Andrea let out a soft 'ah' when he walked away. "He quoted his poem."

Joe watched him, he couldn't believe it, and when he realized what Frank was doing, Joe reached out and snatched the short glass straight from Frank's hand just as the whiskey passed into his mouth. "What the hell are you doing? It's ten thirty in the morning."

"Having a drink." Frank wiped his chin. "Thank you."

"Drink later. The last thing we need is for you to become the town drunk."

"Dad, it's one drink."

"Tough. I can not believe you are drinking whiskey this early." Joe turned to the tap on his shoulder. Maggie stood behind him.

"Joe." She spoke soft. "Speaking of whiskey, may I ask your son a question."

Frank sniffed, and felt important. He was being asked something over his father.

"All yours." Joe motioned out his hand to Frank.

"Frank, why did you only get whisky and gin?" Maggie asked.

"Huh?"

"Whiskey and gin." Maggie repeated. "That was the only type of alcoholic beverages you boys picked up on the run. Well, scotch too. Why didn't you pick something mellow for the women. Like schnapps."

"Schnapps?" Frank asked. "Like peppermint and peach."

"Yes." Maggie smiled.

"Fuck that." Frank told her. "Talk to Henry he's gonna start making something called dandelion wine."

"Oh, that sound wonderful." Maggie clapped her hands together. "I'll speak to him."

After she had walked away, Joe looked to son. "Frank, didn't Henry say we have to be careful of drinking too much of his wine. It's worse than that moonshine Stan makes."

"One glass will put hair on your balls." Frank nodded.

"Beautiful phrasing Frank." Joe said annoyed. "And what the hell is Maggie going to do with hairy balls?"

Frank snickered. "Dad, please." He shook his head. Then leaned down to his father. "Maggie doesn't have balls." He winked and walked away.

"I have a moron for a son." Joe slapped himself on the head.

"I know you're talking about Frank." Robbie approached his father. "You couldn't possibly be talking about me."

"Yeah, but sometimes Robert. I don't know about you."

Robbie grinned. "It could be worse."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Robbie nodded.

Dean's voice rang out in the room as he stood before the set up chairs. "If I can get everyone to gather around."

Robbie pointed to Dean. "You could have *him* for a son."

Joe bobbed his head. "True."

Dean waited until everyone had their seat. He stood by Ellen by a small table, 'the box' set before them. "I wanted to thank everyone for taking time out of their busy day today, to listen to what I have to say." Dean ignored the restlessness he witnessed. "First, as you know, I was outside the walls, at all of your requests. And I wanted to tell you . . ."

"You cured the virus?" Frank interrupted.

"No, I . . ."

"You're close to curing the virus?" Frank pointed.

"No, I . . ."

"You're getting ready to work on curing the virus?"

"No, Frank I . . ."

"You wanna work on curing the virus?"

"Frank, I . . ."

"You'll never cure the virus?"

"Frank!" Dean snapped.

"Frank!" Joe blasted in an echoed. "Knock it off."

"What?" Frank tossed up his hands. "The virus is why we always meet. Fuck, Dean, when are you gonna cure it?"

Dean didn't let himself get upset. "First of all, curing the virus is not foremost for our future. Yes, I will work on it, but there are other things more important. One, the numerous bacteria, infections, diseases, all of which can be a threat to us now, or in at least a year when everything modern medicine provided has gone bad. We have to work on something so simple as the common cold to something complex as cancer, because we now have to develop our own resources to battle these things. That is what me and Ellen will be spending a lot of time doing."

"Just don't have sex." Frank stated.

"Joe." Dean ran his hand down his own face. "Could you control your neanderthal son please? Thanks. Anyway, as I was saying. El and I have to concentrate on the future and the things that will hit us then, and possibly now. Now in working on this, Miguel took me around, and I have more runs planned, but I went out and collected different diseases and virus to work on. Some of which I wasn't allowed to bring thorough the gates. Anyhow . . ." Dean let out his after complaining breath. "In reviewing some of these viruses, I discovered something fascinating." Dean smiled as if the news was so amusing. "I've been so curious as to why we all survived the plague. I know a lot of you aren't, but I have. And now I am more curious because it seems we all have a common natural immunity link to other common viruses as well, HPV, HIV, Chicken pox and so forth." Dean paced a little as he spoke. "See, we all have this strand of our DNA that has a mutation . . ."

"Gees Dean." Frank tossed his hands up. "Now, we're mutants, thank you."

"Mutants?" Henry quickly looked at Frank then at Dean. "Are we mutants? We can't be mutants can we Dean? I mean there wasn't any radiation."

George leaned forward in his chair to speak to Henry. “Yes, but radioactive mutation would only be seen in the next generation.”

Jonas shook his head. “No, no, no. What about the incredible hulk?”

Frank snickered. “Yeah, what about me?”

Through his laugh, Miguel added his two cents. “But the incredible hulk, David Banner was hit with an overdose of gamma rays.”

“Same difference.” Jonas said.

“No way.” Henry said. “Gamma rays are different then the radiation we would be hit with in the event of a nuclear blast.”

“What is true Dean?” George asked.

Dean blinked several times. “Huh?”

Frank tossed out his hand. “There you have it. Our so called brilliant fuckin scientist, not only boring, but clueless. Do you really have a degree Dean?”

“Yes Frank.” Dean said sarcastically. “Several. And unlike you, I can even read beyond a second grade level.”

“Hey.”

Dean flipped Frank off. “Now if I can continue. Damn it, I forgot where I was.” Dean listened to the whisper in his ear from Ellen. “Thanks. O.K., as I was saying. We all have this mutated strand of DNA, but, but . . .” Dean held up his finger. “In the men, the mutation is stronger, leaving me to believe that perhaps the immunity factor is male gender hereditary and can only be passed on by the fathers. To prove this theory, is why you are here. I’d like to ask the men of this community for their help in my research.”

Through the grumbles, Joe’s voice raised. “I knew it. How much blood do you need now. Ellen collapsed my goddamn vein the last time, Dean.”

“Dean.” Henry said. “My arms can’t take it. Is it safe to keep on giving blood?”

John Matoose looked at Henry. “They don’t even give us juice afterward.”

With crossed legs, Jonas flung out his hand. “I used to be a donor in the old world consistently, really the tubes they take are nothing.”

“Then *you* give it.” George told him. “We’re really tired of being voodoo dolls and Ellen’s frustration punching bag.”

Ellen gasped. “I am gentle.”

All the men answered in unison. “Right.”

Dean’s index finger ran slowly over his top lip erasing his smile. “I am very glad to hear your dismay in giving blood. Because it’s not blood that I want from you.”

There was applause from the men, and Ellen smiling leaned to Dean. “They’re excited. Good. We need that.”

Dean opened the box and reached in. He pulled out a specimen cup and turned to face the men. “Gentleman, I will give one to each of you.”

“Oh!” Andrea stood up. If anything else she was a medically smart woman. “Oh.” Her hand covered her mouth. “I think this isn’t a conversation I should be party to. I really don’t, Dean, I think . . .” She pointed back to the door. “I think I may want to leave for this.” She moved to the door. “Thelma, Maggie, would you care to join me?”

Thelma and Maggie looked clueless as they stood up, but they weren't going to question Andrea's invitation to leave, they welcomed it.

Andrea paused by the door. "Ellen?"

Ellen shook her head. "No, I'll stay. I have to touch it anyhow."

Andrea, shuddering, hurried out with Maggie and Thelma.

Dean tapped on the cup. "Now back to what I was saying."

Henry still snickered in amusement at Andrea. "That was so funny. You told her you need it from the men. You would think she would enjoy not having to pee in a cup."

Robbie's hands lifted and dropped to his legs with a slap. "Finally, a painless test."

Dean's mouth squinched up more. "I hope it isn't painful."

"A piss test." Frank barked out in relief.

"I need a sample." Dean said. "But it isn't urine I need from you men. It's something else." Dean waded through the silence. "I need seminal fluid." It was so quiet a pin could be heard dropping. "I need to extract DNA from a sample of fluid that can only be produced through the glands of a male. And also I'd like to take a look to see if the spermatozoon are the predominant carriers."

"Um Dean?" Robbie held up a finger. "Are you saying you want us to . . ." He brought his hand, fingers curled, to his groin area.

"That is exactly what I'm saying."

Henry whined in embarrassment, bringing his hand to his face and hunching.

Robbie shrugged and shifted his body upright in the chair. "I don't have a problem with it. Just keep in mind Dean, I shoot blanks. You're not gonna find any spermatozoon in my glandular fluid." Robbie winked with a nod.

"No fuckin way!" Frank blasted out. "Science or no science. No way am I jerking off in any fuckin cup. Especially Dean, for you to play with it. That's sick. That is really sick. I wondered about you. And now you're bringing El into this. Fuck. The only time I want her playing with my sperm is . . ."

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "Can you learn some goddamn control over that mouth please."

Dean hid his amusement. "I'm not telling you gentlemen to do this. It is strictly on a volunteer basis only. You can, you can not. It's up to you. I need this information. And if you help me out, at least *now* you can give it a scientific excuse."

"And." Ellen giggled. "We plan on showing some enticing pornographic videos to help those who do volunteer."

"El." Dean whispered. "You're not helping them."

"Oh no." Frank shook his head. "She better not be helping."

"Frank." Joe scolded and smacked his son's leg. "Shut up."

"Thank you Joe." Dean spoke up. "Now that we got the uncomfortable part out of the way. I'll continue. We need a sample . . ." Moans came from them. "Your cups will be coded so only I know whose sample is whose. Ellen will not know. Also, those of you who wish to provide, in order for me not to ask for more, I'd like to get a healthy half a fluidounce from each of you. Now, I know that sounds like a lot . . ."

“Ha.” Robbie scoffed. “Dean, please. We’re men. Most of us are young.”

“Robert.” Joe said softly.

“I don’t think you understand.” Dean explained. “A half a fluidounce is a lot. Depending on the last time ejaculation occurred, the more recently it happened, the less there will be. The average male releases two to five milliliters of fluid. It takes approximately thirty milliliters to make a fluidounce.”

Henry held up his fingers counting with a horrified look. “Oh, my God, Dean. I’m young. But I’m not that young.”

“Well.” Dean cleared his throat. “Just give it your best . . . um . . . shot?”

Dean tossed the specimen cup back in the box. He grabbed his clipboard. “Now, for privacy purposes, Ellen will leave, and each of you will take a cup so I can mark down who has what code. If you don’t return the cup.” Dean lifted his shoulders “You didn’t volunteer. No problem.” He looked to Ellen.

“I’m leaving.” Ellen made sure she smiled in a sneaky way to all of them as she crept out of the social. Frank followed right behind.

Dean waited by his box, clipboard in hand while the men in the room hesitated to move, all but Robbie, he was the first to stand and approach Dean.

^^^

It was the first evening in Beginnings Ellen couldn’t recall not knowing what to do with herself. She wondered at first if the other women in the community were as puzzled as she was with how to spend their time, and she deduced that they just weren’t faced with it like she was. After all, Robbie, for comfortableness reasons, asked if Ellen could stay out of the house for awhile.

She went to the social hall which was spooky when no one was in there. She shot pool, played music, switched the heads of the darts, wiped the bar and played pinball. But even after all that, she hadn’t passed that much time.

Such an awkwardness she felt. There wasn’t a male in the community she felt comfortable visiting because she just didn’t know who, if any, were going to be helping out with research. She knew it was safe with Frank, but then Johnny was in a down mood. Ellen could have stayed there, but felt it best not to. That’s how she ended up at the hall. After rearranging the tables for the eighth time, Ellen decided she would do something out of character for her, go to the library. There was some books in there and she was sure she could find one with pictures interesting enough to keep her attention. Just as she was about to leave, William walked in.

Ellen froze. Was she looking differently at him. Should she look differently at him? Ellen couldn’t help it. The vision with William holding that cup came careening through her mind. A part of her wanted to know. A part of her didn’t.

“Evening Ellen.” William spoke.

“Hi. Here for a uh . . . drink?”

“Yes.” He moved to the bar.

“Need a drink William?”

“You could say that.”

“Um . . . an after drink?”

“Ellen.” He shook his head and grabbed a bottle. “After drink? Why don’t you just come right out and ask me if I am volunteering.”

“Are you?”

“That really isn’t any of your business.” He poured a shots worth. “Joking. No. I didn’t. I’m too old to worry about meeting my sons expectations.” He raised his eyebrow as he lifted the glass to his lips.

“Speaking of your son, did he kick you out of the house?”

“For?”

“So he can meet his own expectations?”

William chuckled. “As far as I’m aware, Dean is at the lab preparing just incase he has work to do, courtesy of those who volunteered to meet his expectations.”

“Really? Dean’s at the lab?” Ellen’s eyes lit up.

“Yes.”

“William would think I’m rude if I left you here alone?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Thanks.” Ellen raced to the door. “Oh and William, don’t mess up the tables. I just arranged them.”

William finished his drink when Ellen left and looked at the tables. How neat she had them. Lined up, chairs pushed in. And just because she told him not to, William poured another drink and proceeded to come up with his own geometric way of placing tables.

^^^

A corridor light, and lab light were the only illuminations coming from inside the clinic. All except for the overhead light that hung above the double entrance doors. Ellen walked in, slowly as if she was just on a time passing stroll. She crept up toward Dean’s lab, peeking through the open door and spotting Dean moving quickly back and forth from his lab. She stepped back and walked again passing the door, stopping, backing up, and poking her head in. “Dean?” She said with such surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, hi El.” He set down some papers. “Getting ready for tomorrow.”

Ellen walked in. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“What are *you* doing here?”

“Bored. Robbie kicked me out of the house. He’s uh . . . helping you out.” She winked.

Dean chuckled. “I would think Robbie Slagel would want you there.”

“So would I.” Ellen folded her arms and moved to the counter by Dean. Through the corner of her eyes she spotted an empty specimen cup. “So uh Dean.” She picked it up. “Is this yours?”

“Yes.” He took it from her hand and set it back down. “And don’t look at the code on the bottom.”

“O.K.” Ellen shrugged. “Dean? How does one go about preparing for

sampling?”

“What?” Dean chuckled as he collated a stack of papers on the counter.

“Do you dim the lights? Play soft music . . .”

“Ellen.” He shook his head.

So soft Ellen spoke as she moved closer to Dean. “Dean?”

Dean turned around, Ellen was right there, an inch away. “Ellen . . .”

“Dean.” She laid her hands on his chest. “I’m bored.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He backed up sliding away, but Ellen stuck to him like glue.

“You said you’d like to help entertain me.”

“El.” He cleared his throat. “I have some paper work for you to . . .” He was silenced by a soft kiss by Ellen. “What are you doing?”

“Hitting on you.”

“Don’t.”

“Why?”

“Um . . . because.”

“Because?” Ellen raised one eyebrow. “Dean?” She moved her hand down across his chest and to his stomach. “You know, you shouldn’t waste your efforts tonight.”

“Ellen.” Dean closed his eyes. “Why are you doing this?” He saw how close her mouth was to him, felt her hands on his body. Hands that gave him chills. “Do you realize how . . .” His voice cracked with her touch. “Hard . . . I try to not get involved with you.”

“Then don’t try so . . . hard.” She smiled and tried to kiss him.

“Oh God.”

Ellen moved her lips to his neck, up and to his ear. “You said I’m your research assistant. Let me assist you with this.”

Dean’s eyes rolled feeling her lips touch in a slight nibble to his ear. “You don’t know how bad I’d love to be with you.” His hands gripped to her back and up to her neck.

“Then why don’t you?”

“With all that’s happened . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen kissed him. “Pretend I didn’t make the mistake. Pretend I wasn’t with Frank. How would you be with me right now?”

“Like this.” Bringing his hands to her face with an edge. Dean pressed his palms firm to her cheeks, spread his fingers, and opened her mouth with his thumbs. The moment her lips parted, Dean moved his lips on hers. Wide and hard, he kissed her bringing Ellen against him. His hands moved with anxiousness, fast and with the touch of his excitement. He basked in every second, the feel of her lips and mouth, projecting the gnawing hunger in his gut through his kiss. His breaths intensified, feeling Ellen’s hands move to his waist, pulling out his tee shirt and undoing his jeans. He pulled away from the kiss, bringing his hands back to her face. “We can’t.”

“We can.”

“No, El. We can’t.”

“Yes. What did you say today? We’ll give it a scientific excuse.” She kissed him again, edging off his shirt, “Dean. No commitment, I won’t think of

it tomorrow if you want. But just give me tonight.” Her lips grazed up his stomach.

Dean flung off his shirt and tossed it across the room. It hit something with a crash, and he pulled Ellen into him as he leaned against the counter. His chest moved with hers. And Dean, through his excitement, was nearly out of breath. Lips pressed and moving, Dean spoke through the kissing. “We’ll . . . have . . . to.” He moaned, kissed her and felt her. “We’ll have to get a clean sample.”

“Oh it’ll be clean.” Ellen’s head flung back as Dean’s moist lips slid up her arched neck. “Very clean.”

Kissing her quickly one more time, Dean, with exuberance, spun Ellen, grabbed her hand, and led her to the back of the lab. Half way there, he stopped. He held up his hand to her, raced to the counter, grabbed his specimen, cup, returned to Ellen, took her hand again and brought her to the back room.

CHAPTER SIX

October 29<sup>th</sup> - Beginnings, Montana

So neat everything was lined up on the counter, straight across. Ellen walked by the stacks of paper, moving toward the fridge. "So, why are all these measles work-ups. Are we testing measles, Frank?"

Dean looked up. "Quit calling me Frank. And yes. We are. We'll have to get blood from everyone."

"That hate us Frank."

"Ellen. Quit that." Dean peered up and turned to look toward the other side of the room when he heard his father snickering. "And you encourage her."

"No. I don't." William held up a pencil. "I tell her to stop chasing your ass around. Give up on you."

Ellen with her hands behind her back reached for the refrigerator door handle. "I think I will stop chasing him. After all, if he's going to be like Frank, I might as well be with Frank."

"I am not like Frank. And get out of that fridge Ellen."

Ellen shut it. "Why?"

"Because." Dean walked over and pulled her away. "I don't want you peeking at the specimen cups."

"Why?"

"When I break it down, you won't be able to snicker. So you have to wait until I do that, or until you become scientifically focused."

"Whoa. Big word." Ellen moved to him. "Frank doesn't use big words."

"Will you quit talking about Frank?" Dean snapped.

"I can't help it. Even though he's out somewhere in a truck with Robbie. I feel like he's here. With you being like you are."

Dean's hand slammed to the counter. "Why am I being like Frank?"

"Ignoring me after I lent you a . . ." Ellen giggled. "Hand last night."

"Ellen. Please. My father is present."

"No." William held up his hand. "Don't stop talking shop on my account. Especially since I must go." William set down the things he was working on. "I did all the blood groupings for you Dean and set up who you should test first."

"Thanks Dad."

"If anyone needs me I'm working with Andrea." He moved to the door. "I hope she lost that damned flower." William shook his head and walked out.

As Dean swayed his views back to Ellen, she had made it close to him. "Ellen." Dean moved back.

"You really want to stick to what we agreed with last night?"

"Yes. Not that I want to." Dean held up his hand. "But I can't let myself get that wrapped up in you. I can't."

"I understand."

"Thank you."

"I'll let Frank know."

"Let Frank know what?" Dean asked.

"Your father said to forget you and go back to Frank. I'll tell Frank that him and I can be together now."

"My father told you to do so?" Dean asked.

"Yes."

"I can't believe my father would do that." Dean gasped out. "Well . . . Well you can't sleep with him."

Ellen laughed "Why can't I sleep with him."

"You're pregnant with my baby."

"So."

"So?" Dean laughed "So I don't want Frank . . . I . . . I don't want him there." Dean held out his hand.

"You don't want to be there."

"I never said that." Dean moved from the counter across the lab. "I said I couldn't." He went into the backroom. "There's a big difference El." His voice carried out. "It's my baby. I really think that I should have some rights when it comes to invading our baby's . . ." He came back out holding a box of tubes "Will you get out of that fridge?"

Ellen slammed the door. "I can't help it. Just tell me which man besides your father and Frank didn't volunteer."

"I can't do that. Not until I broke them down. You giggle too much."

"I bet specimen 'B' is Robbie's."

Crash! The box of tubes fell from Dean's arms. "How do recognize Robbie's . . ."

"No." Ellen held up her hand. "Not recognize please." She shuddered. "That's kind of gross. I just saw the amount. There isn't anything there. I kind of figured he'd have a hard time giving a half a fluidounce."

Dean crossed his arms and moved closer to her. "And just how did you know that?"

"Because Dean he's had . . . he . . . he . . ."

"Yes?" Dean raised an eyebrow.

"Dean." Ellen tsked. "He's sterile. Gees, you knew he'd be missing something." She walked away from the fridge. "And you call yourself the big scientist."

"Ellen that has nothing to do with it." Dean scratched his head. "At least I don't think. I have to bring him back and ask him to try agin. Him and one other man."

"Who? Cup 'D'?"

"Yes. Cup 'D'. But I can't tell you who."

"Please."

"No. But if you're around in a couple hours when I call them . . ." Dean tossed his hands up. "What will I be able to say."

"Thanks." Ellen smiled.

"Anyhow, enough talking about this test. Let's stop and talk about your decision to be with Frank."

"Let's not. William says once I make up my mind not to discuss it any further with you. William knows, he's wise." Ellen moved to the door. "And speaking of wise-William, I'm gonna go watch him teach. I'll be back in a

couple hours.”

“Ellen we have . . . Work.” Dean tossed his hand up and let it fall when Ellen left. He brought his hand to his head and ran his fingers harshly through his hair. “Sometimes I wonder if my father is a worse influence on her than Frank.”

^^^

The huge dip the truck hit made Frank bounce high in his seat with a smack to the roof of the cab. “Fuck Robbie.”

“Sorry.” Robbie drove. “We have to work on this back road.

“You have to work on your driving.” Another bump and Frank bounced up. “And this shit is on my nervous. Why did we pick him up.”

“We needed a bartender. His name is Sam.”

“He’s a fuckin life size Ken doll Robbie.” Frank turned his head to the mannequin that squeezed between them in the front seat. “And he doesn’t bend.”

“He’s a store display mannequin Frank, they don’t come with movable parts. And why are you so miserable. You really should have participated in the Dean . . .”

“No-no. Don’t even go there.” Frank held up his hand. “You got me started today.”

“How did I get you started?”

“Lying about Ellen and Dean.”

“I wasn’t lying about that.” Robbie laughed.

“Yes you were.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“And slow down, the gate is closed.”

“It is not.” Robbie argued.

“Robbie, slow down.”

“Frank, don’t tell me how to drive. The gate is open.”

“Closed.”

“Open.”

“Closed.”

“Frank!” Robbie screamed, moving the mannequin out of the way when he tipped in toward Robbie. “The gate is . . .”

Crash!

Robbie hunched watching the sparks of the electric perimeter fence sizzle and shoot up around them. “Closed.”

“Fuck.” Frank shot out his hand.

“Sorry.”

“Now we’re stuck.”

“Sorry.”

Frank lifted the radio from his belt. “Hello.” He called into it and when he depressed the button there was nothing but static. “Shit.”

“Sorry.” Robbie cringed at the sound of live wires hitting against the metal of the truck. “Hey, but Frank, at least we have Sam.”

Frank only shifted his eyes and brought the radio to his mouth again.

^^^

Henry, with disgust, shook the new work counter in Mechanics. "I told you he wouldn't fix it." Henry faced John Matoose.

"He did go out on that booze run with Frank."

"Still, Robbie was told by Joe to do something to help us out."

"True."

"We gave him the simple task of fixing this counter."

"True." John nodded.

"And he didn't. This is the third time since we've been putting this thing together that he has blown me off. But who's counting?"

"You." John said.

"True." Henry nodded. "You know, Slagel or no Slagel, he is really pissing me off. I can see the laziness in his eyes."

"And his work."

Henry breathed out in relief. "I am so glad you said that. I was wanting to. I just keep thinking, he's is going start a long line of ill events that will strike us here in Beginnings and bring us to our knees."

"Henry." John laughed. "O.K., I admit, Robbie may be lazy, you can tell. But . . . ill events that could bring us to our knees? Aren't you being over dramatic. No one lives in Beginnings. What can he possibly do to mess things up?"

A hiss of static over Henry's radio brought Joe's voice. "Henry, Henry, you there."

"Yeah Joe." Henry spoke in the radio.

"I need you at the back gate. We have a situation."

"What's that?"

"Robbie just crashed the truck into the live perimeter fence, now not only is the fence down, live wires sticking out everywhere, but the goddamn truck is an electrocutioner's capsule and those two morons can't get out."

"I'm on it." Henry lowered his radio and hooked it on his belt. "And what were you just saying about Robbie, John?"

^^^

"Will you look at that." Joe stood next to George just inside the perimeter by the back gate. They looked upon the truck stuck in the fence, sparks still flying, paint burnt and Frank and Robbie both red faced, mouths moving a million miles an hour.

"Joe, are they fighting?"

"Looks that way."

Henry's heavy and dramatized gasp carried over to them as he raced up the grade. "Oh look what they did Joe." Henry approached Joe and George. "Look at this mess. This is going to take days. Days to fix. Not to mention, hooking back up the perimeter which I'm not sure I know how to do. We'll need fencing supplies."

Joe ran his hand across his own forehead. "Yes, Henry. But first I need my sons. We have to get them out of there."

"I know Joe." Henry placed his hands on his hips. "They certainly can't get out of the truck with all those wires. They'll die."

"Yes, they will Henry." Joe waited. "So why are the wires still live?"

"The fence is live Joe." Henry told him.

"O.K." Slowly Joe looked at George first. "Why is the fence still on?"

"I can't shut it off."

"Sure you can Henry." Joe explained. "The security room."

"No, Joe." Henry shook his head. "I tried that They screwed up the box. The connection switch won't power that perimeter down."

Joe really tried to remain calm. "All right. Did you think about powering down through the generator."

Henry tsked. "Of course I did."

"And?"

"I don't know what circuit is running the perimeter."

"Shut everything down."

"Oh Joe, can I do that. I don't know if I can do that." Henry rambled. "People may not be happy about that. I should let them know. I might turn off someone's stove while their cooking, or Dean's blood spinning thing while it's spinning or . . ."

"Henry!" Joe snapped.

"Yes."

"Who the hell cares. Get my sons out of that truck now! They're slow baking."

"Right away Joe." Henry spun and darted off.

With a grumble, Joe faced George. "Is it just me or is every person in this community under the age of thirty-five . . ."

"Logistically ill informed?"

"Thank you. Perfect." Joe looked back at the truck. "I was beginning to think I was just a man of little patience."

"Who you?" George smiled. "Never."

^^^

Totally uninteresting is what Robbie believed Dean's lab to be as he waited for Dean to return. He could only take so much of looking at things he hadn't clue of what they were. Reading notes that could have easily been Arabic and looking at blood that had been spun into two different colors. Returning to his seat, Robbie stopped when he heard the grunt. He turned to see Henry. "What?"

"Why are you here?"

"Why are *you* here?" Robbie asked.

"Dean called me."

“Dean called *me*.”

“Are you mocking me?” Henry asked.

“Henry, why the hell would I mock you?”

Henry shrugged.

“So why did you grunt when you saw me?” Robbie asked.

“Because I’m frustrated with you. I spent three hours getting you out of that truck.”

“Three hours Henry. *I* should be made because you’re too lame to figure it out any quicker.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open. “You made a mess up there today.”

“Yeah, so.”

“Yeah, so. That fence is going to need rebuilt.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“Like you did the work counter.”

“Huh?” Robbie scratched his head.

“The work counter. You never fixed it. You said you would fix it today.”

“I’ll fix it tomorrow.”

“Robbie.” Henry said his name with a scold. “I wanted that counter fixed today.”

“Were you using it today?”

“No.” Henry shook his head.

“Then why are you bitching. I’ll fix it tomorrow.”

“And what about the fence?”

“I’ll fix that too.”

“Both of them.” Henry laughed. “Robbie, you couldn’t find time to fix the counter today.”

“Henry!” Robbie yelled. “Why are you bitching at me.”

“I’m frustrated with you. We’re trying to build a mechanical division and you aren’t helping.”

“And I’m trying to do more than work for your slave driving ass. And you don’t seem to care about that. You’re being a prick.”

“I am not a prick.”

“You are. Henry the prick and I certainly hope this attitude isn’t a sign of things to come with you.”

“So what if it is?” Henry got defensive.

“Then you’ll piss me off even more and I’ll have to kick your ass.”

“And I’ll tell Joe.” Henry folded his arms.

“Tattle tale.” Robbie glared at him.

“Lazy boy.”

“Anal retentive mechanical wanna-be.”

“Bad driver.”

“Generator illiterate.” Robbie quipped back.

“Fence wrecker.”

“Tolerance wrecker.”

“Truck wrecker.”

Dean cleared his throat to halt the bickering when he walked in. “Gentlemen. Glad you showed up.”

Henry took a seat, finally, next to Robbie. “We would have been here earlier, but Robbie wrecked the truck.”

Dean quickly looked at Robbie. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine thanks.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open. “Forget Robbie. You should see the fence, Dean.”

“Henry?” Dean looked at him with question. “I would think first concern should be with Robbie.”

“Not when there is that much damage to our perimeter. And he wasn’t paying attention.” Henry pointed. “My father always said, that one can . . .”

“Henry who cares?” Robbie spoke with sarcasm. “Now quit because you’re getting on my nerves just about . . .” Robbie looked at his watch. “Now.”

“O.K.” Dean bounced from heel to toe. “Now, can I just get to why I called you here. Then you two can leave the lab and do this somewhere else.”

“Sorry Dean.” Robbie said.

“Sorry.”

“Thanks.” Dean walked across the lab. He grabbed a clipboard and returned, pulling up a stool in front of Robbie and Henry. “Now. First. I want to thank you for volunteering to help with my research.” Dean snickered when he watched Henry blush. “But . . . there’s a problem.”

“Oh my God.” Henry’s eyes widened. “I have cancer.”

“What?” Dean quickly looked at him. “No. I didn’t even check for that.”

“Then I could have cancer?” Henry asked.

“Henry. Cancer has nothing to do with.”

“Oh my God, you do. You think I have cancer, don’t you Dean. You can tell me I can . . .”

“Henry.” Robbie barked. “He isn’t even saying that. Shut up.”

“No, you shut up.”

“No you.”

“You.”

“Gentlemen.” Dean interrupted. “Please.” He waited for them both to stop glaring at each other and face him. “Now this has nothing to do with illness or diseases. This has everything to do with viable samples.” He saw they were clueless. “Let me put it this way. The samples you provided were way less than I could use and I was wondering if I could bother you for more.”

Robbie tossed his hands up. “I’ll help out. But I must tell you Dean, I have this problem. I just don’t . . . you know, volume wise . . . no matter how long it’s been. I don’t.”

“Well.” Dean’s head bobbed back and forth. “I’ll freeze what I have and add. Just a little more.” Dean saw the open mouth expression on Henry’s face. “Henry, what’s wrong?”

“Were we the only two who didn’t hit the goal?”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “Only one person achieved the goal. You two just fell way below the mark.”

“Who?” Robbie asked. “Who hit the goal.”

“I can’t divulge that.” Dean answered.

“Dean.” Henry spoke up. “I can’t.”

"You can't what?"

"Can't give anymore. It was extremely difficult. Not to mention boring."

"Boring?" Dean asked with a raise of his voice.

"Who?" Robbie was still stuck on the achiever.

Dean held his hand up to Robbie to halt him. "Henry, you were bored?"

"Oh yes Dean, I got bored. I'm just not creative enough to come up with a good enough fantasy to hold my interest the second time around. My mind starts wandering to things I have to do and then, well, moment's gone."

Dean was speechless.

"Who?" Robbie asked again.

"Who what?" Ellen asked as she entered the lab.

"Who was the only volunteer to meet Dean's expected goal?"

"George." Ellen stated.,

"George?" Robbie questioned.

"George." Ellen reiterated.

"Oh my God!" Henry exclaimed. "George. Old George? Oh now I feel so . . . so . . ."

"Incompetent?" Robbie tried to help. "Minuscule. Inferior? Prepubescent?"

"Hey." Henry barked.

"Robbie." Dean squinted "Please. And El, you weren't supposed to divulge that information."

"Sorry." Ellen hunched. "Oh!" She snapped her finger. "Henry must be cup 'D'."

Henry spun horrified. "Dean. Dean I have no idea how she knows I am cup 'D'."

Dean shook his head. "Reasonable deduction Henry. But she had no deduction measures when it came to her knowing which cup was Robbie's."

Robbie bit his bottom lip with a grin. "El, you recognized my sample?"

Henry gasped in disgust. "You know that is really not something to be proud of Robbie. God."

Ellen giggled then saw Dean's glare. "Sorry."

"Forgiven." Dean set the clipboard down. "Now, all I'm asking is that you two wait a few days and try it again. Like I said, I'll freeze what I have. And maybe on . . . what's today's date." He looked down tot his watch. "The 29<sup>th</sup> . . ." He took a moment to think. "Maybe on . . ."

Ellen grabbed Dean's arm. Total seriousness had hit her. "What's today's date?"

"Twenty-ninth."

"Are you sure."

"Yes." Dean nodded. "See."

So breathy Ellen's words were as she raised her head with almost a shocked expression. She closed her eyes and released Dean's arm. "I can't believe that's the date. Oh God." So painfully she shook her head and raced out of the room. In her charge from the clinic she nearly bolted over Joe and George and continued on without saying anything.

Joe walked into the lab with George and saw the stunned expression still

on Dean, Robbie and Henry's faces after Ellen's abrupt departure. Joe shook his head at them. "What the hell did you three say to my daughter."

Dean swayed his head. "Nothing Joe. I told her it was the twenty-ninth and she flew out."

Joe winced with a heavy breath and closed his eyes. "Oh Shit." He ran his hand down his face. "She probably let it slip her mind and now she's gonna be worse."

"Dad?" Robbie looked curiously at him. "What is October . . ." Robbie paused. "Oh man. Josh's birthday."

"Yeah." Joe breathed out. "She'll need some reassurance, the first one is always the toughest. Robbie, can you go find Frank?"

"I'm on it dad." Robbie slid from his seat and walked out of the room.

After a moment, Joe looked over to Dean. "Dean, now what . . ."

"Can . . . can you excuse me Joe? I'm sorry." Dean moved his eyes to the door, then he himself walked out.

^^^

"El." Dean called her name softly as he walked into the livingroom of her house.

Ellen sat on the couch. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, face buried in her hands. She only turned her head slightly, looked at Dean, then returned to burying her face.

"Ellen." Dean shut the door and walked over to the couch. "I uh . . . I came to see if you're all right."

"I'm fine."

"El." Dean sat next to her. "Hey." He moved closer. "Can I help?"

"No."

"Maybe if we talk."

Ellen lowered her hands. "No."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand." Ellen spoke softly.

"Can you try me?"

"I'd really rather not." Ellen stood up.

"El?" Dean stood also. "What's wrong? I want to be there for you."

"No you don't." Ellen faced him. "You don't. That's O.K., I understand that."

"I'm . . . I'm confused El." Dean's voice cracked. "I really am. Why won't you let me try to help you through this?"

"For two months Dean I have done nothing but chase after you. Try to, try to make amends, get close to you. You push me away. We talk about nothing aside from work. You haven't even tried since we got here to be intimate. And I'm not talking physical. I'm talking . . ." Ellen clenched her fist and brought it to her chest. "Intimate. Words. Conversations, Feelings. And right now, with this very personal issue within me, I'd rather not get through it with someone who hasn't even asked me for two months, emotionally how I have been doing.

I'd rather get through it alone, or with some . . .”

“El.” Frank called her name as he opened the door.

Ellen spun away from Dean. “Frank.” She moved to him and immediately into Frank’s arms.

Dean’s head dropped.

“El.” Frank held her tighter, hand gripping her head as he hunched to be at her level. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I forgot. I would have walked you through . . .”

“No Frank.” Ellen’s emotional words were buried in him. “I forgot too. I forgot.” She started to cry. “I feel awful. What’s wrong with me. How could I forget my own son?”

“No.” Frank closed his eyes. “You didn’t. You never will.”

“I let him slip from me Frank. Like he meant nothing. I let him slip from me.”

Frank held her tighter. “You did nothing wrong. It’s just hard to face, that’s all. It’s a hard day.”

“I smiled today. I joked around today. I felt happy and I shouldn’t have. Not today.”

“Why not today?” Frank pulled back and lifted her chin. “Why not today. God El.” He close his eyes and smiled gently. “I can remember many, many times we laughed on this day. You were the queen of making birthdays happy for your kids. His Halloween birthday party. The time we all went to the zoo for his birthday and it snowed. It snowed in October. We laughed.”

“Does this make me terrible Frank? Because it slipped my mind?”

“No.” Frank shook his head wiping his hand down her face. “It makes you a person who just is trying so hard to get past the pain.”

Ellen closed her eyes.

Frank laid his lips to her forehead. “Let’s go take a walk. A long walk and talk. O.K.” He watched Ellen nod. Without saying anymore, Frank took Ellen’s hand in a tight secure grip. And keeping Ellen near enough to hold, quietly he led her from the house.

Dean stood alone.

^^^

Dean hadn’t any idea where Ellen and Frank had gone off to. He just knew that evening had crept up fast and he wasn’t about to leave her house until he spoke to her. Even if she didn’t come back until morning, he vowed to be waiting there.

Dean never really liked the song much, but he kept hearing, ‘Peaceful Easy Feeling’, over and over. Maybe it was a sign. Was there something in the words that he should have been paying attention to. Were they telling him something. Or was Robbie just being annoying, sitting there singing and playing it.

The front door opened, Dean stood up and Ellen walked in alone.

“El.” Dean called her.

She looked oddly at him, her face puffy from crying. “What are you doing

here?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Not tonight Dean. O.K.?” Ellen moved to the steps and slowly walked up them.

Finally the strumming guitar stopped and Dean faced Robbie.

Robbie set down his guitar. “Well, I guess I’m done.”

“Can I go up and talk to her?” Dean asked.

Robbie shifted his eyes around. “Are you asking me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You live here.”

“So I get the decision on whether you go up?” Robbie paused to think. “I guess it would be all right. Sure Dean, go on.”

“Thanks.” Dean moved to the steps and walked up them. He could hear Ellen’s door shut as he reached the top. Though the door was closed as if she were shutting everything out, Dean knocked anyhow. “El?” He turned the knob, it wasn’t locked. He called through the partially open door. “Can I please come in?”

“Yeah.” She answered.

Dean walked in, Ellen was getting undressed. “I was waiting for you.”

“I saw that. Thank you.” She walked to her dresser and pulled out a large sweatshirt, she slipped in on. “Why?”

“Why?” Dean ran his fingers through his hair and shut the door. “I was concerned. And . . . I did a lot of thinking.”

“About?”

“Everything. Can we sit?” He pointed to the bed.

Ellen shrugged and moved over, sitting with him.

“How are you doing? Did you and Frank talk?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded. “We had dinner with Johnny and talked about the kids. I needed to do that.”

“Did it help?”

“Yes.”

“El.” Dean reached over and grabbed her hand. “I told you after what happened with you and Frank, that we would stay friends.”

“I know.”

“And I told you that, I wanted to be close to you for the baby’s sake.” Dean took a breath. “See, I hate to admit my father was right, but he was. I was never good with people. I assumed being close was any type of contact you had with someone, whether it be working or just friends. I didn’t have many friends.” Dean looked up to the ceiling. “In fact. I can’t recall anyone outside of work that I associated with the older I got. Anyhow, getting to the point I am taking an awful long time to get to. I told you we’d be friends. And I started out good right.” He waited for Ellen to nod. “Then I screwed up. I saw myself getting closer to you and I pulled back. I figured as long as we worked together, as long as we communicated somehow, we were close. I was very wrong in that thinking.”

“I appreciate you saying that. But Dean, you’re forgetting. I understand

why you're being like that. I do. I wronged you."

"And I said we'd be friends. We have a baby coming El." His hand reached over and touched her stomach briefly. "I don't want this kid to grow up not seeing his parents care or know about what's going on with each other. Not in this world now. I want him or her to see I'm there for you. And I just want you to know, I will make every effort to be a friend. Not because I have to, but because I want to. And maybe, just maybe if you need to talk or just to feel better. You won't have to run to Frank every single time." Dean released her hand and stood up. "You look tired. I'll let you rest." He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Night El."

"Dean." Ellen called to him as he moved to the door. She waited until he turned around. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He opened the door and stopped. "El, this may not be a good time. But I want you to know, despite how I acted, I really, really loved last night. And for more than just the obvious reasons. Good night." He gave a soft wink, pulling the door closed. So much better he felt. As if he were finally taking that new road he should have been taking with Ellen months before.

Walking quietly from Ellen's home Dean was more upbeat. Then a spark of irritation hit him and Dean was ready to kill Robbie. Because in the midst of his short walk next door, Dean found himself, out loud humming that stupid song Robbie had played all night.

*A Pause . . .*

## PRESENT DAY

Beginnings, Montana

October 2

It was a drastic cough, one that wasn't real, and then Dean waved the cigarette smoke from in front of his face frantically.

"Dean." Frank blew even more smoke his way. "Knock it off or I'm for sure throwing your skinny ass out."

"Do all of you guys have to smoke." Dean looked around. "I'm doing a chest x-ray on every single one of you. I hear you cough Frank."

"I do not cough."

"Yes you do." Dean pointed. "Cough for me right now, let me hear that chest."

"Dean." Frank leaned into the desk. "You aren't going to ask if you can cup my balls too?"

Robbie started to laugh.

Hal failed to see the amusement. "Why do you insist on picking on this man like a school yard bully?"

"What?" Frank laughed. "I don't pick on him."

"Yes you do." Hal insisted. "This man is married to Ellen. He should be treated and regarded as family. Not to mention he is a brilliant doctor. And you treat him as if he were nothing."

"Hal." Frank spoke with annoyance. "You don't know."

"I know enough from what I have witnessed. And Frank, you soon forgot that he almost gave up his life to come and get you." Hal was taken aback when Frank scoffed. "You know, sometimes I wonder if you weren't really adopted like Dad said all these years."

"Do I look adopted?" Frank asked. "No."

"Yes." Hal answered.

"You do Frank." Robbie added.

Dean got his comments in as well. "Hal and your Dad look identical and Robbie, you can see a lot of Joe in him. Who exactly do you resemble Frank? I mean you have grey in your hair and . . ."

"Dean." Frank shut him up. "I'll have you know. I look like my mother."

"Frank?" Robbie snickered. "I may have been young when mom died, but I don't remember her being six foot three."

"Ha, ha, ha." Frank leaned back in his chair. "I have her features."

"You do not." Hal argued. "You're dark skinned. And you have black hair. Mom had brown hair. And . . . Dad has dark blonde hair. What color hair did Jimmy have?"

"Dark blonde." Frank answered.

"Me?" Hal asked.

"Blonde."

"Robbie?"

"Blonde."

"And you?"

“Blonde.” Frank ran his hand over his head. “I dye it to be different.”

“You’re an ass Frank.” Hal grunted in disgust. “Forget parentage. We’ve totally gotten off the subject.”

“Dean’s fault.” Frank pointed at Dean.

“What?” Dean raised his hand. “I merely coughed and stated my concern. You didn’t have to careen off the Ellen subject. And to answer your question Hal.” Dean faced him. “Yes, Ellen did stay that way for a long time. In my history at least. She was good for the first two months and then the reality hit her all over again and she didn’t start to snap out of it for a while. At least a year. Robbie, confirm or deny?”

“In my history.” Robbie had to think. “She got out of it by summer. But she was never the same.”

“In my history . . .” Frank spoke up and laughed when Dean grumbled at him.

“And do you think one of you originals may be one of the ones working for George?” Hal asked.

Frank shook his head. “It’s Jason and Rev. Bob. And speaking of Reverend Bob, why is he still here if we found out he’s a Hadly?”

Robbie lifted his shoulders in question. “Beats me. Maybe Dad was just waiting for you to come back. I know he wants to finish up and do a full scale investigation.”

“Yep.” Frank cupped his hands. “Can’t solve any dilemma without the brilliant Frank mind.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Henry is convinced it’s Andrea.”

“No way.” Frank argued. “It’s not Andrea. I don’t care what evidence you have on the woman. It’s not her. And, though she really gets on my last fuckin nerve, her intentions are good.”

“Now.” Hal began to speak as he always did. With un-Slagel eloquence. “I find the woman endearing, but has she always been so . . . so . . .”

“Flighty?” Frank answered. “No.” He shook his head. “She got bad when Dean spayed her.”

“Frank.” Dean swayed his head. “Do you have to put Frank style into every description. I did not spay her.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Dean.”

“Frank.”

“Dean.” Frank slammed his hand. “When you remove all the female organs from an animal. What is that called?”

“Spaying. But . . .”

“I rest my case.”

“Andrea is not an animal.” Dean said. “But according to Joe . . .” He tilted his head with a smile.

Robbie let out a disappointing whine. “I really wish you guys wouldn’t talk about our new mom like that. She’s good to me. I like her.”

“Robbie.” Hal faced him. “You liked every mom we had. And can we just stop talking about people negatively and get back to why we’re here. Catching

up. Now, I remember when I was in . . .”

“Did we ever tell you . . .” Frank interrupted Hal. “About the elephant that ran rampant in Beginnings.”

Hal chuckled. “Yeah, sure Frank. I’m gonna believe that one. An elephant in Beginnings.”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

Robbie tapped Hal on the shoulder. “It’s true. It happened in my time frame as well.”

“No, it is not. Dean?” Hal looked at Dean for an honest answer.

Dean tossed his hand up. “I hate to admit it. But in my time frame it happened too. Miguel found him on a run and toted him back to Beginnings.”

“No shit?” Hal quickly shifted his eyes about. “What happened to him.” He saw Robbie and Dean point to Frank. “What.”

“Frank killed him.” Dean said.

“Oh I did not.” Frank scoffed. “He died of natural causes.”

“You gave him a heart attack Frank.” Dean snapped. “You couldn’t get him to move out of the fields when he wandered there, so you thought you’d scared him and you fired your gun right by his head. He lifted on his back legs and died. Remember?”

“Oh yeah.” Frank nodded. “O.K.” He shrugged. “Oh well. He was a pain anyhow.”

Hal had his mouth open in amazement as he just stared at Frank. “Now I have heard everything. I swear there’s something wrong with you.”

“Yeah.” Frank smiled. He grabbed a cigarette and lit it. “Now, getting back to catching up. Where were we?”

“I believe.” Hal held up his hand. “I was just about to talk about myself.”

“No you weren’t.” Frank shook his head, grinned at an annoyed Hal and began to ramble some more.

Hal gave up. He knew somewhere in true, not true, Frank-time-frame and Robbie-time-frame stories, he would be able to get his two cents in. And by the way Frank went on at that moment in the Slagel brother meeting, he wasn’t getting his chance anytime soon. But as far as Hal was concerned he wasn’t going to worry about it. He was finally back with both brothers and he was going to enjoy the reuniting time they were spending together. Because Hal knew—especially with the way the meeting was going-- it wouldn’t be long before he sought some sort of sanctity from them both.

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE FIRST YEAR

Completion

CHAPTER SEVEN

March 20<sup>th</sup> - Beginnings, Montana

Humming pleasantly, Andrea skimmed her eyes over the small slip of paper with the typed words, *'Everyday your beauty grows and so does my love for you'*. "Oh." She breathed out. "Maybe tonight." She giggled enamored and laid the piece of paper in a shoe box. With a spark of awe upon her face, her hands rummaged through the many slips of paper that were in the box as well. Too many to count. All of them the same size paper, tiny, with typed messages conveying a single sentence of feeling. Small notes given to Andrea, one every day. Placed anonymously where she could discover them. And they always brought smiles to her, just as they did as she gazed in the box. Replacing the lid, Andrea put the shoe box away in the cabinet in the diningroom. She checked the table set for two, complete with wine glasses, continued humming a Bobby Vinton Love song, and went into the kitchen to make sure her dinner was cooking to perfection.

^^^

"Dad!" Johnny's voice called into the house. "I'm home."

Frank shifted his eyes to the alarm clock on the night stand. "He's early." He sat up in bed swinging his legs over the side and keeping the sheet over his nude body. "I'll be down in a second John."

Ellen set down the brush and turned to face Frank. "I guess our timing wasn't bad tonight."

"Not at all." He watched her slip into her shoes in a rushing, upbeat manner. "You leaving?"

"Yeah. I have to get home. I think Dean wants to head to the clinic." She grabbed her jean jacket off the foot of the bed and put it on.

"I was going to cook something. You don't want to stay and eat?"

"I can't. Rain check?"

"You got it."

In Ellen's stride across the bedroom, she picked up Frank's pants and tossed them to him. "Better get dressed. I'll see ya."

Frank caught them. "Thanks for hanging out tonight."

"My pleasure." Ellen opened the bedroom door, looked back in, smiled at Frank, then left. As she hit the stairs, Johnny was walking up. "Hey John."

"Where's my Dad?"

"Taking a nap." Ellen told him. "I just woke him up so he'll be out in a second."

"Bye."

"Bye Johnny." Ellen darted down the steps and straight to the front door. As soon as she walked out she saw Joe. "Hey Joe."

"Hey Kiddo." Joe saw where she was coming out of. "Everything O.K.?"

Joe twitched his head to Frank's.

"Oh fine. We were just bullshitting tonight. You know us. Preventive therapy." Ellen shrugged. "Where are you off to?"

Joe walked with her to the next row of house. "Andrea's and . . ." He slowed down. "Her house is dark?"

Ellen looked curiously. "Oh no Joe. It's not. She has candles lit."

"She's probably having trouble with her power that's probably why she asked me over." Joe nodded. "I'll check it out and see if I need to call Henry."

"O.K., night." Ellen separated from Joe and moved to her and Dean's house. She slowed down, backed up, watched Joe walk in Andrea's and then looked again. "Candles?" With a ornery snicker, Ellen hurried back and into her house.

"Ellen?" William called out her name seeing the snickering look on her face. "What are you up to?"

"Um, nothing." She approached William checked her tiny son which he held in his arms. "How's Billy?"

"My prodigy is fine." William leaned down and kissed the baby.

"Where's Dean?"

"Bathing Alexandra. She's being fussy."

"She's always fussy. And they sound so loud too."

"Well there aren't any noises in Beginnings. Of course they're gonna be loud."

"So it's not me?" Ellen's hand reached out and stroked the tiny pouting face of her son.

"No." William smiled. "Why would you say that."

Ellen shrugged. "It's been insinuated that I can't handle them."

"What has my son said to you?"

"Not Dean." Ellen shook her head with a smile. "Someone else. They keep saying if I need them to take the babies, they will."

"Ah." William nodded his head knowingly. "Miss Jenny."

Ellen quickly looked up. "Why is she being like that William. She doesn't think I see it. She comes over all the time when the babies are fussy. Help is one thing. An eighteen year old girl telling me that maybe I'm too emotionally drawn to handle them alone is another."

Foots steps hurrying down the stairs precluded Dean's comment. "She's just being nice."

"No Dean she's not." Ellen looked up to him.

"Ellen, you're making far too much out of it." Dean opened up the livingroom closet. "I have to start a test at the clinic. I'll be back." He hurried and kissed Ellen on the cheek. "Dad, are you staying?"

"Dean?" William had question in his voice. "Are you insinuating that your wife can not handle the twins alone."

"Dad." Dean stopped at the door. "Don't instigate. El." Dean winked. "Alex is asleep, bathed, fed and should be down until I get back. See ya." He hurried out.

Ellen turned to William. "He should be with Jenny." She twitched her head

at the door.

^^^

Wine. Candles. Food. Joe scratched his head in wonder as he stared at the perfectly set diningroom table. “So uh Andrea.”

“Hmm?” Andrea folded her hands over her empty dinner plate. She shifted in her seat to make sure that the candle light lit her face just right.

“The dinner was good. What’s the occasion?”

“Just . . .” Andrea spoke in a whisper. “Just wanted to show you my appreciation for all that you have done around here.”

“Really.” Joe reached into his pocket for cigarette.

“Yes. I wanted to do something for you.”

“I have a pair of pants that need sewn, do you think . . .”

“Joe.” She tapped his hand. “You just bring them over.”

“Gee thanks Andrea.” Joe leaned into the candle bringing it to him and lighting his cigarette. “Kids in bed early?”

“The children . . .” Andrea moved te candle back into perfect lighting position. “The children are with Maggie. It’s just us Joe.”

“I see that.”

“All alone.”

“I see that.”

“And I thought you and I could . . .” Andrea giggled. “Engage in something fun this evening to pass time.”

“I don’t see a problem with that. I’m open tonight.” Joe sat back in his chair remembering the last fun evening he had with Andrea, hours he was there. And saw no problem in doing it again. He only hoped that she put the lights back on because he left his glasses at home and would have a hard time seeing that Monopoly Board if she didn’t.

^^^

It was high pitched, singing and muffled by the wall, Andrea’s voice was. “Oh! Sweet Jesus! Oh! Sweet, Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus!”

So red Ellen’s face was as she laughed laying stomach down on her bed. Her forehead met her hands as she laughed again.. Catching her breath she lifted her views to Dean, who laid the same next to her, laughing near hyena mode.

“El. Stop.”

“I can’t help it.”

Another Andrea cry out and Dean and Ellen both at the same time released a burst of laughter and dropped their heads.

“I have to go.” Dean scooted to her.

“Don’t you want to wait for the outcome. It’s like the only entertainment in

Beginnings tonight.”

“I’d love to but I want to finish those test and get home.” He lifted her chin and kissed her soft. “Unless . . .” he kissed her again. “You wanna give me reason to stay home?”

“Like?”

“Like.” More intense Dean placed his lips on hers. “What do you say.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s uh . . . it’s a female thing.”

“A female thing?” Dean questioned and rolled onto his side. “Explain. Are you mad?”

“No.” Ellen giggled at him. “Female problems.”

“El.” Dean rolled onto his back, sat up then swung his legs over the bed. “You had female problems last week.” He stood up.

“I know. I just haven’t been right since the twins were born.”

“You should talk to my dad, see what he thinks.”

“I will.”

“All right. I’ll be back. If I get held up, I ran into problems with the new anti infection batch.” He leaned over the bed and kissed Ellen on the head. “Don’t wait up if it gets too late.”

“I won’t.”

“Night.” Dean walked to the door and left. He stopped to shake his head when he closed the door and hear another burst of laughter come from Ellen.

^^^

“I have to say Andrea.” Joe finished buttoning his shirt. “You meant it when you said fun. And here I thought I was getting my ass whipped in a board game.” He tucked his shirt in his pants.

“Well Joseph.” Andrea tightened the belt to her robe. “I certainly hope this is a first of many, many times.” She ran her hand across her forehead.

“Would be nice. Especially with nothing to do.” Joe looked around for his shoes.

“And it would be nice. Since you find it in you to make me feel good every single day.”

“Really?” Joe sat on the edge of the bed. “How’s that?”

“Oh Joe.” Andrea flung her hand, gave a school girl giggle and covered her mouth. “You know.”

“I do?”

“Yes.”

“No I don’t. So tell me because I haven’t a clue.”

“The notes. The flowers.” She sat next to him on the bed. “The mini poems you leave about for me to find. That is so sweet.”

Slam! Joe’s foot slipped from his hand and fell hard to the floor. “Poems? Flowers?”

“Yes.”

“You think I’m leaving you flowers and poems?”

“Yes.”

“Christ Andrea.” Joe stood up. “Now do I strike you as the type for man that leaves flowers and poems around. No.” He shook his head. “But I appreciate you thinking it was me.”

Andrea’s mouth dropped open. “It . . . it wasn’t you?”

“No.”

“You . . . you . . .” Andrea stood up. “You slept with me for no reason?”

“In my defense.” Joe held up his hand. “You offered.”

Excited, high pitch and rambled fast together was how Andrea’s words were. “You son-of-a-bitch.”

“What?”

“Oh.” She gasped in a sad, over acting emotional way. Her hand went to her chest. “Sweet Jesus I’m a slut.”

Joe had been married several times and he knew women. He also knew when a woman needed kindness, compassion and understanding. And at that moment Andrea needed that from Joe. He wanted to give it to her, but he had to stop laughing at her comment first.

^^^

Dean really thought he was missing something as he slowed down his pace by the social hall. Laughter, deep and lots of it seeped out into the street.

“Dean.” Robbie called his name upbeat as he approached him

“Hey.” Dean looked up and started walking.

“You decided to join us after all huh?”

“What are you talking about?” Dean asked.

“I asked you this afternoon. I said us guys are getting together to try to break the boredom.”

“Oh.” Dean recalled . “No, I’m going home.”

“To be bored.”

“What else?” Dean tossed his hands up.

“Come in with us.” Robbie reached for the door. “Have some fun.”

“Nah.”

“Dean. You never associate with any of us guys. You got a lot of years you have to be with us. Your dad hangs. Come on. Just an hour or so.”

Remembering advice William gave him on trying to fit in, Dean shrugged his shoulders. “Why not. What are we doing?”

“Frank said he has something planned.”

Dean slowed down. “Oh no.”

“It’ll be fun.” Robbie waited for Dean to walk in. “Drink Dean?” Robbie pointed to the bar.

“Um, yeah.” He walked over and joined Robbie only after looking to the tables joined and every male but Joe sitting around.

“Moon shine.” Robbie poured him a glass. “Take it easy on that it’ll kick your ass.”

"Swell." Dean sniffed it. He knew he was in trouble, it even burned his nostrils.

"See you at the table."

Still staring into the glass Dean turned his body and faced a chest. He slowly raised his eyes to Frank.

"Look who's trying to fit in." Frank's long reach extended to the bar and lifted the bottle.

"Excuse me." Dean tried to get past him.

"El uh . . . at home alone?" Frank raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I should go and see her."

"Frank. You two spend enough time together. I would like it very much if you would try to leave her alone some times."

"You would, would you?" Frank smiled, turned and walked back to the table.

"Asshole." Dean mumbled under his breath and grabbed a chair pulling it to the table in between Miguel and Robbie. Just as he sat he heard the rumbling burp come from Miguel and Dean shifted his eyes to watch the big man swaying. "Please don't throw up on me."

Another belch and Miguel held up his hand. "I'm fine."

With a heavy bang, Frank set down the bottle and lowered into a chair at the far end of the table. "Slagel game of truth, dare or drink. Robbie you know how it works. I'm the master of ceremonies. And the person to your right asks or tells you what to do."

"Got it." He looked to his right to William, and chuckled, thinking he wouldn't get drunk at all, then he looked to his left to Dean and grinned widely at him. The expression Dean gave back all but said he knew he was in trouble.

"All right." Frank spoke up. "Henry. Truth, dare or drink."

"Oh Truth Frank." Henry answered. "I like this game."

John Matoose was to his right. "Henry." He snickered as he played with his glass. "Would you be willing to be the one to help Jenny lose her virginity?"

"Oh no not me." Henry shook his head. "Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't. I'm a terrible lay. I wouldn't want to leave someone with that everlasting impression of sex."

Frank laughed and pointed to George. "George. Truth, dare or drink."

"Truth."

"Man." Frank twitched his head. "Wimps. Henry?"

Henry waited for his opportunity. "George. What was the wildest thing you ever did while president?"

"The wildest thing?" George had to think. He started to laugh and brought his drink to his lips. "I got drunk one night and took a piss from the balcony off the oval office."

A loud eruption of 'Whoa's!' rang from around the table and they all raised their glasses and drank anyhow.

"William." Frank pointed. "Truth, dare or drink."

"Truth."

"Fuck." Frank cringed. "Go on George."

"William." George spoke serious. "Tell us something very personal and

shocking you would never tell your son.”

William looked to Dean, so smug as Dean sipped his moonshine. Dean had that look that there was nothing he didn't know. “Well.” William cleared his throat. “When I was a young man in the Corp. Before I was married mind you, I had this little episode in a hotel room with three women. I'll never forget it.” William nearly choked when Dean's loud ‘What!’ made him jolt.

“Dad. You're lying.”

“I am not. Just because your combined lover list doesn't tally three women doesn't mean I am lying. I was quite the ladies man back then.”

“Oh my God.” Dean covered his face.

Frank looked so lost, “I thought they didn't do things like that back then?”

“Have sex?” William asked. “Oh we had sex. Tell him Stan.”

Stan made a clicking sound with his tongue. “By God I think women were wilder back then. But they just didn't brag. What they didn't do to you back in the cornfield. I believe they didn't have a name for it then. But I swear they invented it. Back then, you could be out in a field with a nice woman, look like you're working and she'd never be seen.”

Frank coughed, grabbed his drink downed it and poured another. “I was born in the wrong time.” He gasped at the burning moonshine. “Robbie.”

“Dare.”

Instigating chants filled the air.

William smiled. “I would like you Robert to stand up, embrace Henry, plant a kiss on his cheek and tell him you love him.”

“All right.” Robbie downed his drink and stood up. “Henry.” He extended his arms, and tilted his head. “Come on.”

“Oh my God.” Henry stood up and backed away. “This isn't fair Frank. I'm not the one being dared.”

“We'll skip your turn.” Frank told him

“No.” Henry began to run around the table as Robbie chased him. “I would never pick dare. Uh!” He shrieked when Robbie lunged for him, grabbed him, smacked him hard on the cheek with a kiss and squeezed him tight.

“I love you Henry.” Robbie rubbed Henry's hair messing it up then returned to his seat.

Henry gagged. His face turned red. “This isn't funny.” He pouted and whined his way back to his seat. “This is really starting me out with a bad reputation. No offense Jonas.” Henry sat down. “And my hair got messed up.”

Frank chuckling, looked to Dean and smiled. “Dean. Truth, dare or drink.”

Dean took a breath. He saw his father waiting, then saw the shitty grin on Robbie's face. “Drink,” he reached for his small glass.

“Oh no.” Frank stood up quickly leaned across the table and stopped him. “You seemed to miss something. When you choose drink. You drink.” From the center of the table Frank lifted a large glass. He grabbed the moonshine and poured about three shots worth in. He set it down hard in front of Dean. “Now drink.”

Dean was horrified. His hand gripped the glass that felt so big.

“Drink.” Frank raised his eyes brows. “And down it.”

Dean looked to his father as if for an answer.

“Don’t back out.” William told him. “You always did that when you were a kid. Wanted to play, hated the rules then quit.”

Figuring, he’d show his father, Dean, firm, grabbed that glass, brought it to his mouth, downed every ounce of moonshine and slammed the glass. It took a second, then Dean started gasping. His entire chest felt as if it were on fire. He couldn’t breathe and he knew his face was red. His glands salivated and he tried with diligence not to throw up all over the table. And as soon as his body started to return to normal, he knew he was in trouble. He looked around the table, Robbie looked glowing, the night was still young and that game he joined was far from over with.

CHAPTER EIGHT

March 21<sup>st</sup> - Beginnings Montana

It wasn't even dawn but the moon was shining enough to give the wooded area some visual light. Frank and Robbie's boots made a scrunching sound on the hard ground as they shuffled where they stood.

The steam from his warm breath came from his mouth as Frank sniffled and extended down his M-16. "Dead?"

"No." Robbie extended down his. He poked it in a nudging manner and got a moan. "Alive."

"He's probably freezing." Frank stated sniffing in again.

"Henry said it dropped down to twenty last night."

"Fuck. I'm surprised he's not dead."

"We're lucky."

"Yeah. And maybe we can get some sleep now."

"I'm with ya. I'm beat."

Frank tossed his M-16 over his shoulder and unhooked the radio from his belt. "Dad. Dad. Come in."

"What's up Frank. Give me good news. Alive?"

"Yep. Search is over. We're bringing him in." The static signaled the call was over and Frank hooked the radio back up again. "You or me."

"Loser does it." Robbie stated.

"Odd or even?" Frank asked.

"Even."

Counting to three Frank and Robbie clenched their fists and tossed out their hands extending out fingers. "Shit. Four."

"You're the man Frank." Robbie grinned.

"Yeah. Fuck." Frank hunched down some. "Dean. Dean!" Frank only received a moan from Dean who laid amongst the foliage. "Shit. Oh he's not living this one down. I am riding his ass forever."

"As well as you should." Robbie said. "But look at the bright side. At least he's not heavy."

"True." Frank, bringing himself down to his knees, gripped hold off a passed out Dean, lifted him as he stood and hoisted Dean's small body over his shoulder. Frank turned some, his head shifted about.

"Looking for something?" Robbie asked as they started to walk.

"Yeah, his clothes."

"He took them off at the social hall remember?"

"Yeah that's right." Frank shrugged. "Let's head back." Turning, Frank began to lead the way. And Dean's body, clad in only boxer shorts, flopped drastically over Frank's shoulder with every heavy, fast bouncing step Frank took on purpose through those woods.

^^^

“What the hell did you do to my husband?” Ellen blasted as she watched Frank just plop Dean down on the sofa.

“I didn’t do anything. If a man can’t hold his liquor, he shouldn’t drink. And he probably needs a blanket.”

“In the closet.” Ellen pointed looking at Dean who barely moved. “You got him drunk?”

“I did not such thing. He got himself drunk.”

“And where are his clothes Frank? You didn’t do anything perverted to him did you?”

“Oh my God, I can’t fuckin believe you just asked me that. No!” He dropped the blanket over Dean. “We were playing truth, dare or drink. And he drank then got drunk and took dare.”

“Which was.”

“To run up and down the street three times in his underwear. Then . . .” Frank scratched his head. “We lost him.”

“You lost him?” Ellen’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, you lost him.”

“He just took off. Kept on running. We’ve been looking for him for two hours. Found him passed out. Up in the woods.”

“Oh shit.” Ellen bent over the couch and pulled the blanket more on Dean.

“He’ll be sick when he wakes up.”

“I bet.”

“Hey, El?” Frank softened his voice. “The babies sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s.” Frank winked and twitched his head to the stairs.

“What?”

Frank winked and twitched his head again.

“What, you suddenly have turret syndrom. What is this.” Ellen mocked his movements.

Frank raised his eyebrows a couple times. “You know.” He leaned down to her to kiss her.

“Yeah, right Frank.” Ellen stepped back. “Go home. You have field work today.”

“You’re right. Night.” Frank leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

“Morning.”

Frank walked to the door. “Oh and El . . . when he wakes up, tell him he owes us that last dare.”

“Which is?” Ellen asked.

Frank snickered. “He has to help Jenny out with losing her virginity.”

^^^

“Can you be anymore pathetic?” William asked Dean, standing beside his son in the lab.

“Probably.” Dean’s voice echoed.

“This is embarrassing.”

“Dad.” Dean turned on the water of the sink he hung into. He splashed his

face. "I'm trying to throw up here."

"I see that." William handed him a towel "You know, we were all drinking last night Dean."

"I know." Dean stood up.

"And not one of us is non-functioning today."

"I know." Dean dried his face. "God, I feel like shit. I swear I'll never, never drink that much again."

"You didn't have to." William bitched at him.

"Yeah Dad I did. Robbie Slagel was on my right. It was either drink or be humiliated."

"I have news for you bright boy." William gave a pat to Dean's back. "Running around in your underwear and showing up passed out in the woods is pretty much as close to humiliation as you can get."

"Thanks." Dean swayed his way over to the counter. "Can you believe the things Robbie dared me to do."

"And do you remember the last thing they dared you to do?"

"Vaguely." Dean rubbed his eyes. "Something about Jenny?" He question his father.

"Yep. They dared you to run over to her house and take away her virginity."

"Oh my God."

"And guess what?" William smiled.

"What?"

"You did."

"No." Dean was horrifically shocked. "No. Tell me I didn't."

"How do you think you ended up in your underwear." William flashed a grin. "Well, I'll leave you to your work. I have to hit the fields. do some *manual* labor with . . . " William Snickered. "Miguel." Leaving Dean in a stated of suspended disbelief, William, laughing not only at his bad ethnic joke, but at his son's gullibility as well, walked from the lab having a better morning than he imagined he would have.

^^^

The field house was one of the structures all set up and read to go. That along with three of the five greenhouses. The farming or agricultural division as Stan and Dirk liked to called it, was the only division in Beginnings totally up and running and it had to be for survival.

"The way it will go." Joe explained to the farming pair. "Is I know you guys are used to the cock-a-doodle-do starting time shit, but other things need done as well. So, the men should be here late morning. All except for Robbie. He's setting up outside perimeters beyond our walls."

Stan nodded. "So, we'll have the hands we need?"

"Yes."

"Dirk and I will have to start concentrating on the livestock we got. Flourish them like the fields. We pretty much have Miguel all trained to take over there."

“Excellent. Miguel in the fields, you two livestock and greenhouses. We had a late start last year and still did good. I’m hoping for better things.”

Dirk who looked like the picture book farmer, chewed on a piece of hay as he spoke slow and annoyingly. “Gonna need some strength. If es-saul-rye wit chew Joe, we’d lie ta abuse dat big son of yours. At least until we get ourselves another mechanical plow.”

“Abuse them both. By all means.” Joe was very congenial. He looked at his watch. “O.K., well, I have to finish looking at what needs repaired on the storage building in town and I’ll be back.” Joe started to walk away.

Stan and Dirk looked to each other as they watched Joe leave.

“Hmm.” Dirk let out a long thinking sound. “Dint I tell you he wouldn’t care ‘bout his son being a plow pull.”

“You were right.”

“An look, he dint even ask for nothin in return.”

“Hell of a guy that Joe is.”

Dirk nodded slow in agreement. “Hell va guy.”

^^^

It wasn’t Ellen to take a shower in the middle of the day. She usually was a morning cleaning person. But she tired of waiting for Dean to return and she needed one badly. Ellen crowned herself the queen of the three minute showers. Having the child experience and the knowledge that you just don’t stay out of view for too long, she had it down to a science.

She stood under the water’s stream for a pause enjoying the silence that the beating water gave her. The babies had whined and screamed all day, she was grateful that they quieted down when she got into the shower. She even stole an extra minute, knowing that they were sleeping.

Shutting off the water, Ellen stepped out, immediately opened the bathroom door, listen for crying, heard it was good and shut the door again. She quickly placed on her jeans and sweatshirt, towel drying her hair and leaving the bathroom.

Would it be possible? The babies still asleep. Maybe they would be out long enough for a nap, was what Ellen hoped. Checking and knowing she would do it without a sound, Ellen crept into the second bedroom inching her way to the crib that both small twins shared.

When she reached it, the towel dropped from her hand and her heart sunk. She flew to the crib and lifted the blanket. The babies, both of them, were gone.

“Oh my God.” She breathed heavily then stopped. “O.K. Dean is downstairs.” Ready to kill him for not knocking on the door to tell her he was home, Ellen walked down the steps. “Dean?”

Silence.

“Dean?” She looked frantically around. There was no Dean and no babies. There also wasn’t that bag of Pampers Frank had picked up on the run. Ellen took deep breaths. She knew no one could have possibly snuck into Beginnings and kidnaped her children. Maybe Dean took them out. But why did he grab the

entire bag of diapers.

Getting concerned yet not completely worried, Ellen slipped on her shoes hurriedly and bolted from the house. She had her mind list of where she would check first. And in her darting run, she heard one of them. It wasn't a cry, it was more like a single whimper that quickly stopped.

Where? She wonder as she jolted her head looking around. Their sound definitely came from the living section. Moving down the row of house she heard another whimper and Ellen pegged it.

Outrage not only filled her gut but her face as well as she stared at Maggie and Jenny's home. And through the screen door she saw Jenny pacing around with one of the twins.

Without knocking, Ellen barged right in. "What the hell are you doing Jenny?"

"You weren't paying attention to them." Jenny cradled Billy while she fed him.

"What!" shock was ll through Ellen's tone. "I was in the shower."

"A good mother wouldn't leave her children unattended."

"This is Bullshit." Ellen snatched the baby from Jenny's arm. Billy cried.

"See." Jenny pointed. "They don't even like you. You aren't an attentive mother Ellen."

Ellen ignore her and searched out Alexandra.

"Not like you were with your other children." Jenny continued.

Found. In the diningroom in the basinet. Ellen grabbed Alexandra as well and held both twins in her arms. She marched toward the door.

"If you can't care for them. You don't deserve them."

Ellen spun. "Jenny. These are my children! You had no right. No right to take them from their home!"

"I was concerned."

"I'm their mother!"

"You could care less." Jenny marched to her. "You never hold them. Touch them. Dean does all the work."

"I swear to God, Jenny if my arms weren't full right now I'd punch you."

"You're just angry." Jenny folded her arms. "Because I refused to let you abuse them any further."

"I'm angry because you took them without permission."

"Someone has to look out for their best interest."

Not wanting to argue anymore and seeing a brick wall with Jenny, Ellen pushed the screen door open with her body.

Jenny flew out of the house after Ellen. "And don't think I won't do it again!"

Ellen kept on moving. She marched with determination straight to center town and to the clinic. She knew Dean was still there and the lab was where she was certain she would find him. "Dean." She called to him as she rounded the corner into the lab.

"El" Dean turned around. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Jenny." Ellen walked to him. "I was taking a shower and she took the babies Dean."

"That was nice. You didn't have to do that three minute thing huh?" He leaned to kiss her and Ellen stepped back. "What's wrong?"

"No, Dean, you don't understand. She took them. Took them. Snuck into our home and brought them to her house."

"Were they crying?"

"What?" Ellen shook her head in disbelief. "Aren't you hearing me? She took my babies. She was fuckin wrong Dean and she isn't listening to me."

"O.K. She was wrong. I understand."

"Thank you."

"She probably just didn't realize what she was doing was wrong."

"Dean!" Ellen screamed at him. "Don't defend her."

"She's a kid El."

"And I am your wife. These are your children."

"What do you want me to do. Go over and yell at her?"

"Yes!" Ellen nodded.

"El, come on."

"Fine. Fuck you." She marched to him and handed him both babies. "Take them." She started to leave the lab.

"Hey . . . where are you going?"

"To find someone to straighten her ass out. If someone doesn't do it verbally, I'll do it physically and this new community of Beginnings will be less one red head, freckle face, nymphomaniac mommy wanna be." She stormed out.

"Had to be the snow Joe." George commented as they walked behind the back of a storage building. "It was pretty bad."

"Still." Joe hunched down by the back of the building. "We can't take a flood every time we get a heavy storm." He stood up. "We're going to have to seal this. Or maybe do a french drain around the edge."

"That might not be a bad idea." George said.

"Joe!" Ellen came flying behind the building.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked.

"Jenny, Joe." Ellen caught her breath. "She took my babies."

"What do you mean, she took your babies?"

"I was in the shower and she just came into the house and took them without my permission. Saying that I was a terrible mother."

"You got them back right?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded.

"Did you yell at her?"

"Yes."

"Good." Joe turned to speak to George again.

"Joe!" Ellen yelled. "Something has to be done."

"What do you want me to do Ellen? She took them. Yes it was wrong. She's eighteen years old. A little messed up at times. You got them back and yelled. What more can be done."

Ellen grunted. "Fine." She stormed off. "Where's Frank and Robbie?"

“Robbie’s outside the walls. Frank may be at his office. But I don’t think . . .” Giving a grumble and a fling of his hand when Ellen walked away, Joe returned to speaking to George.

^^^

Frank groaned and rubbed his shoulder as he lowered, sweaty and dirty into his chair in what would be his security office. “Man am I sore.”

Miguel sat in a chair across from him. “That was close to four hundred pounds you pulled today.”

“That’s all?” Frank twitched his head. “I’m out of shape. All right. Where were we.”

“Women.” Miguel stated.

“Women that’s right.”

“I come to you Frank, because I think you know women.”

“I do.” Frank rocked some in his chair. “So, you’re pretty hung up on her.”

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t told her.”

“Not to her face.” Miguel shook his head. “No.”

“What do you mean, not to her face.”

“I . . . I leave her notes.” Miguel blushed. “Poems.”

“Note and poems.” Frank laughed. “Oh you have to stop that.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s a woman, She’ll expect that all the time.”

“I could write her notes of love for the rest of my life.”

“You say that now. But what about when she starts looking bad and her bitching gets on your nerves Huh?” Frank raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t think about that. Did you.”

There was a knock on Frank’s door and Ellen just walked right in. “Frank, sorry to bother you.”

“What’s wrong.”

“I need you to take care of something for me.”

“Sure. What is it?” Frank leaned into the desk.

“I need you to go and speak to Jenny.”

“About?” Frank asked.

“She took my babies Frank. Came into the house while I was in the shower and took my babies.”

“For real?” Frank asked.

“Yes.” Ellen said in relief. “Can you just go tell her how wrong that was. She doesn’t want to believe me.”

“El, come on.” Frank shook his head. “She probably was just trying to help That’s all. I bet she said . . .”

“Fuck it.” Ellen moved to the door again.

“El. Wait.”

“No.” She spun to face him harshly. “Fuck all of you. You want to defend her? You sleep with her. I’m sick of this shit.”

“El, I was trying to talk to you.” Frank defended.

“No Frank.” Ellen scolded. “You were being a dick.” Ellen slammed the door when she walked out.

Frank stared for a moment, scratched his head. Shrugged and sat back down. “Now where were we. Oh yes. Women.”

^^^

Henry had all intentions of staying out of the way when he hooked the new power line up to add spotlights to what would end up being a building full of division offices. He knew he was tall, but he didn’t think his legs had protruded that much that Ellen couldn’t see him. He felt the painful sear as her foot got caught up on him.

Loud, Ellen grunted as she stumbled and caught herself before she fell to the ground., “Henry! Watch where you’re going!”

“Sorry.” Henry stood up. “El.”

“What!” She spun in her full speed walk.

“Everything all right?”

“No!” Ellen screamed. “No it is not all right! Not like anyone cares!” She turned again.

Henry had two choices, he could take the chance of not only verbally getting pelted by Ellen , but physically as well, or he could secure the fact that he wouldn’t be known as an insensitive prick and find out what was wrong. Brave and daring, Henry followed Ellen. “El, wait.”

“What.” Her voice lowered in volume and it shook.

“Something happened. Can I help.”

“I doubt it.”

“Try me.”

“I’d rather not. I’m tired of being humiliated today.” Ellen kept on walking.

“I won’t make you feel that way. I promise.” Henry kept up to her. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s . . . it’s . . .” Ellen huffed. “It’s about Jenny.”

Henry blinked. “Oh, El, That’s a nasty, nasty rumor going around. Really, Dean did not help Jenny lose her virginity.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what your mad about isn’t it?”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I’m mad about Jenny. When I was in the shower Henry, she came to my house, walked in and took my babies.”

“Took them? Just snatched them right up?”

“Yes.”

“She didn’t ask?”

“No, she said I was ignoring them.”

“Oh that is wrong El. That is so wrong. She shouldn’t have done that.”

"I know." Ellen spoke in relief. "And I don't know why I'm bothering you. No one else wants to hear. No one will go over and explain to her why it's so wrong. They think she didn't know. She knew Henry, and it isn't sinking into her skull that she did something really wrong. Everyone's attitude is, 'oh well.'" Ellen tossed her hands up and started walking again. "And they'll let it go when she does it again."

"She won't do it again El." Henry followed her some more.

"Oh sure she will Henry, she threatened to."

"No, she won't. Let's go." Henry grabbed Ellen's hand and instead of him following her, he began to lead the way.

Like the rush-feel of a hero riding onto the screen of a movie, that was how Ellen felt when Henry grabbed her hand and walked with her to Jenny's house.

Henry had a serious look about him Ellen had never seen. He knocked and waited for Jenny to call out. Henry opened the screen door and let Ellen go in first. He followed. "Jenny."

Jenny came from the diningroom slowing when she saw Ellen. "Yes Henry?"

"Did you . . . did you go to Ellen's and take her children without permission today?"

"Yes."

That floored Henry. No argument. No covering up. "Jenny. You had no right."

"I had every right."

"No." Henry's voice raised. "Listen to me. You had no right. What you did was wrong. Really wrong. And in the world where there used to be laws it would be considered a crime."

"But . . ." Jenny seemed so offended. "I had my reasons. Don't you want to hear them."

"No." Henry shook his head. "No I don't. Because as far as I am concerned there is no reason good enough for you to go over and take her children."

"She doesn't know how to care for them Henry."

"And who are you to determine that?" Henry questioned her. "What do you know?"

"I used to babysit."

Henry laughed at her. "Oh that makes you an expert."

"It gives me the experience to know."

"Oh bullshit." Henry argued. "It gives you nothing. You are not a mother. Ellen is. You are not responsible for those babies, Ellen and Dean are. You are an eighteen year old girl with delusional ideals of what mother hood is. And you're wrong. You're wrong. Jenny." Henry stepped to her. "Don't ever let me hear that you did something like that again. Or don't let me hear you are making Ellen out to be a bad mother. That's not your business nor will it ever be.. You are not the judge and jury of Beginnings. No one is. And it's a shame we don't have that because I swear to God I would push for a hard reprimanding." Henry grabbed Ellen's hand and started to walk out. "But let me leave you with this. Start stepping on toes Jenny, start trouble. You go on. Beginnings is not that big, but it can certainly be an awful lonely places if no one wants to be bothered with

you.” Without saying anymore, Henry, grabbing Ellen’s hand walked outside with her.

“Oh Henry.” Ellen closed her eyes and embraced him. “Oh Henry.” She embraced him tighter. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“Yes, I do.” She wouldn’t stop hugging him. “I will never forget what you did today, I won’t. When no one else wanted to take me serious. You did.” She kissed him on the cheek and stepped back. “And I think from this day forward, you and I will be special friends. I’ll make sure of it.”

“I’d like that El.” Henry smiled. “And I’ll hold you to it. Because I’d like that very much.”

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

Beginnings, Montana

October 2

As if he could possibly sneak anywhere without being seen, Frank shifted his views back and forth. Looked over his shoulder, and slid back against the wall to the window by the door. He dropped down to the ground and slowly, very slowly lifted just enough to see in the window. "All clear!" He whispered loudly, then stood straight up and reached for his keys.

From around the side of the quantum lab, Robbie, Dean, and a nervous looking Hal came.

"Frank." Hal kept looking around. "Are we allowed to do this?"

"Hal. I'm security. Of course." Frank unlocked the door and pushed it open. "Now hurry in before someone sees us."

Dean rolled his eyes slightly as he trailed behind the three giant Slagels. "Frank, what is wrong with this picture?"

"What picture?" Frank asked.

"This picture." Dean held out his hand as an indication to the room.

"Where?"

"Here."

Frank first looked to Robbie. then he looked to Dean's hand and moved his views to where Dean's fingers pointed. "I don't see a picture."

"Frank, you idiot. This picture meaning us being here. Sneaking into a place that is five miles from town. Who the hell is gonna see us. And . . . and mind you. How the hell do you think you could get away with sneaking anywhere anyhow."

"Ha." Frank laughed in ridicule. "I can hide anyplace better than you can."

"You think?" Dean asked.

"I know."

"How do you figure Frank?" Dean questioned. "You're six-foot-three. I'm five foot seven."

"Four."

"What?"

"You're five foot four."

"Oh I am not."

"Are too." Frank instigated.

"Frank."

"Dean." Frank stepped to him. "You're little."

"That's right. So how do you think that big body of yours can hide better than this little body of mine."

"Skill." Frank nodded.

"Skill?"

"Yep."

"All right. Say you had to hide in this room from me."

"I wouldn't hide from you." Frank stated.

"Just for argument's sake, Frank." Dean held up his hand. "Say you had to hide from me . . ."

“Dean.” Frank chuckled. “Why would I hide from you.”

“Frank!” Dean snapped. “If you *had* to hide from me. Where would you do it.”

“First.” Frank held up a finger. “Are you as little as you are now.”

“Yes.” Dean answered.

“Simple.” Frank tossed his hands up. “I wouldn’t hide from you.”

“You know what . . .” Dean cringed in frustration. “Forget it.”

“What?”

Dean grumbled.

Hal laughed. “Dean, don’t let him get to you. You let him aggravate you too much. Besides, if it’s any consolation, Frank wasn’t very good at hide and go seek when we were kids.”

Frank gasped. “You lie!”

“I do not.” Hal defended. “You sucked at hide and go seek. You were too over grown and lanky to do anything.”

“Hal, I suck at nothing.”

Robbie whined a little, ready to interrupt. “Um that is not entirely true. I recall you sucking at farming.”

Dean nodded. “Everything you tried to grow died. If I remember in my time frame, that was both you and Ellen who had that magic touch.”

“But.” Robbie continued. “You have to admit Dean. How much of his strength could you attribute to his farming skills?”

Dean had to agree. “You’re right. I’ve never seen a human being made to do that much physical work in my life. I was surprised that you never said, enough is enough, Frank.”

“Dean, how could I?” Frank said. “Everyone was doing it.”

“Farming yes. But you were the only one who pulled a plow, carried that cart with supplies. Pushed that thing-a-jig that dug up the ground.”

“You’re kidding?” Frank looked back and forth at Dean and Robbie. “No one else did that?” He watched them shake their head. “Fuckin Dirk. He kept telling me I wasn’t pulling my weight.”

“You were pulling your weight alright.” Robbie commented. “Along with mine, Miguel’s, Dean’s, Dad’s and the weight of just about all the harvest we had.”

“Fuck. And nobody told me.”

Robbie snickered. “Why would we Frank, then we’d really have to. So you pulled everyone’s weight.”

“But yours.” Frank stated to Robbie.

“No Frank I was lazy.”

The fifth voice in the room was not one expected. “You can say that again.” Henry stood up from behind the far counter.

Frank turned quickly. “Fuck Henry, are you spying on us.”

“No Frank. I was getting the heating fixed in here and I just . . . listened.” Henry walked toward them. “Does Jason know you’re here?”

“Yes.” Frank answered quickly. “And fuckin Jason invites us up and doesn’t show. Go figure.” Frank tossed his hands in the air.

“He must have forgotten Frank.” Henry told him. “It’s just not like Jason

to blow someone off. And Dean? Isn't Joe looking for you."

"No." Dean shook his head. "In fact, he was but found me and now he's not."

Robbie swayed his head at Henry. "We're having a special family meeting Henry, either go do your work or beat it."

Henry gasped. "Oh that isn't very nice. Dean is here. He's not family and I'm more family than he is. Frank and I look alike."

"Yeah." Frank said. "In fact the other day some one called me Henry." Frank clapped his hands together one time. "All right. Now getting back to why we're here. Over here Hal, is the time machine."

"It really works?" Hal questioned.

"Yep." Frank nodded. "Robbie is here as proof."

"Frank." Robbie spoke up. "I have always been here."

"Not to me. Dean has he always been here?"

"Not in my mind."

"Henry?" Frank asked.

"Thank God not mine either."

Hal had to question. "But he showed up eventually in Beginnings. Right? So why did you try to bring him back Frank if he was already here?"

"When?" Frank asked.

"In Beginnings. He showed up right?" Hal quizzed. "So if he showed up, then why when you went back in time did you try to change time to get him to show up. I'm lost."

Frank quickly looked at Robbie. "See Hal, he died in our time frame."

Hal hurriedly looked at his little brother. "You died?"

Robbie tossed his hands up. "Don't ask me. I've always been alive and in Beginnings. These three remember me not showing up till five years later."

"Was he sick." Hal questioned. "Is that why he died."

Again Frank looked in hesitation. "He . . . he was killed Hal when he tried to strong arm Beginnings."

"Robbie?" Hal seemed so shocked. "Robbie's the nice guy. A little shitty sometimes, but he was always the nice kid. Why would he try to strong arm Beginnings?"

Dean decided to explain. "Robbie was out there for a while. When he got here he did some things that went against our rules. He . . . he left." Dean stated. "He didn't like it here and he left. But he returned with an army of men because he had this hostility toward Joe and Frank."

Hal nodded slowly. "So basically, the world changed our Robbie into someone we wouldn't know? In the Frank, Henry, Dean time frame of course. So sad. Our little brother became a product of what the world became."

Solemnly Frank agreed. "Yeah. But that was a source of argument for a while. Was Robbie bad or did the world make him that way."

Hal kept his eyes on Robbie. "The world made him that way. There's no argument there. Not Robbie. And I'm glad Frank . . ." Hal looked back at Frank. "I'm glad you screwed up time or else I wouldn't be looking at him now."

Frank stared for a moment at Hal very seriously. "Can you be any more sentimental? Fuck."

“What?” Hal tossed up his hands. “I am being sincere. Nice. Which you aren’t.”

“Oh Hal.” Henry spoke up. “I have to disagree. Frank is very nice.”

“Yeah.” Frank added.

“Frank?” Robbie said his name softly. “Who killed me in your time frame?”

Frank didn’t know how to answer that and his face reflected it. “Robbie. See uh . . .”

“Who killed me?” Robbie asked again. “If I was starting that much shit, someone took me out, I know the way things run around here. So who was it? Was it you Frank? I expect it would be you. Were you the one?”

Frank’s head hung low. “Listen, I . . .”

Dean saw the struggling Frank had. “Robbie.” Dean interrupted. “Frank has never been able to admit it. You know, he has that big, head of security reputation to hold up. But the truth is, Frank didn’t kill you. Miguel did. Frank couldn’t. He couldn’t. Not his brother.”

Robbie let out a long sigh of relief. “Whew.” He shook his head with a smile. “I know it never really happened since time was changed, but I’m glad Frank. Cause I would have felt really bad.” Robbie smiled some more. “So like are we hanging here or are we going to go over and raid Dean’s mobile lab next.”

“Dean’s lab.” Frank moved across the lab. “The time lab isn’t as fun since time travel got so complicated.” He reached for the doors as Hal, Robbie, Dean and Henry followed. And after Frank opened that door, he took a moment to look at Dean. And just briefly, only briefly, he gave Dean a look of appreciation for stepping in.

BOOK TWO

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE SECOND YEAR

In Routine

CHAPTER NINE

July 7 - Beginnings, Montana

Thick, black, and long. Mounds of it laid all over in piles on Frank's office floor. Miguel's hair. Frank stepped back from a seated Miguel and shut off the clippers. "Now that looks good. Don't it Robbie?"

"Excellent." Robbie reached out and rubbed Miguel's nearly-shaved-bald head.

Miguel looked up to the two Slagel Brothers. "Thank you very much for the make over."

Frank gave a thumbs up. "You want her don't you."

"Yes."

Robbie laid his hand on Miguel's shoulder. "You're a nice guy, so we have to tackle the only obvious reason she doesn't pay attention to you. Your appearance."

"So I look good?"

"You look great. Just lose the fuckin earing." Frank said. "And, We picked out some new clothes for you."

"New clothes?" Miguel looked confused. "I don't need new clothes."

"Sure you do." Robbie commented. "Miguel. We got tons of clothes in storage. Civilian and military. Guy, you have to stop wearing the dark denim K-mart jeans."

"And they turn plumber on you." Frank added.

"Plumber." Miguel was confused. "I don't understand."

Frank leaned into Miguel. "When you bend over. We see your butt."

Horrified is how Miguel looked. "No."

"Yes." Frank nodded with crossed arms. "And women, they can love a guy, but as soon as they see that." He snapped his finger. "He's history. Right Robbie."

"History." Robbie snapped his finger. "But, now you Miguel, are ready to go. You know what you're gonna do tonight, Right?"

"Right." Miguel nodded. "Tonight I wait no more. So you two think it will work. She'll love me back?"

Frank took a deep serious breath and looked to Robbie then back to Miguel. "Probably not." He reached out and gave Miguel a swat. "But it's worth a shot."

^^^

"Now . . ." Joe smiled with pleasure. "This will become my favorite place. I can tell." He took in a long sniff.

George did too. "Rolls."

"Cookies."

"Pies."

“Bread.” Joe grinned at George . “And you have to admit. One hell of a idea Maggie had. I mean were planning a canning division, food prep, why not bakery.”

“Need baked goods.” George stated.

“Daily necessity.” Joe saw Maggie walking out from where the kitchen was. “How’s it going Maggie. Smells good.”

“Thank you.” Maggie looked a little tired. “Joe, my life would be a lot easier if I had those two extra ovens. And keep in mind, when more people come, I’ll need more.”

“I promise you Maggie, Henry and Jonas are going out for a run to prep the industrial section, they said they’ll steal Frank from Dirk and make him lift those ovens.”

“Oh good.” Maggie laid her hand on her chest. “I enjoy baking, but for all that I’m making I need the ovens.”

“And you’ll get them.” Joe stated assuredly. “George and I are taking . . .” He saw Jenny sitting in the corner, huddled with a book. “Jenny?”

Jenny looked up. “Oh hi Mr. Slagel.”

“I thought you were checking out the building with Miguel that we wanted to make into a school.”

“I will. Miguel is busy right now. He said just wait.”

“I see you’re already preparing.” Joe pointed to her book. “Taking it very serious.”

“Oh sure I am. I knew I would.”

“Glad to hear it. What are you reading?”

“Lady Chatterly’s lover.”

“What?” Joe nearly choked. “I thought you were starting to pick out materials to teach Johnny and Denny.”

“I will. But right now I’m reading this to teach myself. She was so innocent that Lady Chatterly was.” Jenny smiled with a pleased look. “Such an adventurous life.”

“But don’t forget.” Joe waved his finger. “She died of syphilis. Let’s go George.”

Jenny so dumbfounded looked up to Maggie after Joe left. “Did she really?”

“Oh yes. Terrible. Terrible thing.” Maggie tsked and turned away. “Adventurous living will do that to you.” She walked into the kitchen. And Jenny quickly flipped to the end of the book.

George looked at his watch. “Well, I’m out of here. I should be back in a few hours.”

“You sure you don’t need Frank to go?” Joe asked.

“No, please. Me?” George scoffed. “Besides, Frank is busy that’s the reason I’m taking Johnny fishing.”

“I appreciate that.”

“No problem. He reminds me so much of my son Davy when he was younger that . . .” George shrugged. “I feel compelled to spend time with him. Almost making up for what I didn’t do. Do you ever feel that way with your

boys Joe?"

"Never."

Just as George started to laugh. He stopped and looked up. "Gotta run." With swift pat, George hurried darted of to the right and disappeared.

Before Joe could say anything, George was gone and Joe saw why. He cringed as he watched Dirk approach. Joe actually debated on running himself, figuring Dirk moved slow by nature and because of that bad hip. But Joe had been dodging him all day and it was time to face the music. "I'm on it right now Dirk."

"I'm kinda hopin' yar Joe. Wanna get started on those pickins."

"I bet you do."

"So you go speck to that wiry Lil possum and get her hind end up dear. Cain't be waitin all summer. Dem may-ters juses ripe as they can be."

"I know."

"I prish-ate it. Joe."

"Consider her on her way." Joe received his nod from Dirk who slowly turned and walked away. With rolled eyes, Joe went off to do the task he had been putting off all day.

"Ellen!" Joe called out for the third time, this time as he stepped into the clinic lab. "Dean." Joe spoke to Dean who stood by the counter. "Where is she?"

Dean pointed down.

"What?" Joe asked. "What the hell?"

Dean stepped back and pointed to the bottom of the counter.

Joe walked around, hunched down and opened up the double door. Scrunched inside was Ellen. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Cleaning. Dean's making me clean under here."

"I am not Joe. She's hiding. She heard you call and she hid."

"Oh you're in trouble." She yelled up to Dean.

"Get out of there." Joe tugged on her arm and Ellen, still curled up, rolled just like that onto the floor. "Why are you hiding."

"I'm not hiding. I said . . ."

"You're cleaning yes. What are you doing in the lab. You know what your supposed to do today."

"No. I don't what?" Ellen asked.

"Ellen." Joe said her name. "Everyone does it. Even Dean put in a few minutes here and there."

"Jenny doesn't. Maggie doesn't. And right now Jenny's job is to read."

"Jenny does do it and so does Maggie." Joe told her. "They work every morning in the greenhouses."

"That is not farming."

"Ellen it is. Now I know you're not a Frank. You aren't that goddamn stupid."

Dean snickered. "Sorry." He moved away.

"Ellen. I protect you." Joe said. "I don't know why, but I cover for you. But you know as well as I do, that we are rationing our divisional work so we

don't do it all at once and end up bored. Part of all of our jobs is to help with food. Prep work, Canning.” Joe raised his eyes brow. “You go, help them pick the tomatoes and then work in canning them and I'll consider it enough for this season.” Joe heard the tsk from Dean “Shut up Dean.”

“Canning Joe?” Ellen asked. “Picking.”

“Yes.”

“I can't.”

“Why?”

“I'm on my period.”

Joe's eyes widened. “What the hell does that have to do with it?”

“Everything. It is bad luck for a woman who is menstruating touch fresh vegetables or fruit and can them. It curses them.”

“Oh Baloney.” Joe waved his hand at her. “Get your ass up there and work. Hear me? Now.”

“But I have stuff to do here.”

“Dean.” Joe turned and looked to him. “Does she?”

“Not a thing Joe.”

“Ellen.” Joe pointed his index finger at her. “Now.” He backed up and left the lab.

Ellen with arms folded marched to Dean. “I'm going to curse our food. Bad luck will fall on us.”

“Ellen, that's an old wives tale. Go to the fields.”

“Fine.” Ellen tossed her head up and her nose in the air. “But Dr. Hayes. You been warned.” She walked snooty from the lab.

“I'll keep that in mind.” Dean chuckled thinking about Ellen's reasoning about not wanting to farm. Then it dawned on him, Ellen had to be the most menstrual woman he knew. Either that, or she just used that as an excuse for everything.

Ellen's first thought as she took the 'Family Circle Cartoon' route to the field was, '*Miguel Sanchez, Fashion guy*'. But then she quickly dismissed it when, even though he wore a new shirt, he still wore those K-mart jeans. But he looked different. Better. She thought. “Hey Miguel. Nice hair.”

“Frank did it.” Miguel rubbed his head.

“Do you know where Mr. Vidal Sasoon is? Ellen asked.

“He's in his office, getting cool.”

“Thanks.” Ellen kept moving. She stopped and looked back. “Miguel, why the new look.”

“I am in love.” he stated. “I want to win my loves affection.”

“Oh.” Ellen nodded slowly. “That's nice. Good luck.” She turned, going back in the direction of Frank's office. It wasn't too far ahead of her, but enough of a distance for Ellen to ponder who it was Miguel was in love with and a long enough of a distance for it to be too much of a bother to run back and ask Miguel. Wanting to kick herself for missing the nose opportunity, Ellen knocked once on Frank's door and walked in. “Hey.”

“Hi El.” He leaned back in his chair. “I can't.”

“You can't what?”

“You know. Can’t. I can’t. I need my legs strong this afternoon. Tonight?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ellen asked.

“Didn’t you come up to fool around?”

“No! God Frank!” Ellen stepped into the office. “You think my life revolves around sneaking around with you.”

“If it doesn’t, it should.”

“Gees.” Ellen pulled out a chair and sat down. “Hey, who’s Miguel in love with.”

“Henry.”

“Really?” Ellen tilted her head. “I wouldn’t have know. Anyhow, the reason I’m here.”

“Shoot.”

“Your Dad is making me farm.”

“Everyone farms El.”

“Yeah, but Frank, listen to me.” Ellen held up her hand. “He wants me to farm and can.”

“So.”

“So I’m on my period.”

“O.K.”

“Frank, I can’t touch fresh fruits and vegetables or can them. I’ll curse them.”

Frank held a serious look. “Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“My God El, you have a problem.” Frank started to laugh and he stood up. “What the fuck. No sympathy from me. None.” He walked over to the door. “If you have to farm. You farm. Everyone does it El Everyone. No exceptions.”

Ellen stood in a pouty manner. “You aren’t going to help me?”

“I can’t. And I can’t do your work again El, I’m really starting to wear down a little.”

Ellen huffed out. “You’re getting weak, that’s why. The old Frank in the old world could have handled the work.” Slouching Ellen walked through the door Frank held open for her. “All right. Bye.”

“Bye.” Frank hurried and kissed her then shut the door. “Weak?” Frank spoke his thoughts out loud really worrying the moment Ellen was gone, if Dirk was right after all. Maybe that was why he was so tired. And if that was the case, Frank knew he’d better work on working a little harder.

^^^

“Here, like this.” George grabbed hold of Johnny’s hands, cupping them with in his and together he and Johnny brought the fishing rod back and cast out the line. “There.” George rubbed Johnny’s head. “That’ll work.”

“Thanks for taking me fishing.”

“I love fishing.”

“Me too. I wish my Dad would take me more.” Johnny’s feet dangled off the old pier on a small lake about ten miles from Beginnings.

“Your Dad is a busy man. Very busy.”

“I know.”

“Sometimes Johnny, we just don’t have enough hours in the day.” George laid his hand on Johnny’s back. “But just know. I’m here. I like hanging about with you.” George winked. “We can fish anytime you want.”

“Thanks George.” Johnny smiled happily, kicking his feet.

George smiled in return. He cast his own line out, knowing full well if they were lucky they may get a bite. But it didn’t matter. Dead world around them or not, fishing at the lake was old world to George.

^^^

“Have to get them done now Joe.” Dirk told him. “Ben wait for a now-er.”

“I know. I know.” Joe rubbed his eyes and looked to Henry who stood there. “Do you know where Ellen went?”

Just before Henry answered, Ellen walked up. “Here.”

“It’s about goddamn time. Where the hell have you been Missy Jane?”

“Joe.” Ellen gasped out. “I’ll have you know that I had a female thing to attend to. I told you what time it is.”

Henry’s eyes grew wide. “Oh my God Joe. You can’t let her pick tomatoes or can them. Are you on your period El?”

“I certainly am.” Ellen folded her arms.

“Oh, Joe.” Henry shook his head. “She’ll curse our food. She will Joe.”

“Henry.” Joe stated calmly. “That wives tale is a crock of shit. O.K. Now . . .” Joe grabbed Ellen’s arm. “Go with Dirk.”

Ellen whined and hesitantly stepped forward. Dirk secured her and nearly drug Ellen further into the field.

Joe faced Henry. “Henry, you aren’t helping the cause you know. You and this curse.”

“I know Joe. But I won’t eat what she cans. I won’t. Not offense to Ellen, but I don’t want to die.”

“Henry!” Joe snapped. “No one is gonna die from her canning. All right? Christ.” Grumbling and ignoring Henry who still mumbled something about the curse, Joe left the fields.

A single nod with that hay in his mouth and Dirk took the tutorial stand over Ellen in the Tomato patch. “Raddy?”

“Ready.” Ellen said while slouching.

“Dirk.” Thelma spoke up. “You got stew give her the die-rec-shins.”

“Aw Thelma hush now.” Dirk told her. “I ain’t gonna be that mooch of a stupor to have her going pickin with out the knowledge now, will I?”

“Ya might.” Thelma stated. “Right Stan.”

Stan didn’t want to argue. He tossed his hands up. “I guess.” He had known Dirk and Thelma for many years. Since they all went to grade school together. He half expected to find them married when he came back to Dairy Ohio, a city man returning to his roots to live out his retirement. Dirk and Thelma were still the same. Stan was educated, he worked more with people and

even sounded city. Dirk and Thelma hadn't changed. Often Stan got a laugh when he heard them bickering. Not because he enjoyed them fighting, but because he could see Frank and Ellen turning into them two.

"Basket." Dirk held up a basket to Ellen. "This here's a basket." He set it down. "This here." He reached to her and grabbed her hand. "This is your hand. Ya fallen me?"

"Yes." Ellen nodded containing her rolling eyes.

"Aw-right. This . . ." Dirk reached to a big vine. "This is a ta-may-ter. This one here's." Dirk pointed to a bright red one. "This one here's been on the vine jus a Lil too long cause some dumpkin says she a gonna pick em and she don't. But now we got ta pick em an can em. 'Stand?"

"Yep."

"Aw-right. Now here's where es gonna get a Lil tricky .Raddy?" Dirk waited for Ellen to nod. "Now you take that there hand you have and you reach it on up to the ripe ta-may-ter. Ya give a nice Lil tug on that may-ter,. You take it from the vine and ya place it in the basket. Got that."

"Got it."

"Aw-right any questions. Ask Thelma." Dirk stepped back and grabbed his own basket.

Ellen figured she show him. He wanted to teach her like a slow student, she would perform like a slow student. She moseyed with her basket, grabbing a tomato and slowly picking it, taking extra long to put it in the basket. She huffed out a sigh of exhaustion and looked to Dirk, Stan and Thelma who had nearly a full basket to her ten tomatoes. "Hey Dirk. I don't know if I'm much of a help. Look."

Dirk walked over and looked in her basket. "Don't have much in-ear do ya?"

"No. Not at all."

"Hmm." Dirk reached in. "But chore doin a dandy pickin job. And member. One may-ter an hour with chew, es one more may-ter an hour den we'd have without chew." He winked and moved on.

Ellen gave up. But only for the time being, until she could figure out something else.

^^^

It was the only thing really to do at night, go to the social hall or stay home. And mostly everyone made a stop at the social hall during the course of the night. To unwind, play a game or just talk.

"One more, El?" Frank asked as he followed her to the bar.

"No." She finished her drink then looked at the time. "I have to go. And so do you. Your father said he wanted to come here tonight."

"Yeah I know." Frank downed his drink.

"Walk me home?"

"The long way?" Frank raised one eyebrow.

"The direct way." Ellen set down her glass. As she turned around, Jenny walked into the hall. "Joe should lay down some ground rules for the under twenty-one."

"Let's just go." Frank nudged her to get moving before any trouble ensued. Ellen moved slowly, her eyes connected in hatred to Jenny's.

Jenny snidely spoke as she passed her. "I see you're being the good mother. Drinking and hanging out with the other man again."

Ellen spun in a violent pursuit, only to be bodily stopped by Frank, who wrapped his arms around her, lifted her some from her feet and walked out of the social hall.

"Easy." Frank put Ellen down.

"She . . ."

"El. No. It's not worth it. Let it go." He grabbed her hand. "Why don't you come back to the house with me."

"I can't. And you need to spend time with Johnny."

"I will. You can just hang until he goes to sleep." They moved toward the living section.

"Frank, the last time we did that Johnny didn't go to sleep. I hung out looking stupid."

"El, I'm not ready to stop spending time with you tonight. O.K., even if we don't . . ."

"Frank." Ellen whispered as they walked. "Don't say it. You know I hate to talk about it."

"Fine. How about this. Even if we don't have our therapy." He leaned down to her. "We can still hang out."

"I can't." Ellen moved to the steps of her house. "I have to get in." She took a step up. "Night."

"El." Frank reached out grabbing the back waist of her pants. "One more minute."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Please." Frank leaned on the railing, bent down, chin on his hands. He looked up at her with his dark eyes. "Thirty seconds?"

"Frank." She nearly whined his name.

"El, really. You're so lucky I love you or I would not deal with this hard to get act." Frank smiled raising his head.

Ellen chuckled. "Thirty seconds."

"Yes." Frank whispered out his excitement and reached up his hand as he stood straight up. Ellen, even though on the second step was only a bit taller than him. He leaned over the rail, pulling at Ellen's shirt and bringing her to him. Parting his mouth, he inched his lips to hers and stopped, when the door to Ellen's house opened. He pulled back only a little when Dean pushed opened the screen door.

"Say good night Frank." Dean took Ellen's hand, gave a soft tug, opened the screen door wider and waited for Ellen to walk in to the house. The whole time, Dean's eyes, in a hard mean stare, never left Frank's.

Ellen looked back as she stepped into the house. "Night Frank."

Frank winked at her. “El.” Watching her go in, Frank backed up with an arrogant, shitty grin smeared across his face. And the eye contact between him and Dean never was lost until the moment Dean slammed the door.

^^^

“Miguel?” Andrea opened up her door in such surprise to see him standing there. “What do I owe this visit to?”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .” Miguel’s lips moved more than words came out.

“Would you like to come in?” Andrea opened the door wider.

Miguel nodded and stepped inside. He could feel his stomach churning in nervousness and feared becoming flatulent right there and then in the middle of his big moment.

“What can I do for you?” Andrea asked.

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

“Very nice hair cut.”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

Andrea smiled. “Great shirt.”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

“Is there something you wanted to say?”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

“I see. Shall we sit down?” She motioned her hand to the couch and saw Miguel frantically shake his head. “Want to stand?”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

“O.K.” Andrea folded her arms. “So. What is it that you wanted?”

“I love you.” Miguel let out a loud breath. “There I said it. Now I feel better. I have been telling you in my notes and flowers. But . . .” He saw the shocked looked on Andrea’s face. “Andrea?”

“A . . . a . . . a . . .”

^^^

Sitting alone at a table in the social hall, Jenny sipped on a drink she didn’t want to drink. But she wanted to feel important and older. Her eyes shifted to the men in the room, all of them but Frank and Miguel. They all were there doing something, except noticing her. And Jenny knew it was time to change all that. To change her life as she so much wanted to do.

Slowly she stood up and walked over to the jukebox. The money door on the bottom was open and she pulled out the stock dollar bill. With it in her hand she skimmed the selections and smiled brightly when she saw the one she wanted. Inserting the dollar she made her choice. And with a click, the social hall only filled with conversational noise, then filled with a blasting music. All attention turned to her. Jenny, with her back against the jukebox, smiled.

^^^

The entire contents of Andrea's special shoe-box was dumped on the coffee table. So excited she sifted through them. "And this one here, Miguel, is my favorite. Simple, yet my favorite." she took a deep breath and read it in awe. "*I like your hair today.*" with an 'ah' she set it down. "Oh this is so wonderful."

"I was so afraid to tell you."

"You shouldn't have been."

"I couldn't speak in front of you. I got a tied tongue."

Andrea giggled. "That is so cute. And you even cut your hair and got rid of that earring. For me. But you didn't have to. I like you all the same."

"You do?" Miguel seemed surprised.

"Yes, and I have to tell you I was a bit disappointed that you never came to read the bible with me. I thought you lost faith."

"Oh never." Miguel shook his head. "I have lots of faith."

"We can share our faith." Andrea grabbed his hand. "Oh Miguel, I would like to share that with you. I miss being close to someone. I miss having that companionship. So you suppose we could be like that."

"I would love to be like that."

"Oh Good." She stood up. "Then we'll get married. Let's go tell everyone and we'll make George do it."

"Married?" Miguel jumped to his feet. "You want to marry me. It is not sudden?"

Andrea slowed in her race to the door. "No. We've known each other over a year and . . . oh. You don't want to marry me."

"No, I do." Miguel rushed to her. "It is much more than I expected. Here I was only hoping for a thank you. This is much better. Much, much better." Miguel grinned. "Marriage."

"Shall we go tell everyone, they're all at the social hall."

"Yes."

Like two excited teenagers, hand and hand, Andrea and Miguel darted from the living section to the social hall. They stopped at the closed door.

Andrea heard the loud music. "Sounds like a party."

"We can add to their fun."

"Lets." With exuberance and ready to shout out, Andrea pushed open the social hall door and blasted in. At the same time, Miguel and her both stopped cold. Andrea's eyes moved around the social hall. Joe and George sat at the bar before Sam, engrossed in a hand waving conversation. Stan and Dirk played darts. John Matoose and Henry were involved in a game of pool. Jonas beat the hell out of the pinball machine. Then Andrea's eyes went to the clothes on the floor and they led like a trail to Jenny. Wearing bright pink old-lady style underwear and a support bra, Jenny, wiggling, rolled seductively across the jukebox flinging her head back and lifting her leg in a kick. When she brought her head up, her red hair across her face, she looked to see if she had caught anyone's attention yet, and she did, finally. But it wasn't the audience she wanted. Andrea stood before her, one eyebrow raised in a motherly glare extending out to Jenny, her clothes.

CHAPTER TEN

July 8 - Beginnings, Montana

“Dean. Dean. Dean.” Ellen followed him like a puppy as Dean whizzed about the lab. “Dean.”

“Dean.” William yelled from the other end of the room. “Answer her.”

“Dean. Dean.”

“El.” Dean spun to her. “In case you haven’t noticed I’m really not speaking to you.”

“Why?” She asked.

“I’d like to know that too.” William questioned.

“Dad, please.” Dean widened his eyes to Ellen. “I think you know.”

“No, I don’t.” Ellen chased him. “Tell me. Dean. Tell me. Dean. Dean. Dean. Tell me Dean. Dean . . .”

“Ellen!” Dean snapped. “I don’t think I need to.”

“I think you do. What did I do?”

Dean walked away from her and laughed.

“Well, if you aren’t going to tell her.” William said. “Can you at least tell me why my fingers are cramping. Why in God’s name do we need this many packages of sutures. No one gets hurt.”

“Dad. Just make them.”

“Dean.” Ellen called him again. “Are you going to tell me why you haven’t said anything since last night?”

“Bingo.” Dean nodded.

“Oh, that says a lot.” Ellen tossed her hands up.

“You wanna know?” Dean moved closer to her.

“Yeah, I wanna know.”

“You really want to know?”

“Dean!” William finally had enough. “She said she wants to know. And so do I.”

“Fine.” Dean’s hand slammed on the counter. “You were kissing Frank last night.”

“I was not.”

“You were.”

“Did you see us?” Ellen asked.

“No.”

“Then I wasn’t. There, is that why you’re mad. God, you get upset over nothing.”

“Nothing!” Dean’s voice raised high. “Ellen, I saw him. He was pulling you to him. His lips were millimeters from yours. What was that?”

“He . . . he . . .”

Dean folded his arms in anticipation of her answer.

“Frank was telling me a secret. So there.”

“What?” Dean laughed in ridicule. “You expect me to believe that one?”

“I do.” William commented. “Sounds good to me. Now can you stop being

mad at her.”

“No!” Dean yelled. “She’s lying!”

Ellen gasped so loud it rang across the room. “I am not lying! And I cannot believe you are standing here accusing me of lying. I was not kissing Frank last night and that’s the truth. And . . .” She marched to the door. “I’m late for cursing the canning. But let me leave you with something Dean Hayes.” Ellen pointed, one eye closed with a mean look, as she prepared to make her dramatic exit. “I was not lying to you. I will not forget this. I won’t. And you are going to have to get over this two bit jealousy and insecurity thing you have about Frank, because I will not live my life being examined under a microscope like one of your experiments. You have hurt my feelings. So there.” She spun, tossing her head back and marched from the lab.

William hid his chuckle. “So there.” He pointed to where Ellen was.

“Don’t.” Dean held up his hand and returned to his work. “I know what I saw.” He flipped open a folder and hesitated. He ran his hand through his hair then down his face. “Or at least I think I know. I don’t know.” He grumbled in frustration and tried to get back into a work mode.

^^^

Joe facially cringed, blocking out the headache that pounded at him. He moved quickly from town at a steady pace, hoping to lose Andrea who kept right up to him. “Andrea. Drop it.”

“I will not drop it.” Her head bobbed as she moved. “You lead this community . . .”

“Oh I do not.”

“I beg to differ Joseph, You lead this community and you best establish some ground rules. Alcohol should not be distributed to minors.” Andrea argued.

“She is eighteen years old Andrea. If she wants a drink, what the hell am I gonna do. I let my boys drink at eighteen.”

“Oh!” Andrea gasped out. “Then you broke the law.”

“They were old enough to serve their country, they were old enough to have a beer.”

“This is not the old world Joe.”

Joe stopped and spun to face Andrea. “No it is not. It’s a dead world Andrea and who the hell cares if she has a drink.”

“You should. You are the father of this community.”

“I am the father of two moronic sons and a flighty daughter. I don’t need anymore children thank you very much.”

“She was naked Joe.”

“And no one paid one bit of attention to her.” Joe waved his finger. “No one. Now if you have anything pressing to bring to my attention, then you tell me. If not, I have work to do. We’re making runs tomorrow and we have preparations to make. The last thing I need is a headache brought on by a morally righteous woman who should just be minding her own business.” Joe

turned and walked some more.

"I will tell my Miguel how you spoke to me."

"You tell him." Joe kept going.

"Someone has to watch out for our young! Make sure they are brought up right!" Andrea screamed. "It is our responsibility as elders to do so! We have a new world to make! The bible says so!"

Joe winced, stopped again and marched back to her. "The bible doesn't state jack about a plague ravished world. And this is not the book of Revelation." he calmed himself. "O.K. Suppose you're right. Suppose we should make sure they're better than us. You think you're qualified. Then you do it. *You* do it. There you have it. That's your new job. You wanna stop her from drinking. Stop her. You wanna stop her from stripping. You stop her. But I have other things to worry about. All right? Put a chastity belt on her. Picket the goddamn social hall for all I care, but just don't come to me with this shit anymore."

"I don't like your Heathen attitude."

"Andrea, come on." Joe shook his head.

"I know why you're being like this with me." Andrea folded her arms. "You're jealous of Miguel. He should be the one leading this community. He has morals like myself."

"Oh please. And before you go any further with this holier than thou attitude, you better stop and look at your own sins little lady. I'm not the holy ruler, bible thumper, who tossed myself into an illicit, premarital, one night stand. Now, am I?"

"Sweet Jesus."

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Joe nodded. "Now can we stop this bickering."

"No. We will never stop bickering."

"Fine. Bicker alone. I'm a busy man." Joe turned, ignoring Andrea's huff and walked away leaving her just standing there.

^^^

"All right. O.K." Robbie walked with Frank. "So we went a little crazy."

"No, we did not go crazy Robbie. We did our job. We just did too much."

"So why is Dad bitching."

"Dad has always bitched."

"It's not like we can't fix it." Robbie paused and slowed down went they reached the area near the back gate. He scratched his head. "Can we fix it Frank?"

"Um . . . ." Frank tossed his hands up. "I don't see why not. But we did good."

"We did real good."

"Too bad it won't work for an armory hatch."

"Yeah." Robbie peered down. "It would work for a pool."

Frank laughed and then a huge grin crossed his face. "Or . . ." Frank leaped

forward into the huge hole that Robbie and he had been working on for a week. Squared out and deep, it was supposed to be three feet by six feet and ended up being three times bigger. Frank landed softly on his feet and sunk into the mud that had formed in the four foot huge ditch. “Hey Robbie. The pit.”

“The pit.” Robbie smiled. “Yeah.”

Frank stomped his boot. “The ground is soft too. What do you say?”

“I say . . .” Robbie backed up. “Watch out.” He charged forward with a scream and flew his body downward into the pit at Frank.

^^^

“So then Lady Chatterly goes . . .” Jenny stopped telling her story. “John, are you listening to me?”

“Um . . . yeah. Who was chatting.” John hunched down by a bush.

“Lady Chatterly.”

“Who is that.”

“A woman like myself. A woman in search of true love and . . .” Jenny softened her voice. “Sexuality.”

“Found one.” John emerged from the bush. “Open that bag wider.”

“Sure.” Jenny made a facial cringe when she opened the large sack she carried. “Whew.”

In his gloved hand, John held a dead rabbit. “Look. He’s been dead for a while.” John flipped the rabbit back and forth then tossed it in the sack. “That poison Dean makes works good.”

“We shouldn’t be killing them.”

“We have to kill them.” John told her. “If we don’t we’ll get over run and they’ll eat our food.”

“Why don’t we eat them.”

“There’s too many to be bothered with skinning and gutting every one.”

“Oh.”

“Is that getting heavy.”

“No.” Jenny shook her head. “There’s only eight in there. Anyhow, as I was saying, Lady Chatterly goes to her gardener and he . . .” Jenny huffed in irritation when she heard the loud male scream. “What was that?”

“Sounded like Robbie.” John took off running in the direction he heard the scream come from. He raced up the small grade toward the back gate and stopped cold when he got to the top. “Oh my God.”

Out of breath, Jenny caught up to him, “Oh no.”

John hunched in pain and he wasn’t the one getting it, when he watched Robbie, with a branch, crack Frank hard on the back with it. “Shit.” Trembling John grabbed the radio from his belt. “Joe, anyone. Come in. I need help at the back gate region. Frank and Robbie . . . ow.” He cringed when he saw Frank ram Robbie face first into the dirt wall. “They’ll killing each other up here. It’s a blood bath.”

Jenny shrieked some when she watched Frank climb out of the hole then raise his arms up, leaping back in and landing on Robbie. “Can’t you stop

them?”

John only shifted his eyes to her.

Miguel, Henry, and Jonas all arrived within seconds of each other.

“There.” John pointed.

Miguel shook his head. “They are brothers. What is the matter with them. Henry, help me.”

“Oh, you know what.” Henry shook his head. “They’re awfully big. Maybe we should just . . . hey!” Henry screamed when Miguel tugged him.

Jenny looked at John and Jonas. “Aren’t you two going to help Miguel and Henry?”

“Jenny.” Jonas stated her name. “Look at me. Do I look like I *can* help Miguel and Robbie.”

“What’s going on?” Joe called out in question as he finally arrived to the grade.

“Joe.” Jenny indicated to where Frank and Robbie now threw punches. “They’re killing each other.”

Joe observed. He saw Miguel and Henry nearing the pit and he saw Frank, in a run toward Robbie, extend out his arm and clothes line his younger brother. “Christ, they aren’t killing each other. The assholes are wrestling.”

“Knock it off!” Miguel called out jumping into the mud filled pit. “Now!” he grabbed a hold of Robbie who had Frank in a head lock. “Henry, grab Frank.”

“No.” Henry was in the pit, but stayed at his distance. “You’re doing good.”

Miguel gave a toss to Robbie and a shove to Frank. “What is wrong with you? You are brothers. You shouldn’t be tearing each other apart like this. Brothers do not fight with fist. It is wrong. Do you know that?”

Frank nodded. “Yes.”

Miguel looked at Robbie. “Brothers should speak out their anger not fight. Right?”

Out of breath, Robbie agreed. “Oh yeah.”

“Then it is settled.” Miguel stepped out of the way. “What do you two have to say to each other.”

Frank sniffed and wiped the blood that poured from his nose. He held his hand up high to Robbie. “Oh yeah, Miguel and Henry are here. Battle Royal.”

After a quick, muddy, splashy high five to Frank, Robbie spun and moved to Henry who was trying to make an escape, at the same time, Frank tackled Miguel.

Happy laughter, along with a few screams of agony carried up to Joe on the top of that grade. Watching for a second, Joe turned and started to walk away.

“Joe.” John called him. “Aren’t you gonna stop them?”

“Nah.” Joe waved out his hand. “There just having fun, that’s all. They’ll stop when someone really gets hurt.”

John’s eyes widened and he turned back to view the bloody, muddy wrestling match where the Slagel Brothers proceeded to turn the pit into the own tag team wrestling ring, and Miguel and Henry into their unwitting opponents. “That . . . that does not look fun.”

“I agree.” Jonas said. “Nothing would make me run down there and get abused like that.”

“Me either.”

“John? Jonas?” Jenny spoke their names in a school-girl flirtatious manner. “I know a way we can have some fun in the mud.” She winked three or four times at them.

John quickly spun to Jonas. “I think Henry and Miguel need some outside interference.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Let’s go.” John suggested.

“I’m right behind you.”

“Hey!” Jenny called out. “I was talking!” She watched John and Jonas race as fast as they could toward the pit and she was totally dumbfounded on why they did that.

^^^

Ellen rolled her eyes in disgust as she tossed a peeled tomato into the big bowl in front of her. “I swear.” She picked tomato skin from her finger nails. “If I never see another tomato as long as I live, I’ll be a happy camper.”

“Aw comb now dumpkin.” Dirk said, tomato juice running down his finger. “Ya act as if es aw that bad. Et ain’t aw that bad now is it Thelma.”

“Ain’t all that bad.” Thelma dropped a peeled tomato in her bowl. “And I cain’t see what may-tearing has ta go and do with campin anyhow.”

“Aw now what is wrong with you woman. She ain’t talking about no campin trip. She’s making a figger a speech. I swore some time you’s as holler as a nutshell.”

“Dirk Jefferson Wilson the third, how am I s’pose ta know she’s using a figger a speech.”

“Jus got ta pay attention. Ya ain’t never paid attention to nothin your whole life.”

“Aw now that ain’t true.” Thelma looked to Ellen. “It aint true. He’s just a hard headed old fool.”

Ellen took a deep breath and slowly peeled another tomato. “What are we gonna do with all these tomatoes we’re canning and I’m cursing.”

“Thar ya go again.” Dirk pointed at Ellen. “Goin off an talkin about that cur-sin stuff gain. You got to know what we’re doing. Press-or-vay-shin. That’s what it is. May-ters to last a lifetime.”

“For what?” Ellen asked. “We can’t slice them a put them on a sandwich. And there’s only so much you can do with . . .” She looked around the empty

house they were in. The house used for canning. Boxes of mason jars were around. "A thousand jars of tomatoes."

"Saws." Thelma nodded "You can use them in saws."

"Nut-tin like a good batch of saws." Dirk agreed. "Gotta lotta may-ters for that."

"I make a good batch of saws." Thelma said.

"Says who?"

"Says anyone in Dairy who ate my saws."

"Then them was lyn to you."

Thelma gasped. "You don't think I make a good batch of saws?"

"No I don't think you make a good batch of saws."

"Ev-run said I make some good eye-tale-yin saws."

"Now why you goin in believin them people." Dirk shook his head. "I ate your saws. I know your saws. It ain't no eye-tale-yin saws. You got to be eye-tale-yin to make good eye-tale-yin saws. Them peoples can rest in peace but I got to live with you running around the ravish world think you the only eye-tale-yin left. When you ain't even eye-tale-yin."

"I ain't never said I was eye-tale-yin." Thelma argued.

"Yes you did."

"No. You said you got to be eye-tale-yin to make good eye-tale-yin saws. Ellen, do you think you got to be eye-tale-yin to make a good batch of saws."

"I was always one to believe you just had to be strong enough to open the jar."

Dirk tsked three times. "You goin askin a modern woman who ain't probably cooked a scratched meal in a heaven's length of time. What she know?"

Thelma began to get angry. "You have got be one of the most mis-re-bell men I know. I'm done talkin to you."

"Good." Dirk peeled another tomato. "Perhaps now we can peel these here may-ters without that old trap of your flappen like the back side of a duck."

"I swear there's somethin wrong which chew."

"Aw go on which chore old self, Thelma."

"You ain't gonna hear my mouth no more." Thelma raised her hand.

"Good. Peel."

Thelma huffed a breath then Thelma dropped forward and fell face first into her bowl of tomatoes.

Thelma didn't move.

Ellen's eye's shifted and she turned toward Thelma. "Hey." she called her.

"Aw no thar she goes, been all silly. Thelma!" Dirk called "We got to eat them may-ters. Quit your foolin around and get your face out of them."

"Dirk?" Ellen stood up "Dirk. I think she's . . . ." Ellen touched her. "Shit."

"What?"

"Oh my God."

"What now. Say it."

Ellen looked up as her red hand felt for a pulse. "She's dead."

^^^

Loud and dirty. The clinic was baptized but far from the biblical sense. Dean, covered with mud raced into his lab. William just as dirty stood at the counter where Dean headed.

“So, Dad, what were you saying about too many suture packs?”

William took out the last of the packages he had made. “I never would have thought one wrestling brawl could use up our whole stock.” He handed some to Dean.

“Robbie needs at least ten stitches in his head alone.”

“And poor Jonas’ nose. That bridge will never heal right. However I think you should handle Miguel’s ear.” William stated. “I may have more experience but you do nice suture work.”

“That will attach back on right?”

“Oh yeah.” William nodded as he walked out with Dean. “It’s just a gash. It only looks like it’s coming off.”

“That really can be awfully . . .”

“Joe!” Ellen came barreling through the clinic doors screaming at the top of her lungs. “Joe!”

Dean and William raced her way.

Joe came from the designated waiting room. “Ellen, Christ. Why are you screaming like that.”

“Joe.” Ellen grabbed her chest. “I killed Thelma. I cursed her Joe.”

“Ellen.” Joe laid his hands on her shoulders. “Calm down. What do you mean you cursed and killed her.”

“I did it Joe.” Ellen was hyper. “I told you I shouldn’t have been canning. I cursed her. I curse her and now she’s dead and . . . why are you so muddy Dean?”

^^^

Dirk wouldn’t even turn around as he stood outside of the special canning house three rows back in the living section. He faced the wall even when Joe called out.

“Cain’t turn round Joe.”

Joe looked to Ellen and Dean who were with him. “Why?”

“I ain’t gonna be next. You go on in there. I’m not.”

“What do you mean next?” Joe asked.

“That there daughter of your with the menstrual problem.” Dirk pointed over his shoulder. “An if es aw-rye which chew Joe, I would jus as soon not have her anywhere nears my crops.”

At first Joe glared at Ellen. He thought for sure it was some sort of ploy. The he led the way into the house with Dean and Ellen right behind him.

“Christ Almighty.” Joe said with irritation as he walked into the diningroom. “You couldn’t even take her out of the tomatoes?” Joe walked to

behind Thelma's still body, arms dangling to her side, face still in the large bowl. Jo grabbed her head, lifted her from her tomato tomb. "Doctor confirm?"

Dean cleared his throat. "She looks dead."

"Thank you for that." Joe moved the bowl out of the way and let Thelma's head fall to the table.

Ellen cringed at the thump. "Joe."

Joe grunted at her. "What happened, Ellen?"

"I cursed her."

"Yeah, yeah. Besides that. What."

"She dropped dead Joe. Just . . . dropped dead. One second she was arguing with Dirk, the next she's face first in the tomatoes."

Joe turned his head to Dean. "Was she sick? Did she have any health problems that you were aware of?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "As far as I knew she was a healthy seventy-six year old female."

"Who was just cursed." Joe tossed his hands up. "All right. I'll get George and him and I will get her out of here." Joe walked to the door. "This has got to be the strangest day. First I have six grown men at the clinic in need of medical attention. I have a back gate region bodily re-landscaped by those six men in some sort of sick simulation of the goddamn WWF, and now I have an dead elderly farm woman cursed by my menstruating daughter. What the hell else can go wrong." Joe opened the door.

"Joseph Slagel!" Andrea marched with spitfire his way. "Care to tell me what your demented sons did to my Miguel's ear."

Joe held out his hand. "There it is."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sick to not only his stomach, but to his heart, is how Dean felt. All afternoon and evening Ellen stayed in her bedroom, sitting on the bed, knees bent up tightly to her chest and she stared so hard at the far wall.

“El.” Dean spoke soothingly. “Tell me what I can do?”

“Stop me from ever menstruating again Dean. Just stop me so this curse doesn’t hit anyone else.”

“El, it wasn’t your period that caused this.”

“Yes it was.” Ellen’s words emerged from her as if she were in a dream state.

“You’ve had your period for many years. Don’t you think if it was a curse to people you would have found this out by now.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “I’ve never been a farmer. I warned everyone. Henry warned everyone. No one listened.” She whimpered out dropping her head to her knees. “No one listened at all.”

“El . . .”

Loud was the gasp Ellen let out as she brought her head up in a flinging manner. “A sweet old woman is dead because I touched the tomatoes she was touching.”

“Do you need something to calm you down?”

“No. I need you to take me . . .” Ellen closed her eyes in pain., “Take me now. Cut me open and give my a hysterectomy. Right now.” She turned her body to him and grabbed his shirt, clenching it so tight. “Right now. Take it out. Just take it out that entity.”

“Um . . .” Dean grabbed on to her hand, pulling with all his might her fingers that squeezed onto him. “El, I’ll be back.” He hurried off the bed. “I’ll be right back. Here, Andrea sent some soup for you.” He picked up the mug and lifted off the cover. “Oh, well. I don’t think you’ll want this.”

“No. I’m not hungry.”

Grateful for that, Dean turned and started to leave the room wondering what was going through Andrea’s mind when she sent over tomato soup. He covered it back up and walked out and downstairs.

“Well?” Joe asked as he stood up from the sofa.

“Joe, she’s really distraught over this.”

Joe turned to William. “You’re a real doctor, what do you think?”

“I won’t make a judgement call here, Joe. Who knows how the mind works.”

Joe thought for a moment, hands in his pockets, bouncing from heal to toe. “Well, there may not be anyone in Beginnings who knows how the mind works, but there sure as shit someone in Beginnings who knows how *her* mind works. I’ll be back.” He walked to the door. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

^^^

“Will you look at this eyebrow.” Frank stood before his bathroom mirror.

"Nasty Frank." Joe said. "Now the . . ."

"It won't grow back. I'm gonna end up missing the corner."

"Be tough. Now . . ."

"I'm gonna look like Ruth. The stepmother with one eyebrow."

"Payback's a real bitch." Joe began to get irritated. "Listen to me."

"Seven stitches. What the fuck was Robbie thinking."

"Frank!"

"What!"

"Shut up!"

"Fuck Dad." Frank walked out of the bathroom. "I'm injured here. Have a little compassion."

Joe followed him. "Frank I am trying to talk to you about Ellen."

Frank stopped.

"Thank you." Joe dropped his hand. "She's not coming out of the bedroom. She's coming off really upset over this Thelma incident."

"Why?"

"I don't know why? She's blaming herself. She says she cursed Thelma."

Frank started to snicker, then stopped. "You don't think she did?"

"No! I don't think she cursed her. I think Thelma just died. Died. And Ellen . . . I don't know." Joe shrugged. "I don't want to go in there telling her she's acting, because what if she isn't. I mean, how do we know the simple death of an old woman wasn't the one thing it took to throw her over the deep edge?"

"Is she that bad?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"Ellen?"

"Yes."

"Our Ellen?"

"Frank!" Joe tensed up, really trying not to yell. "Who the hell else am I talking about."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to talk to her. And then let me know what you think. You know her better than anyone. Can you?"

"Sure. Now?"

"Yes." Joe dropped his head in relief. Finally he had gotten through and he watched Frank walk down the steps playing around with the stitched up and partially missing eyebrow the whole time.

It wasn't that Dean wanted to leave. He didn't He tried using the twins as an excuse, but Joe countered that by bringing Maggie over to take them. Joe had his reasoning for emptying the house. If Ellen was not being honest, she certainly wouldn't admit it to Frank if she knew there was a chance that anyone could be listening. And, Joe was certain that whatever Frank told him would be te truth. Like he explained to Dean, too many years were between them. Frank could look at Ellen and know. Dean reluctantly agreed. He'd go to the social hall but swore he wouldn't have a drink. But no matter what Joe's thoughts were for

getting out of the house, it still pained Dean to not only watch Frank walk into his house but walk up the stairs to his bedroom as well.

Frank only knocked once on the bedroom door, waited for the wispy ‘come in’ from Ellen and then he did. He walked in and shut the door. “El.”

Ellen let out a long breath, looked at him then stared ahead. “Oh hi Frank.”

Frank walked slowly to the bed, watching the blank look on Ellen’s face, watching her pay so much attention to that wall. “El?”

“Yeah?”

Frank dove on the bed landing sideways with a heavy plop and smiling when he looked up to Ellen. “What the fuck is this?” He started to laugh. “And the best part is. Everyone is buying it.”

“I’m depressed Frank.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m staring at a wall here.” Ellen pointed out.

“I see that.”

“I killed an old woman today. Not too mention the fear I have of poisoning the community as well.”

“El. Come on. It’s me. First of all. Cut you open and talk out the entity? El and . . .” He raised a finger. “I did some recalculating. You are not on your period at all.”

“Frank. I don’t want to farm.”

“Tough. Everyone does. It’s almost over with.”

“Harvest is coming.”

“So.”

“So Frank. I don’t want to farm. If they think I’m mental they won’t let me. Dirk already said he doesn’t want to look at me without a crucifix until after I’m done with my period.”

“El.” Frank laughed.

“No Frank, if you tell them I’m not upset, they’ll not only get mad. They’ll make me . . .” Ellen swallowed. “Can.”

“My God!” Frank shook his head as he lay on his side. “You have to.”

“Frank.” Ellen quickly leaned forward, bringing herself onto her knees. “Please don’t tell them.”

“El, my father is trusting me here and . . .” Frank reached up and touched his eyebrow. “Do you think I look like Ruth?”

“Who’s Ruth.”

“Remember, I showed you her picture. Hal and Robbie put super glue on her eyelash and she lost an eyebrow.”

“Oh.” Ellen tilted her head. “If that doesn’t grow back at all, you do have a new nickname.”

“Thanks.”

“I can pencil it in for you Frank, no one will know.” Ellen leaned more to him, she nudged him making him go onto his back. “You can’t tell on me. You have to say I’m bad.” Ellen hurriedly straddled Frank, lifted his arms above his head and brought her lips to his neck. “Please Frank.”

“Integrity El. You’re trying to bribe me.”

“Please Frank.” She ran her lips across his neck sensuously. “Please I don’t want to farm.”

Frank saw them all sitting in the social hall waiting on him as if he were some sort of bailiff with the jury’s verdict. He stepped into the hall and released a heavy sigh.

“Frank.” Joe stood up. “Honest opinion.”

“Dad.” Frank’s voice graveled in emotions. “If . . . if she were any worse. I’d fear suicide.”

Frank’s sincere sounding words took them all by surprise, but they had to believe him. Frank knew Ellen. And they accepted what he said. And Frank, was glad about that, because he had accepted Ellen’s bribe.

^^^

Miguel looked more like Dumbo rather than the handsome Mexican Andrea had grown to love over the past twenty hours. His shaved salt and pepper hair gave that grey effect and his right ear was so swollen, if he could have flapped it, he would fly. But Dean assured Miguel it wasn’t his lack of suturing skills or Frank’s pulling on the ear that made it so big, it was the abundance of Novocain that lingered in there.

Miserable, Miguel sat on Andrea’s sofa, listening with a half ear to what she read. He just wanted to sleep. Though he thought he loved Andrea, he didn’t need the pity she kept giving him. He could have gotten out of the brawl, but once Frank suplexed him, Miguel vowed to turn the tables around.

“Excuse me.” Andrea set down her book. “I’ll shoo them away.”

Miguel nodded, teetering in the twilight phase of sleep. He was glad for the intrusion, maybe they would speak to Andrea long enough for him to fall into a deep slumber.

“Jenny?” Andrea opened the door.

“Oh Andrea!” Jenny glowed, speaking smoothly and stepping inside. “You will not believe what happened.”

“What? You certainly look happy.”

“I am.” Jenny lifted her shoulders in her deep inhale. “Since I first found out about it, I have been waiting for it to happen. I thought something was wrong with me, I was eighteen and I . . .” Jenny paused to giggle when a loud Miguel snore rang out. “Funny.”

“Yes. Go on.” Andrea stated.

“Anyhow it happened. Andrea. I . . .” Jenny heavily sighed. “I am a woman now.”

“Oh.” Andrea smiled. “Oh Jenny that is wonderful news.”

“It is.”

“Oh honey, and don’t you think anything is wrong with you. It is perfectly normal for it to occur that late in life.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes.” Andrea laid her hand on her cheek. “And should you have any questions about the changes in your body, you just feel free to come to me. I myself was a late bloomer. I was fifteen when I got my first period.”

“Period?” Jenny shook her head. “Oh no Andrea, I’m not talking about my period. I’ve had that since I was twelve.” Jenny giggled again.

“But you said you’re a woman now. What in the world do you . . .” Andrea saw the glowing smile on Jenny’s face. She gasped and covered her mouth in a nineteen fifties horror film fashion. “Sweet Jesus.”

“Ouch. Ouch.” Jenny squeaked loudly. “Ouch you’re pinching me.”

“Tough.” Andrea stated firm.

“I won’t tell.”

“Oh you aren’t gonna have to.”

“Ouch. Ouch.”

Andrea didn’t care. With a broom held high in one hand and Jenny’s arm clenched between her fingers she stormed to the social hall with her. She burst in the door of the hall filled with nearly every man. Unnoticed, but for only a second, Andrea marched over, broom and Jenny to the juke box and kicked out the plug with her foot.

“Hey!” Frank yelled out. “I like that song. Put it back on and wait your turn.”

“Shush your mouth Francis Slagel.” Andrea pointed the broom and took a long breath in through her nostrils. The hall was silent. “Now.” Her head bobbed side to side. “I want to know who did it. Who amongst you has no scruples, morals, regards for chastity, or self gratification control.”

“Hey.” Frank held up his hand. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Me either.” Robbie shrugged. “I don’t think.”

“Somebody did.” Andrea snapped out. “And I want to know who. Which one on you perverts stole this child’s virginity.”

Andrea’s eyes shifted harshly about the quiet room for answers. No one was owning up to it. She knew she was threatening with that broom, but she also knew the guilt of the party would shine through. And it did. While casing the faces of the men looking for signs, Andrea heard her sign. A faint whistling carried out and she looked up to see Dirk sneaking out of the social hall. She brought her breath loudly inward with a heave. When Dirk heard that, he took off running. And not only did Andrea charge right after him with the broom held high in her hand, so did every male in that social hall not wanting to miss the outcome.

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

Beginnings, Montana

October 2

“A thin Hal.” Robbie said as he laid on the floor of the living trailer in the mobile lab. “Don’t you think Frank?”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head, sitting on the couch legs extended on the coffee table. “I always thought you and Jimmy looked more alike than him and Hal.”

Henry had to ask. “So was he the nice Slagel brother. Not that you aren’t nice Hal, but was Jimmy the nice one. You three are a lot alike.”

Hal scoffed at that. “I am nothing like Frank. The man is demented.”

“Hey.” Frank snapped. “I am not.”

Dean laughed. “Not that I like to defend Frank. But Hal, if your brother wasn’t demented we wouldn’t have been so protected at times.”

“Now see.” Hal folded his hands in such a ‘Joe’ fashion. “I feel really bad for my baby brother when you talk like Frank is all security. Robbie does quite a bit.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded. “But in my time frame, Frank trained every single man that walked in the gates. He hand picked them for security, Drilled them. Taught them and walked a perimeter sixteen hours a day when we first got here. In fact for years he worked sixteen to twenty hours a day.”

Robbie agreed. “Even in my time frame he did that. It wasn’t until we started growing that he really needed my help more. And probably more now since he brought back an entire arm.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded, pleased with himself. “Neville Points. Which, I will win the competition.”

“Doubt it.” Robbie said. “I’m too far ahead of you. Anyhow . . . I was too divided Hal.”

“What do you mean?” Hal asked.

“I was the utility guy. I worked Mechanics. Security. I did survivor runs., And the entire containment and survivor process was mine and El’s baby. Trust me when I tell you, Frank ran security. There was a point in time that I couldn’t do nothing but get survivors and work in containment.”

“Bet I got mad.” Henry spoke up. “I could see me getting mad at you.”

“You did. You’ve been a prick since I met you.”

“Oh.” Henry gasped so hurt. “I can’t see myself bing like that.”

Hal bobbed his head. “You’re a nice guy Henry. But I can see it.”

“Me too.” Frank added.

Henry stood up. “I can see that I’m going to be a verbal punching bag. I should leave,.” He waited for someone to say something to the effect that he shouldn’t. No one did. Henry sat back down. “But I want to hear more about Jimmy.”

Hal looked confused. “Frank? Robbie? Don’t you guys talk about him?”

Robbie shook his head. “We do. But it’s more private. Family thing. I think, to me, it’s worse now since you came back Hal. I mean, why didn’t

Jimmy survive.”

“Maybe he did.” Henry stated. “You never know.”

Hal shook his head. “No. I mean I wouldn’t have survived had it not been for that doctor.”

“Is that true Dean?” Robbie asked. “Or does Hal only think he wouldn’t have survived.”

“It’s true,” Dean answered. “I ran blood work on Hal. His mutation is no where near as strong as yours and Frank’s. He had to be given something that allowed what defense he did have to the virus to work. Had Jimmy been given the same thing. Then Jimmy too would have survived.”

“And he didn’t.” Hal said solemnly. “When I went east to find my family, follow the Slagel contingency, I went to Norfolk. I found him at an aid station. In fact . . . I can’t believe I didn’t show you this.” Hal reached around his own neck and with jingle took off a small chain and a set of dog tags. “I’ve never been without them since I found these.” He handed the to Robbie.

Robbie’s fingers ran across the name. “I can’t believe you have this.” He showed Frank.

“Oh wow.” Frank held the tags. “This is so eerie. Isn’t this eerie Dean?”

Dean blinked at he watched Frank hold the dog tags. “I’d say. A substitution of one Slagel brother for the other.”

Hal was confused. “Why do you say that.”

Henry explained. “In our un-rippled time frame, Robbie searched out Jimmy and Robbie had those dog tags.”

Hal took the tags back off of Frank and placed them on. “I guess no matter what, one of us was to have them in our possession. I have a lot of things in my possession that was from our lives as a family. I had more time to pack up a bag with that stuff from my home in Hawaii. I have pictures and everything. I also took what I could from Dad’s house when I went there.”

“Me too.” Robbie stated. “You probably didn’t find much.”

“I didn’t.” Hal said. “Frank, when you come down to my town, you have to see what I have. I even have an old report card of yours.” Hal snickered. “I couldn’t let any of you go.”

“What I’d like to do.” Robbie said. “Is once we get situated. With things so hectic with moving your town and all, I’d like to get together, you, me, Frank, dad and Ellen. And sit down, have dinner, go through all the stuff, then privately have our own memorial for Jimmy.” He saw the looks he got from Frank and Hal. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“No.” Frank shook his head with an awe look to him. “I’d like that. I feel bad I didn’t think of it.”

The solemn moment was broken by the hesitating snickers that eventually seeped out.

“What?” Frank said. “I could have. Given time.”

“Frank, please.” Dean scoffed. “You are not sensitive.”

“I am too.” Frank argued. “Aren’t I Robbie?”

“Um . . . yeah sure Frank.” Robbie hid his laugh.

“Frank.” Henry interjected. “Though I find you a totally endearing man . . .” He paused to let the moans finish from everyone. “Sensitivity is not your

forte.”

Dean snickered at Frank’s shock. “Frank, don’t even tell us you believe you’re sensitive. You’ve gotten worse every single year.”

“Dean.” Frank firmly said his name. “All of you. You’re killing me.” So dramatic Frank spoke. Do I not bleed when I am cut . . .”

“Frank.” Dean whined.

Frank continued. “Do your sharp words not cut me like a knife? Do I not . . .”

“Frank.” Dean stopped him.

“What?”

“Where did you hear that from?” Dean asked.

“I uh . . . made it up.”

Dean laughed. “Oh you did not.”

“I did too. I wrote it off the top of my head. Just like that.” Frank snapped his finger. “You’re just jealous that you aren’t that creative.”

“You are not the creative Slagel.” Dean pointed at him. “Hal and Robbie are. Robbie plays music he writes songs. Hal, he writes stories. What do you do Frank?”

“Dean.” Frank spoke his name with arrogance. “Please. I have written something great that neither of my brothers could ever do.”

A snorting snicker escaped Dean. “Like what?”

“I, Dean.” Frank nodded. “Have written a brand new history.”

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE SECOND YEAR

Boredom

CHAPTER TWELVE

November 27 - Beginnings, Montana

So proud Andrea looked as she carried the huge golden brown bird on a platter. She set it down on a table off to the side of the three long tables linked together at the social hall. She slapped Joe's hand as he reached to pick.

"Now that's one hell of a turkey." Joe looked at it.

"You can start carving that while Maggie and I run back and get the rest of the trimmings."

"I can do that."

"And no picking." Andrea instructed as she backed up and walked away.

The social hall was just starting to fill up for the mid afternoon feast. Joe picked up the large carving knife, reminiscing and missing his old electric knife. Jonas joined him.

"Jonas." Joe stuck the fork in the bird. "One hell of a turkey. You did good."

"Frank calls me the mighty hunter."

"You are."

"It was just luck Joe, my gun went off accidentally while we were hunting."

"Excellent accident." Just as Joe started to carve, he heard the squeaking of chairs. He looked to see Robbie and Frank moving furniture way off in the corner. He shook his head.

On a cart, Robbie wheeled a television, plugging it into the wall. "This was like the coolest idea."

"It's not Thanksgiving without football." Frank said. "Even if they are tapes from games past."

"Now we can sit back and be all lazy while someone else cooks." Robbie popped in the tape.

"Yeah." Frank flopped down in a chair.

"I'll get some beers." Robbie raced over to the bar area.

They didn't watch football, Johnny and Denny found their own entertainment. Watching Dirk. He sat on the sofa brought into the lounge, eating appetizers and watching the game.

Johnny sat on the floor looking up. "Do you suppose he uses his tongue or guns to break up the crackers."

Denny watched Dirk eat. He really did, so he could find out the answer to that one. Dirk chewed with his mouth open some, crackers crumbs came from the sides of his mouth along with saliva. "Both."

"That is really gross."

"Yeah. My sister eats better than that."

"He kisses Jenny with that mouth."

"They don't kiss." Denny argued.

“Yeah, they do. Open mouthed too, I saw them.”

“EW.” Denny cringed loudly. “How can they do that.”

“I don’t know. And his lips don’t even look like that work.” Johnny looked up when he felt the hand on his head, he smiled to George who walked by him. “George said it’s a phase Jenny is going through.”

“Well I hope I never go through that wanna kiss old people phase. I never liked kissing my grandmother.”

“I think this is different.” Johnny rolled his eyes. “Jenny doesn’t kiss him like a grandfather.”

“But how can she not. He’s old.”

Johnny thought about it, and even in his young wisdom, he had no answers.

And Frank was just as dumbfounded over it as his son. He verbally and facially cringed when he watched Jenny hand Dirk a beer and kiss him then walk away.

“Now why es et that ya do that Frankie.” Dirk asked him.

“Do what?”

“Make that there noise and face when ever Jenny and me is ta-gather.”

“Because you shouldn’t be together.” Frank finished his beer. “It’s sick.”

“Why?”

“You’re old.”

“So.”

“So, go after someone your own age.”

“Frank.” Henry nudged him. “Its none of our business.”

“I don’t care.” Frank snapped. “We have to see it.”

Dirk waved his hand at him. “Then don’t go looking.”

“How can we not. You flaunt it.”

“You’d flaunt it too.”

“Please. No I wouldn’t.” Frank argued. “Besides, she’s a kid. I see her as a kid.”

“Well I see as a Lil sweetie with dee-zi-er jus a burnin like the ol rubber on a peelin tire.”

“That’s sick.”

“Son.” Dirk chuckled. “I think that maybe you’s just a right jealous cause you ain’t gettin none.”

Frank scoffed as he stood up. “You don’t think?”

Henry quickly looked at Miguel and whispered. “Is Frank sleeping with Jenny too?”

William nodded with a closed mouth so impressed looking at the tray of turkey slices Joe laid down. “Nice job.”

“Always was a fanatic about a nicely sliced turkey.” Joe commented as he carved. “Hate a butcher job.”

William chuckled. “Funny how we have the same theory. Anyhow, after the meal, I’d like to talk to you about that list.”

“You’ve been working on it?”

“Yes. Preliminaries. Enough for discussion for your little pow-wow.”

“What about Dean’s list?” Joe asked.

“Getting worse. I’m believing Joe, his pessimistic view is more personal than professional. I think he just doesn’t want to bring the outside world in here.” William motioned his head to Dean, Ellen and the babies coming in the door.

Joe looked over. “Maybe William, he has his little world and that’s just all he needs.”

Ellen snickered as she took little Billy’s coat from him and his hair, with static, stuck straight up. “He looks so much like you Dean.”

Dean tried to pat it down. “He definitely has the hair.”

“You seem a little better. Are you glad we waited?”

“I would have been more glad to stay home and have our own thanksgiving dinner.” Dean said helping Ellen take off Alexandra’s coat.

“Dean, these people are our family.”

“In a sense, but I’m lucky enough to have my own family.” Dean leaned into Ellen and kissed her. “And this is our first Thanksgiving married. I would have liked to have this holiday alone. And not here . . .” Dean stepped back. “Definitely not here.”

“Why?”

Before Dean could even tell Ellen why, Frank approached, walking up behind Ellen and placing his hand on her shoulder. He stepped into her, pressing his body to hers and laying his lips to her cheek. “Happy Thanksgiving El.” He raised his eyes to Dean, stared at him for a second, kissed Ellen’s cheek again, ran his hand over Alexandra’s head and walked to the bar.

Softly Dean grumbled. “Why does he have to do that?”

“Dean, you let him get to you.”

“I say nothing about you two being friends. But El, you have to make him stop that.”

“Dean . . .”

“No, El. I’m your husband. He does it to be a dick.”

“You’re getting worse with him.”

“No. He’s getting worse with you. Yesterday when we all went out for the turkey, I had to hear about your first Thanksgiving with him. Everyone laughing at his story of how you took the bus to his Dad’s, got stranded at the Greyhound station in Breezewood, thought you could take any bus east and ended up in Cleveland.”

“Dean, it’s my past. I can’t erase it.”

“Funny, that’s the exact same thing he said. In fact, you always say the exact same thing as him, and he says the exact same thing as you.”

“Oh we do not. And let’s just say hello to Joe before he gets pissed. He’s like Mr. Family during holidays.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I’m just bitching.”

“You’re allowed.” Ellen smiled and kissed Dean on the cheek. “I love you.”

Remember that.”

“Thanks.” Just as Dean started to walk, Frank approached again.

“El, you should get over and say hello to my father before he gets pissed. He is Mr. Family during holidays.”

Ellen looked to Dean with a hunching, ‘sorry’ look.

“Here, let me take Alex.” Frank lifted the baby from her arms, held the smiling little girl up. “Hey you.” Frank spoke soft. “Wanna go see Pap? Yeah.” After tickling her face with his goatee and making her giggle, Frank kissed her and walked to Joe.

Dean held it in, but his rolling eyes gave away his dismay. “Why does he have to hold my daughter?”

“Dean. Knock it off.”

“Sorry.” Dean followed behind Ellen.

“And for our brothers and sisters who are at your own feast, Dear Jesus.” Andrea stood, head down, eyes closed, everyone seated around her. “May they look down upon us and our bountiful . . .”

“Andrea.” Joe interrupted. “Can we eat?”

“Joseph. I am saying the prayer.”

“You have been saying the prayer for ten minutes.”

“And I will not stop until I’m done.” She took a deep breath. “Heavenly father. Bless this food and the crops in which produced it. Bless Jonas for bringing in such a delightful turkey in from his hunt. For the health and . . .”

“Andrea.” Joe’s hand slammed. “I enjoy a good dinner prayer myself, but we aren’t in church for crying out loud.”

“Can you be anymore of a heathen?” Andrea shifted her eyes to him in anger.

“Yeah.” Joe nodded. “Finish the goddamn prayer, the turkey is getting cold.”

“Fine.” Andrea huffed. “Dear God you know *my* intentions. Amen.”

A loud ‘Amen’ rang out around the table and as soon as that happened, it was like the starting gun. Frank, Robbie, John Matoose and Miguel, jumped from their seats, reached around everyone to load up their plates, and to stay in context with old world tradition, the four of them took their plates and ate their dinner around the television.

^^^

In a coy, yet funny way, speaking a little deeper than his usual tone, Dean, sitting on the couch, tilted his head, raised one eyebrow and stared down to Ellen, who laid there. “Im my professional physician’s opinion, quiet is essential.”

Ellen’s face tensed up as she held back her laugh. “Which we have.”

“Which we have. Relaxation is also important.” He pointed his hand down to her. “Which we have.”

“Cozy and comfy.”

“And the most vital physician’s recommendation I can make is, elevation of the legs.” He turned his body. “Which . . .” He flashed an ornery grin. “We’re gonna have just about now.” Parting Ellen’s legs, he lifted them some, bringing them to his waist as he lowered down to Ellen. Through her laughter he began to kiss her until a knock on the door stopped him. He lifted his head. “I swear if this is Frank, I’m hitting him.”

“Go ahead.”

Dean slid his body from Ellen’s, straightened his hair, waited for her to sit up and he opened the door. “Robbie?”

“Hey Dean.” He peeked in. “Hey El.”

“What’s up?” Dean asked.

“I know it’s late, well not too late, but I was sort of wondering, can I just spend some time with El?”

“Something wrong?” Dean opened the door wider for him.

“No. I just kind of need that companionship right now. The friend thing. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all. In fact . . . I’ll run down to the clinic, I have some things to get ready for Joe’s meeting tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to leave, it’s nothing personal I need to discuss.”

“Nah.” Dean opened the closet door and grabbed his jean jacket. “I should get this done anyhow.” Placing it on, he moved to the sofa, bending over the back of it and kissing Ellen. “I’ll be back.”

“See ya.” Ellen grabbed his hand and felt it slip away as Dean backed up.

“Night Robbie.” Dean moved to the door.

“Thanks Dean.” After he saw Dean had left, Robbie walked over and sat on the other end of the couch. “I hope I wasn’t interrupting.”

“No, not at all. Is something wrong?”

“No. Really there isn’t. I just need to talk to you.”

“About anything in particular?”

Robbie shrugged. “Somewhat, but there’s nothing weighing me down if that’s what you think. I wanted to know if you would help me with something.”

“Sure. If I can.”

“It might take a lot of your time.”

Ellen snickered. “Not like I can’t spare it. What’s up.”

“Remember . . .” Robbie inched his way to her. “Remember when you lived with me and we got into that one conversation about when we pick up survivors. We kind of exaggerated.”

“I remember.”

“Remember we came up with a plan on what should be done.”

“Yes.”

“I think we should really examine that joking idea and present it seriously to my Dad.”

“Robbie.” Ellen shook her head in disbelief. “It’s a bit extreme.”

“We’ll tame it some, but it’s a good plan. And I’d like to do it. But it’ll take your help and we’ll have to show him we’re serious by doing a lot of prep work or it.”

“You mean setting up schedules, activities . . .”

“Processing and . . . reading up on things.” Robbie finished her sentence. “The whole nine yards. What do you say?”

“You think Joe will go for it?” Ellen asked.

“I think if we tell him seriously about it, he will. Plus you know, getting some things ready will take a few hands. Winters coming.”

“It can be something for us to do.” Ellen agreed. “I’m up for it. We should detail it out before letting him know. And we should detail it out tonight if we want him to ponder on it before the meeting.”

“My thoughts exactly. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”

“And the other?”

“To see you.” Robbie winked.

Ellen smiled and stood up. “Thank you. I’ll get some paper.” She moved to the diningroom. “And Robbie . . . I’m glad to see you too.” So young and innocent Robbie looked to her at that moment, the way he lowered his head in a blush as if he had never been complimented. And maybe, Ellen thought, he just hadn’t been complimented enough lately, or because he was always so upbeat and smiling, Robbie just was forgotten about as someone that needed that attention. And if Robbie needed attention, whether it be through the survivor project or just couch conversation, Ellen was going to give as much to him as he called for. Because Robbie was the only person in Beginnings that was completely positive about everything, and with the world the way it was, Beginnings couldn’t lose that. Not a single ounce of it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

November 28 - Beginnings, Montana

“Surviving.” Joe stated the word as he dropped three filled folders to the long table in the social hall. “That is what this whole Garfield project was about. Surviving and building a tomorrow. But people, the truth is, we may have had the birth of the twins, and Jenny could end up knocked up, but it’s not building. We have to do what we are meant to do. Build.” Joe paced a little as he spoke. “I spoke to Dirk and Stan and they are spreading out the crops. We want to get people in here so by next harvest we have people to help. Right now, where we’re at, we have too much food. It’s time to share. Now I know some of you are apprehensive about this. Our protective world, letting outsiders in, especially those who have been in that world for what will be two years by the time we start searching. We have a plan. And when Robbie and Ellen approached George and myself this morning with the fact that they had an idea. We were a bit apprehensive, until we heard it. And they’ve worked some on it, and will continue to work on it. It’s . . .” Joe winked at them, “It’s a good plan. It will be their baby the survivor thing and because of that. Robbie, give it to them in a nutshell.”

Robbie stood up. “Basically the ground rules for survivors will be set down right before we start to look for them. And we will look for them. The ones that approach us, well, we’ll handle them as they come. But we’re calling it the survivor process. First we search them out. We then bring them here. They will be processed in my Dad’s office, through paper work, then they will be given an examination there complete with blood work. If they are sick in anyway, they will go to the clinic, if not, then they go to a place we will call Containment. It will be a place El and I work that will house, feed and teach those people about living in our world. We’ll watch them, observe them and when they’re ready we’ll let them into Beginnings. It will be a secure building, so no one gets out on their own.”

Andrea raised her hand. “What happens if you have someone in this containment and they just can’t handle living in the civilized world.”

Robbie hesitated but only for a second. “Then as cruel as it seems, we have to take them from Beginnings.”

Frank had his questions too. “You said examine them at Dad’s office. Containment? Where will this be.”

Joe took over. “That’s where all of you come in. We need to build a few places. Remodel. There are two rooms adjacent to my office. They both will need to be done. One as a waiting room,. One as the examining room. Storage building ‘J’, next door, is big, hollow and has plumbing. Miguel, you mentioned you have some carpentry experience and I know Frank can do a hell of a job with dry wall. I want both of you to take that building, make me some plans and come up with a way to make it into what Ellen and Robbie want. Has to house both men and women. We can use the next couple months to get the supplies, then instead of twiddling our thumbs waiting for a heavy snow to fall so we

have something to do, we'll build and remodel all winter."

Frank turned his head to Miguel. "I'm up for this. We can make that building into a sort of squad bay. That will work."

Joe nodded. "I know last winter was bad with the boredom and it's already started since harvest is over with. This should keep us pretty busy." Joe saw Henry's hand was raised. "Yes Henry?"

"What about runs, Joe?" Henry asked. "When will we make the runs?"

"We'll have several types." Joe answered. "And I think most of you will be up for this. I'd like to schedule the first round of runs in two weeks. One of them being a Christmas run, and the others a supply run. We shouldn't need to go far for the building supplies. Off route 2 there's that home warehouse that should have all that we need. But Dean, has given me a bunch of data." Joe lifted a huge folder. "Of things we're gonna have to deal with when these people come in, health wise that is. So Dean, over the next two weeks, you and Ellen and your father, come up with what we'll need to stock up for this, and figure out some places close that we can get it."

Dean nodded in agreement, but he was short of words.

"All right." Joe looked up. "Looks like we got ourselves a plan to follow. We can do this people. If we all work together, keep the lines of communication between us open, establish a common goal and vision. And with a lot of hard work we can eventually make this place into what it is supposed to be . . . the Beginning of the new world."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

December 12 - Miles City Mall, Miles City

“Momma, comb my hair.”

Henry snickered as he held the baby doll and his fingers pressed the tummy. He sat center of an aisle, dolls spread everywhere around him. The toy store just disrupted some, hardly looted if at all.

“Momma, feed me.”

“O.K.” Henry laughed again. “This is so neat.

“Attention Toys R Us shoppers.” Robbie’s deep voice rang over the intercom of the store. “For the next ten minutes only you can purchase the life size, Frank action figure guy for only nine-ninety-nine.”

A blast of a toy machine gun rang out as Frank turned the aisle and aimed at Henry. “Hey check this out. Real M-16 action.” He laid fake fire on Henry who sat on the floor. “Look at you playing with dolls.”

“She talks.”

“Just like a female. Henry, why the fuck are you playing with dolls.”

“I’m picking some out for Katie and Alexandra.”

“Both of them still drool, you should be in the un-eatable toy aisle.”

“But they won’t drool in a couple years Frank. And what happens if we can’t go out and get any of this stuff in a couple years.”

Frank scratched his head. “That might be true. O.K., you’re in charge of the female stuff Henry, and make sure you get Barbie Dolls.”

“Got it Frank.”

A motorized small car zipped around the bend of the aisle and Robbie followed it. “Frank, we have to get some of these for ourselves.”

“Oh yeah.” Frank bent down to it. “We can hook explosives up to them.”

“Like when we were kids.” Robbie grinned. “Hey is that the Commando Man, Mutants of War with real M-16 fire power action?”

“Yeah.” Frank fired. “Check it out.” He tossed it to Robbie.

“Whoa.” Robbie fired it. “It kicks. Kind of light though.”

“Robbie. They have to draw the line on real.” Frank was so serious. “You can’t expect a two year to tote around a fuckin toy as heavy as he is.”

“You’re right.”

“Frank?” Henry held up another baby. “This one pees.”

Robbie motioned his M-16 down to Henry. “Why does it not surprise me Henry is playing with dolls.”

“Henry probably always played with dolls.” Frank said. “And we should be getting back. Let’s start loading up.”

Henry stood up. “I hope Joe lets me be Santa. I asked if I can be Santa. He grumbled at me.” Henry played with a doll’s hair.

Frank rolled his eyes. “Wanna know why? You’ll give it away who you are.”

“Why?” Henry asked.

“Henry, when’s the last time you saw a Chinese Santa?”

"I'm Japanese Frank." Henry followed Frank through the store. "And all my life every Santa I saw growing up was Japanese."

"Then you witnessed some lame Santas. Santa is not Asian."

"How do you know?" Henry asked.

"I know."

"No Frank. No one knows. Have you ever seen the real Santa?"

"Henry!" Frank spun around. "Shut the fuck up about Santa. Even if I never saw the real Santa, I know he's not some oddball, six foot, lanky, long haired Asian man. That's for sure." Frank found his cart full of toys and began to push it.

"You are so mean Frank. You aren't nice at all. Not at all." Henry pushed his cart as well. "And racist. You're very racist."

"I never claimed to be a fuckin saint Henry." Frank stopped pushing his cart as he approached the double glass door. He paused as he pushed them open.

"Hey Frank!" Robbie raced forward. "You forgot to pay for . . . what's wrong?" He saw Frank staring out.

"I thought we closed the back gate of the truck the last load we took out."

"We did." Robbie said.

"No, we didn't." Henry added. "I don't think we did."

"Did we? Or didn't we?" Frank asked.

"Obviously we didn't." Robbie commented. "Because it's open now."

"But what if we did." Frank asked. "It shouldn't be, if we did." From around his back, Frank swung his real M-16, opened the door and shoved the cart out with one hand, shifting his eye about, moving slowly and toward the truck.

Henry whispered to Robbie as they walked out. "I think your brother has been playing Commando Man too long today."

Robbie stepped outside of the mall-plex with his cart. "Frank?"

"You guys load up." Frank stepped away from the cart and pumped his M-16.

"What is it?" Robbie asked.

"Listen. A fluttering. It's in the distance."

Robbie listened. "A motor?"

"Yeah. Load up."

Henry moved into high gear. "Oh I can see it." He started to just throw things into the truck. "A bad episode of Mad Max. You know John Matoose ran into trouble when he went east last time."

"I know." Frank still stared out. "That's why I'm telling you two to load." Frank's eyebrow lifted. "And in double time gentlemen."

Close but echoing a raspy male voice rang out at them. "Oh, will you look at how clean. I knew the military would be up and running. All healthy they are. They don't look starving at all."

Frank raised his weapon. "Load it up. Get ready Robbie."

"Let's just get out of here Frank." Robbie said. "Load up and out. What's one man going to do. It's not worth the trouble."

"I know. Just be pre . . ."

A short scream precluded the diving of six men from the roof of the toy

store building. They dove like savages onto Frank, Robbie and Henry. As soon as the one landed on Frank's back, he flipped him with ease, turned to the one who had jumped on his brother, stole any reaction time Robbie had, lifted the man from him, and tossed him out ward as if he weighted nothing.. Re-gripping his M-16, Frank fired out, shooting the two men he downed. He pivoted his body just in time to grab one that Robbie spun in a punch, Frank grabbed him, threw him and shot him.

Three left.

Instead of firing his weapon Frank swung it out, nailing one so hard he literally flew back ten feet. Seeing Robbie was holding his own, Frank went after the last one who went for Henry. By the back of the throat Frank gripped him and lifted him, holding the man at arms length, dropping him, then shooting him.

"Shut the gate!" Frank yelled in order to Henry. "Robbie get in the truck. Now!"

"But Frank we can take . . . these . . . . shit." Robbie's eyes widened when he saw on motorcycles twenty more riding their way. "We can lay these guys out Frank."

"Or we can just go." Frank hurried and helped Henry. "Enough people are dead in this world, they don't need our help to drop. Let's just book."

With a slam of the truck's gate, and the motorcycle's nearing, Frank raced to the drivers seat jumping inside the cab at the same time as Robbie and Henry. Frank turned the ignition, shifted the gears and pulled out before his door or the other was even shut.

"Frank." Robbie could see the reflection in the side mirror. "They're still on us."

"Fuckin assholes. Are they armed."

Robbie looked again. "I believe so."

"You wanna drive or me?"

"You choose."

"What?" Henry was horrified. "Frank's already behind the wheel of the truck."

"You drive." Frank told him. "I'll end this happy fuckin pursuit"

"No." Henry shook his head. "Look, just drive faster. Drive faster. Guys I don't . . . Uh!" Henry shrieked, hunched and covered his eyes. Peeking through his slightly spread fingers he watched as Robbie hurried across the cab of the truck, switched feet with Frank on the gas and then, like a well rehearsed ballet, Frank lifted up, slid to his left and Robbie took the driver's position.

"Floor it!" Frank yelled, then out the door he went, laughing and thinking 'bonus;' when the door whammed a cyclist in it's fling open. Frank swung his body to the ladder on the side of the cab, gripped the rungs and, wind whipping he climbed his way up.

He was careful not to stand when he reached the top of the cab. Crawling on the roof with a good hold on, Frank scooted on his belly at the same time he removed the revolver from his shoulder harness. He braced his hand and his aim, lowering his head to see his mark.

“Oh I can’t see.” Robbie peered closer to the windshield and Frank’s long legs that dangled over. “Frank, move your legs!”

“He’s busy Robbie.” Henry told him so nervous. “Oh my God. Oh my God.”

Robbie swerved the truck and unwound the window. Henry screamed.

“Fuck!” Frank yelled. “Easy.”

“What?” Robbie yelled back. “Frank, move your legs.”

“What!”

“Move your . . . screw it.” Robbie turned on the windshield wipers batting Frank’s big combat boots.

Henry kept whining. “Robbie please. He’s gonna fall. Robbie drive . . . oh.” Henry fell sideways when the truck squealed to the left. “You’re bother’s dead. He’s dead.”

“What the hell?” Frank felt the swerving truck and the tapping on his feet. “What’s he doing?” Ignoring the hits against his feet, and the fact he was near falling off, Frank aimed again, saw the face of one rider, shot out, hit the wheel and sent the motorcyclist toppling and spinning. He was like the single domino that began a chain of ricocheting events. His immediate flip and spin backwards caused the stopping and falling of several other bikers as well.

“Yeah!” Frank called out. “Ha!” Taunting them loudly as if the occupied fallen bikers could hear him. See that they no longer were chased, Frank, slid his body over, grabbed on to the ladder and climbed back down to the passenger’s side. He opened the door with a grin. “Miss me?” He jumped in side.

“Frank, your big ass legs were in the way. I couldn’t see.” Robbie whined.

“You couldn’t drive.” Frank argued.

“I couldn’t drive because I couldn’t see.”

“What the fuck Robbie, I was busy.”

“Did you get them?” Robbie asked.

“Do you see them?” Frank replied.

Robbie checked out the review mirror, the bikers became like specks in the distance. “Good job Frank. And Man, did you see the way you tossed them guys.”

“Yeah. I swear it was like they weighed nothing.” Frank said almost amazed with himself. “It was like I had superhuman strength.”

“Bet me it’s from all that farm work you do. We don’t grow spinach”

“For sure I’m not stopping now. I was cool.”

“You were cool.”

“Thanks. Hey Henry what . . .” Frank spun around in the seat. “Where did he . . . oh.” Frank started laughing when on the floor behind the seats, Henry laid passed out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

January 2 - Beginnings, Montana

On his back, looking up, Joe laid on the floor in the room connected to his office. He hooked up the plumbing to what would be the sink in the new examining room. He felt the nudge at his feet.

“Sorry, Joe” George spoke, carrying in a sheet of drywall.

“Not a problem.” Joe grunted.

“Where’s Frank?” George asked. “He’s supposed to be carrying all this stuff in here today.”

“Making rounds.”

“Again?”

Raising his arms out to his invisible leverage, Joe brought himself to a sitting position. “Again.”

“He does it morning, noon in night. You don’t supposed there may be something wrong with your son. Do you?” George inquired.

“Nah.” With a roll to his knees first, Joe stood up and brushed himself off. “Frank says he thinks there’s trouble out beyond the wall. His traps aren’t going off, but he says he hears things. And if Frank thinks there might be trouble. There just might be.”

“From who?” George asked. “Who would start trouble. Who’s left? Maybe he’s just being paranoid.”

“I doubt it. All of our men have run into trouble out making the rounds George. That’s not their paranoid delusions, it’s real. And if there’s people out there that can make trouble on our runs, there are people that can make their way here to start trouble.”

“I suppose you’re right.” George dusted off the white from his hands. “Well, whenever he’s done, if you see Frank, can you tell him we have some heavy stuff to be moved?”

“Will do.” When Joe had saw George had left, he laid back down and returned to his plumbing.

^^^

“See, I’m not understanding this attitude.” Robbie said to Frank as they walked near the back gate perimeter.

“That’s because I’m not understanding all of this sudden time you have to spend with Ellen.”

“I told you Frank. It’s for the survivor program.”

“It’s all the time Robbie.” Frank had edge to his voice.

“We’re reading books about behavior, psychology. It’s not romance.”

Frank stopped. “Now why would you say that?”

“That’s what you’re implying.”

“No I am not. I’m bitching about the amount of time you’re spending with her. Every minute with you is one less minute with me.”

“But you’re worried about something romantic.”

“Robbie.” Frank snapped his name. “Now, I’m worried. I wasn’t fuckin thinking it before.”

“Bullshit.”

“Bullshit?” Frank, hands on hips stepped closer to his little brother. “Why are you all defensive now.”

“Because for two weeks you’ve been an asshole to me. And now I know why. It’s because of Ellen. Nothing is going on, Frank. We’re working.”

“I want it to stop.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you. Learn the shit you need to learn on your own.” Frank pointed down to Robbie.

Robbie swiped his hand away. “See. I’m not even going to discuss this with you. I’m not. You’re getting pissed over nothing.”

“You don’t think I have reason too?”

“No.”

“I do. I said nothing about you two being romantic. You did. That tells me, there’s more than meets the eye.”

“Then that is your jealousy and insecurity.” Robbie backed up. “Besides, Frank. It’s not your place to be jealous or insecure. You’re not her husband. And if her husband is fine with it, I shouldn’t be getting flack off of you.”

“Her husband is not fine with it.” Frank shouted.

“What?” Robbie turned around. “Dean is too.”

“No, he uh . . . he came to me and told me to stop you. Yeah.”

“Right.”

“I’m serious.”

“Frank. I’m not fighting with you over this.” Robbie turned again and started to walk.

“Robbie, you . . .” Frank’s head quickly shifted to his left when he heard the subtle crack of a branch. Stern faced and vision focused he scanned the wooded area. Only a glimpse of it was enough to send a warning siren off to him. The barrel of a shotgun. “Fuck. Robbie, hit the dirt!” Frank charged to him.

Just as Robbie turned to Frank, a shot rang out. The fence may have protected them from outsiders, but not from bullets. The bullet seared into Robbie’s arm spinning him and the next shot rang out hitting him in the side.

Frank dove for Robbie, and in the midst of his leap a third fired out. Blood shot from Frank’s thigh from the hit just as his body careened into Robbie’s. He grabbed his brother and rolled with him down the grade and out of harms way.

When the momentum of their roll slowed down, Frank lifted from Robbie. “You O.K.?”

Robbie grunted and nodded.

Taking the revolver from his shoulder harness, Frank crawled to the hillside, keeping low. As he made it to the grade, he heard the revving engines of motorcycles. “Robbie, it’s our toy store gang.”

Bloody, Robbie rolled over, reaching for his own gun. On his stomach, he inched his way toward Frank.

“Here.” Frank held down his hand grabbing Robbie’s and helping his

injured brother. He started laughing the louder the motorcycles grew.

“What . . . what’s so funny.” Robbie crawled up to Frank.

“Stupid mother fuckers. Look. Oh this is gonna be beautiful.” Frank gave a demented, proud grin to Robbie.

Robbie began to snicker in a sick laughter with Frank, forgetting their petty differences in a moment of Slagel entertainment. They watched, moving extremely fast, the ten bikers thinking they could crash through the gate. They came at such a high charging speed, that even seeing what happened to their comrade before them didn’t give them enough time to stop the same fate from happening to them. Stopped, shocked and fried. Crash. Surge. Scream . . . were the sounds made as one by one they made contact with the perimeter fence.

^^^

“We have a bleeder.” Dean called out, pushing the cart with Robbie on it to the operating room.

“He’s going into shock, Dean.” Ellen said as she monitored the vitals of Robbie.

“He’s lost too much blood. We’re going to need Joe to donate.”

Ellen’s hands felt Robbie. “Shit, we lost the pulse. He’s gone into cardiac arrest.”

“Andrea, start compression now!” Dean ordered, “Ellen, you shoot to OR stat, get things ready to tube him. Get one amp epinephrin ready and one amp, atropine.”

“On it Dean.” Ellen took off.

With the cart still moving, Andrea jumped up on the side, cupping her hands over Robbie’s chest. Dean on the end, pushed the cart as fast as he could, losing some control as they turned the final bend. And with the weight of the cart and his pushing it, he barreled through the double doors of the operating room.

“Time.” William clicked the stop watch. “Excellent. two minutes. Let’s try to top this. This time let’s have a v-fib the moment he is dropped on the cart.”

Ellen, Dean, and Andrea caught their breaths and nodded in agreement.

“Guys.” Robbie lifted up from his laying down position on the cart. “I’m still bleeding here. Can we rehearse emergency medical procedures when you fix me.”

“Nonsense.” William patted Robbie’s leg causing Robbie to grunt in pain. “We need some sort of urgency, so we can rush this.”

“What if I start to really get bad?” Robbie asked looking at his side. “I’m losing a lot of blood here.”

“Then we’ll be ready.” William smiled. “Dean?” He motioned his head. “You three take him back out to the front. We’ll try this all over.”

Robbie moaned when the cart started moving again.

^^^

“You look pale.” Frank commented as he sat at Robbie’s bedside that evening.

“I feel pale.”

“You look it.”

“I swear Frank, those sickos were trying to make me go into real cardiac arrest.”

“They were up to something with you.” Frank straightened his arm and bent it. “I couldn’t get up for an hour. They took three pints from me.”

“Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. Man, I never knew anyone who had to get a blood transfusion from a simple flesh wound.”

“That’s because they let me bleed for two hours Frank.”

“Yeah., And then the assholes run around saying they saved your life.”

“*You* save my life Frank.” Robbie pointed.

“Nah, I just stopped you from getting shot again. But I’m getting good at that stuff.”

“Yeah you are. We’re gonna be calling you Super Human Frank of the after Plague world.”

Frank chuckled. “Hey, do you suppose something happened to me to make me strong and I just don’t remember it?”

“You mean like in Greatest American Hero?” Robbie asked.

“Yeah.”

“I would think you would remember an alien Frank.”

Frank scratched his head. “You would think. Plus, I’d be able to fly.”

“True.”

Joe heard that last comment as he entered the room, and he didn’t even want to ask. “So, how you feeling Robbie.”

“Weak.” Robbie coughed. “Real weak. Dean tried to kill me.”

“Fuckin Dean.” Frank commented.

“Yeah.” Joe walked closer to the bed. “Well, Ellen and I have an idea, a community idea.”

Robbie quickly looked to Frank. “Uh-oh. They aren’t gonna play ER with me again. Are they?”

Joe shook his head. “No. That is what brought up my idea. I realized again, how bored this community can get. Today’s little Marcus Welby episode proved it. And since you can’t leave the clinic because they’re making you stay to practice patient care, I brought everyone to the waiting room. I’ll wheel you down Robbie.”

“What . . . what are we doing?” Robbie asked.

“We’re gonna be entertained. At least for a half hour.”

Frank was curious. “How?”

“You.” Joe pointed.

“Me?” Frank questioned. “I’m gonna be the entertainment?”

“Yep.” Joe nodded.

“Dad.” Frank nearly whispered. “You aren’t gonna make me pose or

anything are you?"

"Frank, you're an ass. No. I'll get the wheel chair."

Frank watched Joe leave and he turned to Robbie. "What do you think it is?"

Robbie tossed his hands up. "I haven't a clue."

Dean scratched the back of his head as he watched Ellen bring the television in the waiting room. "Tell me what we're watching again. But say it slow so I can be sure I understood you correctly."

Ellen giggled. "Frank on Jeopardy."

"That's what I thought you said." Dean pointed. "Frank Slagel on jeopardy?"

"Yep."

"The game show?"

"Yep."

Dean almost laughed, but he didn't because he realized it wasn't a joke. "El, the game has integrity."

"It never aired."

"I see."

"They gave us the tape though. Unedited." Ellen held it up.

"Jeopardy the game show?" Dean questioned again.

"Yes Dean." Ellen tsked.

"How . . . how . . . how did Frank get on Jeopardy?"

"Frank was the game show guy when he was stationed in California." Ellen laughed in remembrance. "If it aired, Frank tried to get on it. It was like his way of trying to add that extra income to his family. Price is Right. That was funny. Um . . . some spinning game."

"El. Stop." Den held up his hand. "I can see Frank on Price is right. Actually, I can see him doing well if picked."

"I have that tape if you . . ."

"Some other time." Dean interrupted her. "But Jeopardy?"

"Hello Dean. Yes. With Alex Trabek and all."

"El, sorry. But in order to get on Jeopardy you have to have achieved a certain level of intelligence. And that level has never been third grade."

"Oh Dean, that's terrible. Frank is smart."

Dean's eyes widened. "Frank?"

"However, you have a point. Frank . . . well, Frank lucked out."

"How?" Dean asked.

"Well, Frank was on leave when they were in Connecticut auditioning. I flirted with the production Assistant and got the quiz. Frank aced it."

"So he cheated to get on Jeopardy?"

"In a sense. But he still had to study."

"Of course."

Henry raced in the waiting room. "Hope I'm not late."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "You're only the second one here."

“Good.” Henry grabbed his chest. “I didn’t want to miss what Joe called, ‘highly entertaining comedy’.” He looked to Dean’s snicker. “What? It isn’t funny?”

“Oh.” Dean held up his hand. “I’m expecting to be rolling on the floor.”

“What is it?” Henry asked.

Dean answered. “A tape of Frank . . . get this . . . on the game show Jeopardy.”

“Aw.” Henry whined with a stomp and a turn. “Gees.”

Dean looked a little stunned by Henry’s reaction. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Gees Dean, when’s the last time you saw Jeopardy. Well, scratch that it’s been at least two years.”

“Yeah, so.” Dean said.

“So Dean.” Henry gave attitude. “Last I recall, Game shows weren’t that funny that I’d be rolling on the floor.”

“But Henry think.” Dean stated. “Frank is a contestant on the game show Jeopardy.”

“Yeah, and Jeopardy is like the ‘no laugh’ game show. All those contestants are like really smart and . . .” Henry’s eyes widened and he hurried and took a seat on the floor in front of the television cart. “Oh, this is gonna be good.”

Frank, Joe and Robbie were the last to arrive in the waiting room. Joe positioned Robbie and then walked immediately to the television. Frank walked over to Ellen and sat down next to her on the floor. He flashed a smile and wiggled his fingers to Dean who glared at him.

“El.” Frank whispered. “What’s my Dad making me do?”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked.

“He said I’m the entertainment for tonight.”

“Oh.” Ellen patted him in a pacifying manner on the knee. “He’s showing that tape I have of when you were on Jeopardy.”

“Why?”

“He’s proud of that accomplishment in your life.”

“I was pretty smart wasn’t I?” His eyes lifted to Dean who snickered “Shut the fuck up Dean.”

Joe grabbed everyone’s attention with his clearing of his throat. “All right. I promised you entertainment. Tonight you’ll get it. A few years back, some years back, while stationed in California, my son Frank made an appearance on a game show. And because we’ve always been so . . . so . . . shocked at his performance. I thought you’d enjoy it.” Joe turned on the television then pushed in the tape and pressed play. He enjoyed the brief moment when gasps of shock and moans of surprise rang out in the room the second the ‘tag’ *Jeopardy-November 17* in block-style, white lettering appeared on the black background. And before he missed a second of his all time favorite video, Joe took his seat in the chair.

The tape began to play . . .

The dark set. The flashing lights and the theme music boasted the enthusiasms as the announcers deep voice played.

"She's a librarian with a degree in history. He's a botanist from Duluth and he's a . . . sergeant in the United States Army. Meet, Wilma, Marv and Frank. And here is your host . . . Alex Trabek."

The audience gleefully cheered Alex as he ran across the stage waving to Frank and the other two contestants. Each of them behind their little stand. Each with their names written neatly across the front. Except for Frank's. He could have chosen to erase it when he spelled his name wrong, but instead he just scratched it out and wrote it again.

"Thank you. Thank you." Alex bowed three times as if he really appreciated the audience. He held his hands out to the contestants. Wilma an older woman on the heavy side, red hair and glasses. Marv. Short, balding and the epitome of a Jeopardy contestant. And then . . . Frank. "Now let's meet our contestant. Wilma, tell us a little about yourself."

Wilma was bubbly and perky. So much happiness. "Well, Alex. My name is Wilma Davidoline . . ."

"Lovely name." Alex commented.

"Thank you." Wilma blushed.

"Christ." Frank mumbled.

Wilma quickly gave a premenstrual style glare to Frank. Then, turning Sybil, she resumed her perky, high tone voice. "I'm from right here in Los Angeles. I'm a librarian, and I teach history to mentally challenged individuals. Oh . . ." She giggled. "I love to cook."

Alex shifted his eyes to Frank when he heard the sarcastic fluttering of lips. Frank pointed to Marv. "O.K., Marv, tell us about yourself."

Marv gripped the podium like a man so sure of himself. "Marv Smith, Alex. I'm from Minnesota, I'm a botany professor at the University of Minnesota. I love to bowl and I'd like to say hello to all my special students in the evergreen tree study." Marv waved. Frank leaned into Marv's camera shot and waved also.

"Frank." Alex ran his finger down his mustache. "Tell us about you."

As if Frank's mouth wasn't loud enough, he leaned as close as he could down to the microphone. "I'm a Master Sergeant in the United States Army forty-second battalion Infantry Division, Alex."

Alex waited. There was silence. "Frank, any hobbies?"

Frank again, leaned into the microphone. "I have none Alex."

"None?"

"I like to drink."

"No recreational activities? You are a big guy. How big are you?"

With an ornery snicker, Frank leaned again into the microphone. "That's uh, pretty personal question. Don't you think, Alex?"

"I didn't mean . . ."

"And can someone fix this microphone." Frank looked off stage as if expecting a stage hand to just jump right up. "My back is gonna kill me if I keep having to bend over."

“Frank.” Alex called him. “You don’t have to lean into it. It will pick you up just fine.”

“Oh.” Frank stood up. “I’m a little nervous Alex.”

“Understandable.”

“Just a little.”

“All right.” Alex widened his eyes. “You three know the rules. You must phrase your answer in the form of a question. And if you think you know the answer. Buzz in. Let’s take a look at our categories, shall we?”

With a few beeps, the board lit up.

Alex read them. “This Land is your land. All in a name. Shakespeare. Useless information . . .”

“Yes.” Frank whispered in excitement.

“Um . . .” Alex stumbled then continued. “The Bible and Potpourri. Wilma you won the honors to go first.”

A giggle preluded Wilma’s choice. “Let’s go with, This Land is your Land for two hundred”

Alex read the question. “The City of Istanbul straddles these two separate continents.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Wilma.” Alex called upon her.

“What is Europe and Asia. I’ll take . . .”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” Frank held his hand up. “What the piss does that have to do with Patriotic songs.”

Alex shuddered. “Excuse me.”

“This Land is your Land, this land is my land.” Frank stated. “I thought the category was about patriotic songs. You can’t get any further from patriotism Alex then Istanbul.”

“Uh . . .” Alex took a moment. “Frank, not all categories mean what you think.”

“O.K. Got it.” Frank nodded.

“And we try not to interrupt the other players, Frank.” Alex continued.

“My apologies.”

“And vulgarities can not . . .”

“Alex.” Frank snapped his name. “Enough picking on me already. Fuck.”

“Frank.”

“Sorry.” Frank held up his hand.

“Wilma, continue.”

After a huff, Wilma looked at the board. “I’ll take The Bible for a hundred.”

“During exile he wrote the book of revelation.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Marv.”

“Hold up!” Frank held up his hand while staring down to the other that held his buzzer.

“Frank.” Alex called him. “Marv is trying . . .”

“Something’s wrong with my fuckin buzzer Alex. I’m pressing and pressing.” Frank depressed it. “Nothing. Retake.”

“Nothing is wrong with your buzzer, Frank. Marv just beat you to the punch.”

“Oh I don’t think so.” Frank swayed his head and glared down to Marv. “Did you beat me to the punch.”

Nervously, Marv looked up to him. “I be . . . I believe your buzzer was stuck.”

“See.” Frank motioned his hand.

“Judges?” Alex peered to the panel at the same time Frank tossed daggers at them. “Our judges said you can have it Frank.”

“Thank you. The book of Genesis.”

“Can you phrase that in the form of a question please?”

“The book of genesis?” Frank upped the end of his word.

Buzz.

“Fuck.”

“Language.”

“Sorry.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Wilma?”

“Who is John. Bible for two hundred.” She snidely looked at Frank.

“The poem, Love is Patient, Love is kind is taken from this book of the bible.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep

“Frank.”

“What is the book of Genesis?”

“Sorry that’s incorrect.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep

“Wilma.”

“What is Corinthians. Useless information for a hundred Alex.”

“Oh yes!” Frank held that buzzer ready.

Alex read the question. “It’s the age of mother Judy in the cartoon the Jetsons.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Frank.”

“What is thirty-three. Useless information for two hundred.”

“This adorable cartoon character was banned in Finland because he doesn’t wear pants.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Frank again.”

“Yes. Who is Donald Duck.”

“Correct.”

With a clenched fist Frank grinned and bobbed his head in arrogance to Marv. “I’ll toughen it up here, Alex.” Frank sniffed. “Let’s go with the pot-pour-eye, for a hundred.”

“It’s the number of time zones you go through if you travel straight through the Soviet Union.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Marv.”

“What is seven? The Bible for three hundred.”  
“He was the first in the bible to have a prophetic dream of the world’s end.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Frank?”

“What is the book of Genesis?” Frank stated.

“I’m sorry that’s wrong.”

“Fuck.”

“Language.”

“Sorry.”

“Frank?” Alex had question in his voice. “You do realize that is the third time you gave that answer.”

“Yes I do Alex. I’m certain it’s right somewhere. I have a feeling.”

“All right. Anyone to take this?” Alex looked to Marv and Wilma. “No one. Who is Jeremiah,. Marv, your pick.”

“All in a name, Alex for a hundred..”

“It’s the WD in WD40?”

“Oh!” Frank shouted. Then pressed his buzzer. “I know this.”

“Frank?”

“What is water displacement.”

“Correct.”

“Watch me rule Alex. Staying clear of that Shakespear category I’ll take useless information for three hundred.”

“36-29-33. What are these numbers.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

Alex tilted his head. “Frank again.”

“What is a Barbie Dolls real life measurements. Useless information for Four hundred.”

“These two tyrant rulers are said to each have only one testicle.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

Frank with a snicker answered “Who are Hitler and Napoleon?”

“Frank. Correct.” Alex smiled. “You’re good at this category.”

“I’m a virtual vat of useless information, Alex.” Frank sniffed in arrogance. “Let’s finish this one off.”

“American car horns beep in this musical key.”

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

“Frank once more.”

“What is the key of ‘F’.”

“Correct.”

“Yes!” Frank jumped. “HA!” He pointed to Marv. “And you’re a botanist.”

Marv rolled his eyes. “It’s useless information.”

Frank leaned over his podium. “It’s fuckin points pal. Oh look, you have none. Ha.”

“Frank.” Alex interrupted him. “Can we not swear nor taunt the other players.”

“Sorry Alex.”

“Take your turn.”

“It’s all in a name for two.”  
“It’s the study of caves.”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Marv?”  
“What is speleology. The bible for Four hundred Alex.”  
Alex waited for the question to turn. “It’s the number of chapter in the book of Psalms.”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Frank?”  
Frank smiled. “What is the book of Genesis.”  
“I’m sorry.”  
“Shit.”  
“Language.”  
“I tamed it.”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
Frank turned his head to Wilma. “We’re talking here.”  
She crinkled her nose at him and pressed her buzzer again.  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Wilma.” Alex called upon her.  
“What is one hundred and fifty. Bible for five hundred.”  
“Shem, Ham, and Jepheth are the names of these three sons in this book.”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Wilma.”  
Arrogantly she grinned. “What is the book of Genesis?”  
“Correct.”  
“Uh!” Frank smacked himself on the forehead. “Judges. Fuck. She took my answer. She stole my answer Alex.”  
“I know. But once again we are going to have to ask you to refrain from the vulgarity Frank.”  
“Sorry. But she stole my answer. I’m ready now.” Frank held his buzzer, allowing his middle finger to point to Wilma, he nudged Marv. “You better get a move on. You suck.”  
Wilma, not amused with Frank, picked her category. “All in a name for five hundred.”  
“Calcium sulphate hemihydrate is more commonly known as.”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Frank.” Alex called him.  
“What is plaster of Paris.”  
“That is correct.”  
“Yes!” Frank jumped again and glared at Wilma. “Didn’t know that one, did you babe. Too slow. Too slow.”  
“Frank.” A reprimanded call came from Alex.  
“I know. I know. Taunting the players. But I didn’t swear Alex.”  
“Good for you. Pick a category.”  
“Let’s see I’ll take . . . hmm . . . How about . . . let’s go with . . .”  
Wilma gasped out. “Can you just pick one!”  
“Alex, she’s taunting me!” Frank pointed at her. “Tell her.”

“Wilma please. Frank, a category.”  
“Pot-pour-eye for four, Alex.”  
“The name of the Ernest Vincent Wright novel that contained not one letter ‘E’”  
Bleep-bleep-bleep.  
“Marv.”  
“What is Gadsby?”  
“Correct.”  
“Good job.” Frank gave little Marv a swift pat to the back sending him forward. “Sorry. But you got one.”  
Nervously and shaken, Marv fixed his hair and stood up straight.  
“Shakespear for one hundred Alex.”  
Frank breathed out heavily. “Fuckin Shakespeare..”  
“Language.”  
“Sorry.” Frank turned to the board.

The final Jeopardy music played through out the darkened studio. Wilma diligently wrote her answer. Marv concentrated and Frank, almost as if he were dancing, bobbed his head and body to the upbeat ding-a-ling music.

“Time.” Alex called. “All right. For the first time ever in Jeopardy, we’ve gone into final Jeopardy with not only a three way tie, but a very low scoring three way tie.”

Marv pointed to Frank. “He kept pushing us to guess incorrectly Alex.”

“Marv.” Alex said. “What did I say about taunting.” he watched Marv hunch. “All right the final jeopardy category is geography. The answer. ‘It is known as the driest place on earth. Where rain has not been said to fall for at least two million years. Wilma, you have three hundred. What did you say?’”

“I said Mahabi desert.”

“I’m sorry that’s wrong.” Alex told her. “What did you bet.”

“I bet it all.” Wilma tossed up her hand and gave another scolding look to Frank.

“Marv.” Alex pointed.

“I said the same thing. And I bet half.”

Alex turned to Frank. “Frank. Your answer.”

“I said . . .” Frank revealed his answer. “Las Vegas, Alex.”

“Oh, close but no.” Alex shook his head. “Frank, if you bet less than half you’re the new Jeopardy champion.” He saw the grin on Frank’s face. “I’m taking it you bet less than half.”

“You better believe it Alex. I bet one dollar.”

The fanfare music began to play. “Frank, with two-hundred-ninety-nine dollars, you’re our new Champ.”

“Oh yes!” Frank raised his hand in a high five to Marv. “Yes. And Christmas is just around the corner. Out comes that lay-a-way Alex.”

“I’m uh . . . sure.” Alex looked into the camera ignoring Frank who gloatingly began to dance and jump around the stage to the Jeopardy theme music. . . .

. . . so quiet in the waiting room of the clinic a pin could be heard dropping. Joe reached up and shut off the television.. “Even though the ending was a surprise. Entertaining. What did I tell you.”

Dean was so shocked. His head swayed as he held it in disbelief. “Frank won Jeopardy?”

“Dean.” Frank snapped his name. “What? You didn’t think I would.”

“Frank. No. At one point in the last round you were minus three thousand dollars.”

Henry interjected. “But Dean, he knew Military history. He came back.”

“Yeah.” Dean said with sarcasm. “Only after he threatened Marv not to buzz before him.”

Ellen clapped her hands together once. “I just love that tape. Hey! Let’s watch Frank on Price is Right now.” She jumped up and raced to the television. “I dug it up too.” She held up the tape. And really, Ellen received no arguments from anyone. They had nothing better to do and Frank on television was amusing.

Ellen popped in the tape and backed up with a smile returning to her seat between Frank and Dean, And everyone realized the moment the tape started, that they surely were in for another ‘Frank-style game show’ treat. When Frank, standing at with the other three contestants, ready to make his first bid, turned around to the screaming and chanting studio audience and yelled his loudest at them. “Shut the fuck up, I’m trying to think here!” And for the first time in Price is Right history, a hush took over the entire audience.

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

Beginnings, Montana

October 2

“Traitor.” Frank commented to Hal in the meeting slash hideaway at the living trailer.

“Now why do you have to be like that?” Hal asked. “I’m trying to tell my story.”

“Traitor.”

“Frank.” Hal twitched his head. “I’ve listened to your made up stories about what happened in Beginnings.”

“What?” With an offended gasp, Frank laid his hand on his own chest. “Do you suggest I tell tales?”

“Yeah Frank.” Hal snapped. “And everyone knows the truth. *I* know the truth. I’ve been reviewing history.”

“History is wrong.” Frank told him.

“History is wrong.” Hal repeated. “Sure Frank.”

“I’m telling you. Henry?” Frank looked to Henry.

“To me it’s wrong.”

“Me too.” Dean added.

“It’s right to me.” Robbie commented.

“I say let’s take a vote.” Frank suggested. “All those who say history is wrong, raise you hand.” Frank along with Dean and Henry raised their hands. “There. Wrong. I’m right.”

“And I’m talking now.” Hal said “I’m sure we’d like to hear other stories other than Beginnings stories.”

“Hal.” Frank said. “We’re catching up. Why would we want to hear fuckin Hal stories?”

“Don’t I count?” Hal asked.

“No.” Frank shook his head. “You’ve been dead to us for nearly seven years. Fuck Hal, you blew us off.”

“I did no such thing.” Hal really defended himself.

“Hal, where were you.”

“I’m trying to tell you that.”

“Traitor.” Frank crossed his arms.

“My God Frank.” Hal was aghast. “You’re worse now than I remember you.”

“I was never bad Hal, you were.” Frank pointed at him.

“Please.” Hal scoffed in sarcasm. “Robbie, who was the one always in trouble.”

Robbie, innocently looked to Frank. “Hating to admit it, when we were younger, Frank.”

“Exactly.” Hal nodded.

“Hal, you asshole.” Frank snapped. “That’s because you always blamed everything on me.”

“And you never did anything wrong?” Hal questioned.

"Never. You did."

"All right." Calmly Hal said. "Since you're being Mr. Diplomatic here. May I take a vote?"

"No."

"Tough." Hal looked to Robbie, Dean and Henry. "All those who believe Frank was an innocent, never did anything wrong and I blamed him for everything, raise you hands." No one did. "See Frank."

"Copy Cat." Frank sneered.

"May I now tell my story?" Hal asked. "All right, two years post plague for . . ."

"Was this before or after you became a traitor?" Frank questioned.

"I was never a traitor." Hal stated.

"Did you . . ." Frank held up an investigative finger. "Join the society?"

"Yes but . . ."

"Of your own free will?"

"Yes but . . ."

"The Caceres Society?"

"Frank, you know I did but . . ."

"Traitor." Frank smirked. "All those who think Hal is a traitor, raise your hands." Like an excited school boy Frank lifted his arm high.

Dean had enough. "Frank, can you be anymore immature?"

"Yeah." Frank nodded and smirk.

Dean shook his head. "Finish Hal."

"Thank you. As where was I?"

Frank gave a thinking look. "I believe you were at the part when you became a traitor."

"Frank!" Hal blasted in a loud voice. "If you are going to be so insulting, rude, interrupting and pig headed." Hal grunted when Frank gave a sarcastic 'whoa'. "Can you at least be original and stop calling me the traitor."

"But you are."

"Use a different word."

Dean saw it and he smirked. It was always something he enjoyed seeing, the clueless look on Frank's face. "I think you may have shut him up. Take advantage of it."

"I will." Peacefully, Hal leaned back on the floor, trying to get into his story mode. "It had been about six month since we . . ."

"There is none." Frank spoke up.

"What?" Hal asked.

"There isn't another word for traitor."

Robbie snickered. "Sure there is Frank. What about Benedict Arnold."

"I thought of that." Frank pointed. "But that's two words. There is none."

Henry disagreed. "Frank, there is. There are many."

"No." Frank shook his head. "We need one of those Hemorrhoid books."

Everyone at the same time, swayed their head to Frank with an open mouth, gasping 'what?'

"Hemorrhoid books" Frank chuckled. "The-sore-ass. Get it. Hemorrhoid. The-sore-ass." He heard them moan. "Fuck you people. It was funny."

“Ha, ha, ha.” Hal bobbed his head. “May I continue? Thanks. Six months after we separated and began our family searches, we returned to the meeting place and . . .”

“Betrayer.” Dean spoke up. “That’s another word for traitor.”

“Is it?” Frank asked.

“Sure.” Dean tossed his hands up. “Why not.”

“What about . . .” Robbie paused to think. “Defector?”

Frank shrugged. “That’ll work.”

“Renegade?” Henry asked. “That’s another.”

“Oh!” Frank snapped his finger. “This is fun. We should keep score.” He jumped from the couch.

“In the kitchen drawer Frank.” Dean told him. “There’s some scrap paper.”

Frank raced in there and returned. “Hal, are you playing?”

“I’m telling the story.” Hal sounded whiney and annoyed.

“That’s right.” Frank leaned over into the coffee table while he wrote. “You’re like the host. O.K., let’s say everyone has one. Go on Hal.”

“Ludicrous.” Hal shook his head.

“Hal.” Frank said. “I don’t think that means traitor. Dean, does it? You be the judge, you have the highest level of education.”

“Aw Frank.” Henry whined. “That’s not fair. I have more common sense than him.”

“Henry, what the fuck does that have to do with being smart enough to be the human hemorrhoid book judge?”

“Nothing I suppose.”

“Right, so sit your skinny ass back and shut the fuck up. We’re playing a game here.” Frank bitched. “And if you’re gonna whine like a broad. You’re out. Dean?”

“Huh?” Dean looked up.

“Fuck.” Frank tossed his hand out. “Is Ludicrous another word for traitor.”

“No.” Dean shook his head.

“Sorry Hal. No points.” Frank dropped the pencil.

“Frank.” Hal grew more and more irritated. “I’m not playing the game.”

“Then why are you guessing?” Frank asked.

“I wasn’t guessing. I was insulting you and your idea.”

“You’re just pissed because you can’t come up with another word that means traitor.”

“I don’t want to.” Hal stated.

“Then if you don’t want to Hal.” Frank tilted his head. “Quit fuckin playing.”

“I give up.” Hal threw his hands up.

A prelude snicker came from Robbie before he spoke. “Frank, I believe not only is our brother a traitor, but now a quitter as well.”

“Or how about this?” Dean held up his hand. “Withdrawer.”

“Works.” Frank nodded a little in agreement.

Hal’s mouth dropped open and his head swayed to Dean. “And you call yourself an educated man. That isn’t even a word.”

“True.” Dean conceded easily. “But, hey we’re working on traitor anyhow.”

Which I have one. A Judas.”

“Aw.” Henry whined again. “I was going to say that.”

“Henry!” Frank yelled. “What I tell you about whining. God, I fuckin bet you were awful to play games with when you were younger.”

“Hello!” Hal shouted out. “May I tell my story please?”

With a huff, Frank looked at him. “I wish the hell you would. We’re tired of waiting on it.”

Hal paused. He remembered who he was dealing with. “Fine. I . . .”

“Oh!” Henry shouted. “Mark it down Frank. Dissenter.”

Dean’s eyebrows raised and he gave an impressed look to Henry. “Good one. But top this . . . Iconoclast.”

Robbie scratched his head. “I don’t even think I would know what that word meant if it wasn’t used in sentence. And here I thought I had a good one.”

“What was it?” Henry asked. “You do need points.”

“I feel kind of stupid now saying it after iconoclast. But I was going to say double-crosser.”

Amongst the ‘good answer. Good answer’ comments as if Dean and Henry were on Family Feud, Frank saw the heated glare on Hal’s face. “Guys. Guys.” He held up his hands. “Can you be anymore rude? My brother has been trying to tell his side of the survival story. Hal, go on.”

“May I tell it without you four yelling out synonyms for traitor?” He saw their humble nods. “Thank you. Now in the second year post plague for me. It was about six months after we all completed our family searches. Well those of us who . . .”

“Hal.” Sharply Frank said his name. “And you wonder why we keep interrupting you. You keep saying the same sentence over and over again. Either move on with the story or let someone else talk.”

Hal stood up in a fast movement. “I’m sick of this. Forget it. You Frank. Piss me off.”

Frank’s face tensed up as he tried not to laugh.

“Go on. Make that goofy Frank face.” Hal stormed to the trailer door. “But I’ll tell you what. I can see it. You and I big brother, real soon are gonna end up going round and round and I don’t just mean verbally.”

“Do you uh mean . . . physically?” Frank snickered.

“You think I’m joking. That’s right. You think you’re the almighty Frank. Unstoppable.”

“I am.” Frank said with certainty.

“Well you laugh Frank.” Hal’s hand flung about. “You go on and laugh, but you won’t be thinking it’s all that funny when I kick your ass.” Hal flung open the door. “And this is no game.”

Frank jumped at the slam of the door. “Should I be frightened?”

Robbie bobbed his head back and forth. “He could give you a run for your money Frank.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Please. He’s a pansy with a ponytail.”

Henry nudged Frank. “I think you can take him. Dean?”

Dean’s hands lifted. “As much as I hate you Frank. I don’t think there’s anyone you can’t take.”

“Yeah.” Frank stood up and went to the door. “And what the fuck is he doing leaving the brother meeting like that?”

“He was pissed.” Robbie said. “He said it wasn’t a game.”

Frank opened the door to see Hal marching across the field. “I think we should make it a game.” Frank got a twinkle in his eye. “Brother football.”

Robbie stood up. “Slagel Tag football?”

“You bet.” Frank nodded. “And we should start right now.” Frank used his ‘bad actor’ style voice. “Hey Robbie Look. Hal got the ball.”

Robbie spoke like Frank. “I think we should go tag him Frank.”

“Let’s.” Frank grinned and took off out the door. Right behind him Robbie flew.

Slowly, at their own pace, and afraid of getting drug unwittingly into their sick game, Dean and Henry moved to the door.. They heard the charge-out call of Frank and Robbie, followed by the shriek of Hal, and by the time they made it to the door’s opening, Hal couldn’t be seen under the two behemoth brothers.

Dean released a slight snicker. “Look at them. They have something wrong with them.”

“True.” Henry said. “But they also have something I am completely envious of.”

“What’s that?” Dean asked. “Size.”

“Hardly.” Henry looked out at the wrestling trio. Hal was the only one not laughing. “They have each other.”

## IN RETROSPECT . . . THE SECOND YEAR

### Preparing for Company

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

March 10 - Beginnings, Montana

Jonas Lyons was the quietest resident of Beginnings. Seldom heard from. Never complained. Worked his field job. He was a thin man, not quite six foot. African American by race, but most people all his life assumed his was Puerto Rican. A tiny mustache decorated the area above his thin top lip. So soft spoken and his voice was higher in tone. Good looking, and voted best dressed man in the nomad world.

He walked a little different than most men in Beginnings. Everyone noticed it, but no one was ever able to put their finger on what it was. Until eleven year old Denny pointed out that Jonas rubbed his thighs together when he walked. And as soon as Frank realized that the word 'swish' could be used to describe his friend's walk, Frank knew there had to be something done about that. No because he hated the fact that Jonas walked like that, Frank never minded. It was that he worried about Jonas with the time getting closer and closer to bringing in people. And knowing how 'tough' the people were that seemed to show up at the front gate right after garbage burning, Frank wanted no trouble to start with Jonas.

'Feared' is what Frank told Jonas he would be when he got through with him. Jonas highly doubted that. Seeing that the toughest chore he did in farming was getting the plow for Frank to pull. He never denied bribing Frank to do his work, telling Frank if he did one laborer's job, he would clean Frank's house and do his laundry. Fair was fair and Frank liked that. Jonas did something to make his tee shirts so white. And never was there a wrinkle.

And there wasn't a wrinkle to be found on the uniform Jonas wore as he waited on Frank in a little bare area off the utility building. Told to be out of those Khaki pants, Jonas put on the green pants Frank gave him along with a tee shirt and combat boots. If nothing else, Jonas looked tough. Clean, pressed and tough.

"Hey!" Frank yelled out as he made his way to the area. "Look at you."

Jonas blushed, tilted his head and tucked his shirt in when he stood up so as to keep that smooth, tight shirt appearance. "I'm ready Frank."

Frank cased him to inspect. "Where are your blouses?"

"Frank, you said nothing about wearing a blouse. You said to look tough."

"Huh?" Frank was confused, then it hit hm. "No not a shirt. You blouse you boots. Like this." Frank lifted his leg showing Jonas how his pants bunched up just beyond the top of his combat boot. "See"

"Yes."

"I gave you blouses. Little green bands with a latch on them."

"Oh yes." Jonas lifted his arm. "These?"

Frank blinked when he saw that Jonas had them on as bracelets. "Jonas, they weren't jewelry. They make you pants look like this."

"I'd rather not."

"Why?"

"Because my pants will wrinkle if I bunch them up like that."

"Tough. Blouse your boots."

"What is the point." Jonas bent down to one knee.

"So your pant legs don't get caught up."

"On what?" Jonas asked looking really dumbfounded on how to place on the bands.

"Here." Frank bent down to help. "I'm going to train you Jonas. You aren't gonna be in the fields all the time. I'm putting you on my security team for when we get survivors." Frank saw the horrified look on Jonas' face. "What's wrong."

"Frank." Jonas swallowed. "I'll get beat up."

"Not when I'm done with you."

"Frank I got in one fight during my entire life. And that was a slap match."

Frank snickered and stood up. "Well, that's why I'm here. To teach you."

"Can you?" Jonas stood as well.

"Fuck yeah. What the fuck do you think I did for a living. I trained people."

"Are you . . . are you gonna yell at me?" Jonas asked.

"Probably."

"Please don't."

"Jonas . . ."

"You'll hurt my feelings Frank. You will." Jonas rubbed his hands down his own arms. "And shouldn't we be wearing a jacket. It's a tad chilly?"

"No. I'll warm you up." Frank nodded.

Jonas smiled. "Oh Frank."

Frank grumbled. "All right. First, we want to establish how tough you want to be. So uh . . ." Frank bobbed his head in thought. "Tell me an actor who you find extremely tough. Someone that you wouldn't want to mess with."

"Hmm." Jonas crossed his arms and rubbed his chin. "An actor."

"Yes."

"I'm thinking."

"Don't take too long. This shouldn't be all that hard."

"Will I try to be like him?"

"You can."

"O.K." Jonas thought some more. "Does he have to have alive?"

"Jonas. Everyone is fuckin dead. Chances are, any actor you pick is dead. So pick one."

"Um."

"Jonas."

"All right. All right." Jonas smiled. "I have one."

"Good. Who?"

"Cary Grant."

"Cary Grant?"

"Yes."

"The actor Cary Grant?"

"Yes." Jonas said. "You said a tough actor. I picked one."

"Just so we're on the same wave length here. The actor from the fifties."

"Yes."

“Jonas!”

“What?” Jonas stepped back. “And please don’t yell.”

“Cary Grant isn’t fuckin tough.”

“Yes he is.”

“No. No he isn’t.”

“Oh I beg to differ Frank. Did you see him in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? He got this glare in his . . .”

“Jonas. Just because the man knocked off a fuckin bird, doesn’t make him tough. He wears glasses and recites fuckin poetry. Not to mention he played in movies with Doris Day. Doris Day Jonas. She’s the fuckin damsel in distress, nobody wants to save. Besides, that Mockingbird movie was the Peck guy.”

“Gregory Peck.” Jonas drew up a glowing look.

“No. Not peck. Don’t think about it.”

“Why are you going off like this?”

“You picked Cary Grant.” Frank argued.

“There is nothing wrong with Cary Grant.”

“Jonas, fuckin Dean is tougher than Cary Grant. Pick some one else.”

“But . . .”

“Pick someone else!” Frank blasted.

“You’re making me feel bad.”

“Who cares. Pick someone else.”

“All right.” Jonas thought about it some more. He snapped his finger. “Oh. I know. Brad Pitt.”

“Brad Pitt? Pretty boy Brad Pitt. Oh, now I know you’re fuckin gay. Brad Pitt.”

“He’s tough.”

“To get to take a bath. Brad Pitt. You stink. I’ll pick your tough guy.”

“Oh I don’t know Frank. And I wish you’d lose this attitude.” Jonas told him. “I’ll get all emotional and won’t want to train to be tough.”

Frank grunted at him. “O.K., how about John Wayne.” He watched Jonas shake his head. “Clint Eastwood?”

Jonas cringed and shook his head again.

“Sylvester Stallone.”

Jonas smiled widely.

“You like him?”

“Yes.”

“You think he’s tough?”

“Hot.”

“Fuck. All right. It’s a start. Let’s model you after Sylvester Stallone.”

“O.K. I think I’d like that.” Jonas got excited and stood straight up. “I’m ready.”

“Good.” Frank nodded. “Frame of mind is so important. We can build you into a man who doesn’t sway when he walks. Talks tough. Acts tough.”

“Do I have to spit and grab my testicles?”

“Balls or Boys.” Frank corrected. “Never testicles. And yes, you do.”

Jonas winced. “That is so foul.”

“That’s being a man.”

“All right.” There was some reluctance in Jonas’ voice. “Let’s start.”

“For starters you need . . .”

“I never adjust in front of women.”

“Good. Now . . .”

“Will I have to start now?” Jonas asked.

“What? Adjusting in front of women.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t fuckin care. Let’s just begin with . . .”

“I won’t do that then. It’s rude.”

“What?” Frank was lost.

“Adjusting in front of women.”

“Jonas!” Frank blasted him vocally.

“Frank.” Jonas grabbed his chest. “Stop that.”

“No.”

“Then I’m going home.” Jonas tossed his head back and just as he stepped forward, Frank, reached to the back waist of his pants and yanked him back. “Hey.” Jonas turned around and slapped Frank’s hand. “Stop that. You’re getting me messy.”

“Jonas, walk away from this tough guy training and I’ll hunt you down. Then no matter where I find you, I will take you outside and throw you down and I will keep knocking you down until you get tough enough to get back up.”

“That will never happen Frank. I’ll cry.”

“Then you’ll cry.” Frank’s face grew red as he stepped to Jonas. “But goddamn it, you’ll get tough.”

“Will I bleed?”

“Probably.”

Jonas crinkled his face. “Why are we doing this?”

“Because I like you.”

“Thank you.” Jonas smiled.

“No.” Frank winced. “Not like that.”

“Oh.”

“There are going to be some tough characters entering our world. We already have Dean. We don’t need to give them someone else to pick on. I don’t want them thinking they can get over on you. I need them to fear every man in this community one way or another.”

“What if I just threaten them with you.”

“That’ll work in the long run, but what happens if you find yourself center of trouble. Huh? Jonas, I just want you to be able to take care of yourself. You’re the only one here who doesn’t have a means of defense. Even fuckin Dean can kill someone with a virus.” Frank explained. “Now. I’d like to see what you got.”

“Excuse me.”

“I want to see how strong you are first. I know we have to work on that walk and voice, but let’s see how strong you really are.”

“Not very.” Jonas said.

“How much do you weigh?”

Jonas took a long breath through his nostrils. “I never give my weight but .

..” Jonas dropped his voice to a whisper. “One sixty-five.”

“Then you should be able to blast someone with a hundred and sixty-five pounds of pressure. Hit me.”

“What?” Jonas’ eye widened.

“Hit me.” Frank saw his hesitation. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t hit you, you’re my friend.”

“Jonas, I’m a big guy. Hit me.”

Jonas reached out and tapped Frank’s arm.

Frank’s head flung back and he counted to himself to calm down. When he did, he looked at Jonas. “Give me everything you got and nail me in the face.”

Jonas gasped. “No!”

“Jonas! I can handle it. Trust me. I need to see how you fight. Give me everything you have.”

“All right.” Jonas took another breath. “I apologize ahead of time.”

“That’s fine.” Frank stood ready. “Think of something in your life that really pissed you off and put it in that hit.”

“O.K.” Jonas closed his eyes. First a smile hit him, then a mean glare. With daggering eyes he looked at Frank, revved back and hauled off with everything he had. “Bastard.” His open hand connected with Frank’s cheek and Jonas cringed in pain when he felt the stinging on his palm. He blew on his own hand to stop the hurting.

Frank blinked once. “Did you just . . . slap me?”

“Yes.”

“You slapped me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re supposed to fuckin punch me.”

“You said give you everything I got. I did.”

Frank huffed out. “You will learn how to punch and you’ll never slap another human being again. You hear me?” Frank started to retrieve that old seargeant style tone.

“I hear you.” Jonas stared at his palm. “Can we take a break. I think I hurt my . . .”

“No!” Frank yelled. “All right. Tough guy again. We’re gonna have to rely on your acting skills.”

“Oh!” Jonas perked up. “I am a great actor. Did I tell you I won seven awards in college for acting.”

“You did?” Frank was impressed.

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

“Why.”

“Because you’ll act the tough guy part.”

“I think . . . I think I can do that.” Jonas lit up on that idea.

“Good. Now, since we’re dealing with Sylvester Stallone. Have you seen any of his movies?”

“Many.”

“Good.” Frank nodded. “Pick one. Pick a Sly movie that best depicts him. One that you can work with and remember well.”

“So I can be like him in that?”

“Exactly.” Frank stated, knowing which movie he himself would pick.

“Got one.”

“Bet I know. Rocky?”

“No.”

“Rambo, First blood?”

“No.” Jonas smiled. “And I loved this film. Rhinestone Cowboy.”

Frank said nothing. He stared for a second open mouthed, held up a finger, decided it best not to comment, and then Frank turned and walked away.

^^^

Dean swore he wanted to be like his father when it came to medicine. Never turn a single soul away, listen to their problems, help them out. He wanted to be free to discuss any medical dilemma someone felt they had. Help them out. Be the medical guy. When Jenny came into his lab and said, ‘Dean, I have a health problem I like to talk to you about’. Dean invited her to sit and discuss, certain he would have to break out the pregnancy test. But the second the words ‘flaccid’ and ‘penis’ came from Jenny’s mouth in the same sentence, Dean just wanted to yell. “Dad!”

“So is he Dean?” Jenny asked.

“Um . . . uh . . .” A big ‘yes’ hit Dean’s mind when he saw William walk by. “Dad!”

William popped his head in and then quickly retracted it. His fast moving footsteps could be heard.

“Dean?” Jenny had question to her. “Is he ill?”

“Um, Jenny, why are you coming to me with this?”

“Your father said to. He said you have had similar problems.”

Through the corner of his eyes he saw William again. “Dad!”

By the door William moved fast.

“Um.” Dean scratched his head. “He isn’t sick Jenny. And it isn’t anything your doing. Sometimes . . . Jenny, he’s seventy-seven years old. Blood flow plays . . . the flow of blood has a lot to do with it. The blood doesn’t flow as well at that age.”

Jenny tsked. “So. What ended up being the reason for you.”

“Excuse me.”

“Why did you have the same problem. I want to make love and he can’t seem to get . . .”

“Andrea!” Dean called her as he stumbled from his stool trying to stand up. And in his haste of doing so, Dean lost his balance, got caught in the legs of the stool and fell backwards catching himself before he crashed completely, like the stool, to the floor.

“Sweet Jesus Dean.” Andrea walked in. “Are you all right.”

“Help.”

“Are you hurt.” Andrea approached him.

“No.” Dean shook his head and pointed to Jenny. “She has a problem. Can you help her please?”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you.” Dean gasped out backing up. “I need to find Robbie. Bye.” Hurriedly, without being stopped, Dean wanted to make it out of that lab. And his exit would have been faster had he not made that sudden turn and sprint, banging directly into the center counter as he did so. After grunting, grabbing his stomach and stammering a few steps, Dean regained his composure and flew out to mental safety.

^^^

“Ben waitin for an nower now. Cain’t be waitin much longer.” Dirk complained. “ If a half ta, I’m gonna half ta pull in that there young in son of yours. Got dat dirt dat has ta be ov-turned.”

“I know. I know.” Joe held up his hand then quickly shifted his eyes to George who snickered.

“Dad.” Robbie stood there with them behind the storage. “I can’t pull that plow.”

Joe shook his head. “I don’t know what’s keeping Frank. I know he’s giving tough guy training to Jonas.”

Dirk snickered. “Now don’t be gettin me wrong Joe. I like Jo-naz. But he cain’t be tough. A smatter fact the only ways he cain be more fem-Nin if he’s a girl.”

“Now. Now. My son can do this. I think. If anyone can he . . . he . . . he . . .”

“Was smatter Joe?” Dirk asked. “Cat got that there tongue of yars or ya just run out of gas for that flapper.”

“Dad?” Robbie saw what Joe saw.

George, not wanting to be left out, turned his head to see Jonas walking their way. “Is he ?”

Joe nodded. “Walking different. Yeah.” Joe tilted his head.

Jonas didn’t swish or sway. He moved with a lean. A strut with an edge, rough edge and he had a glare to his face. He lifted his hand in a wave and spoke. Only Jonas didn’t sound so mild. He sounded deep.

“Sup.” Jonas spit, grabbed his balls and kept moving.

A hush took over the four men as they continued to watch Jonas move down the street, And all of them knew right then and there, they would have to applaud Frank’s mastery skills the next time they saw him.

^^^

The buzz of building was the sound that filled the large building that would become the containment center. Half the walls were complete with dry wall the others were two by fours waiting to be covered.

Ellen sniffed as she walked into the larger room. "You have to love the smell of saw dust."

Frank looked oddly at her. "No, you don't, that's sick."

"Call it my construction worker fantasy." Ellen chuckled.

Henry stopped cutting with the saw when he noticed Frank. He lifted the goggles over his head, pulling back his hair like it was in a band. "Frank." He walked over to them. "Where's your brother?"

"I don't know." Frank shrugged.

"He was supposed to be here two hours ago."

"He's late."

Henry took a second to calm down. "Yes I see that. Is there anything you can do about it. Can you talk to him. He's always late."

Ellen spoke up. "Henry, in Robbie's defense. He had to do field work this morning. He had to speak to Joe about something and meet with Dean about symptoms to illnesses."

"I know this." Henry said. "I allotted the time. But El, he just wanders around eating up time."

"Henry." Frank stepped into him. "It's time. It's not like we're short on it."

"Yeah, Frank we are." Henry said. "We want to have this place ready to go in less than four weeks. Time is something we can't waste if we want to meet that deadline." Henry spoke with irritation. "So could you just talk to him about not blowing off his responsibilities?"

"Sure." Frank took hold of Ellen's arm and turned her. "Come on El, show me where your office will be."

Ellen felt Frank's lead and she looked back to Henry who tossed his hands up in a frustrational defeat. "Frank, don't you have to be at the fields?"

"Yeah. But I want to spend time with you. Is this it?" Frank pointed to the only closed door.

"Yeah but . . ."

"Let's check it out." Frank opened the door. "Hey, the door works." He held his hand in a leading way.

Ellen walked in the small unfinished room. "This is it. Not much to see. Now let's . . ." She watched Frank shut the door. "Go."

"In a minute." He stepped closer to her.

"What are you doing?" Ellen asked,

"We've been busy El." Frank softened his voice, reached out and laid his hands on her hips. "I've missed our talks." He pulled her closer.

"Frank, now is not a good time. And right here is definitely a mistake."

"I'm not suggesting we roll on the floor here, El." Frank lowered his head to her. "I just want a minute to maybe . . ." He winked. "Entice you for tonight."

"I'm busy tonight."

"I need you tonight. *Need* you El." Slowly Frank lowered his lips to hers and kissed her gently. "Give me one hour."

"Frank, Dean has been . . ." His lips silenced her. "Frank."

"No talking about him." From her lips to her cheek to her neck, Frank slid his lips. He pulled Ellen into him, tighter, wrapping his one arm around her to hold Ellen against him while his other hand reached under her hair pulling softly

to arch her neck.

“Frank stop.”

Frank moaned as he widened his mouth, sensuously kissing her neck.

“Frank, you have to stop.” She felt his continuous kisses. “Frank, stop.”

“Yeah Frank.” Robbie’s voice rang in the room with seriousness. “Stop. Her husband doesn’t look pleased.”

Frank lifted his head and shifted his eyes to see Robbie and Dean standing there. With a sneer and a slow release of Ellen, he stepped back and mumbled. “Fuck.”

Dean bounced a little staring only at Ellen. “I didn’t think . . . I, I didn’t think I had to give a warning knock to my own wife.”

“Dean.” Ellen stepped to him.

Dean shook his head and walked out.

First looking at Frank who looked pissed, then at Robbie whose eyes were glued on his big brother, Ellen raced out after Dean.

Frank cleared his throat and raised his eyebrows once to Robbie. “Thanks for the intrusion.” He stepped toward the door.

Robbie grabbed Frank’s arm. “What are you doing?”

“Leaving.”

“No. I mean why are you hitting on Ellen.”

Frank pulled his arm from Robbie with a snicker. “Hitting on her?” Frank chuckled. “I was trying to steal some private time with her.”

“Private time Frank? I’m not blind. I saw you kissing her.”

“No fuck Robbie. That can be called private time. I need that.”

“She’s Dean’s wife.”

Frank gave Robbie a quirky look. “So.”

“So?” Robbie nearly laughed. “What do you mean so. Frank, you can’t hit on Ellen. You’ll place her in an awkward position. She already has to explain to Dean what he saw.”

“I’m sure she will. And why are you having this talk with me? It’s none of your business.”

“I like Dean.”

“Good for you.” Frank told him.

“I don’t want you to start something that may cause tension. I remember the first day.”

Frank only laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Start something? Robbie, come on, you are not that naive. That first day here was not the last time I slept with Ellen in Beginnings, it was the first time I slept with her in Beginnings.”

“And you’re proud of this?”

“Robbie . . .”

“No, Frank.” Robbie stepped to him. “I’m disappointed in both you and Ellen. I can’t believe you made the mistake again.” He closed his eyes trying not to get upset when Frank laughed. “How Frank . . . . How can you sleep with another man’s wife, knowing you have to face him every single day. Knowing he’s one of nineteen people you live around in a dead world. How can you do

that?”

“Don’t judge me.”

“Sorry Frank. I am.”

“I have always been involved with Ellen and I have no intentions of stopping.”

“It’s wrong.” Robbie snapped.

“It’s my life.” Frank’s voice raised.

“What about Dean’s life.”

“Ask me if I fuckin care.” Frank walked to the door.

“Frank.”

Frank slowly turned around. “What?”

“Can you be anymore of a dick?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can.” Frank nodded with an arrogant smile. “I could go tell Dean I’ve been sleeping with his wife for two years.” Having said all that he wanted or needed to, Frank walked out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dean's fork ran slowly through his mashed potatoes, lifting them, molding them, as if he were the star of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He would lift his eyes to Ellen who sat to his left. She picked at her dinner as well.

"Are they bad." Ellen asked him of the potatoes.

"No." Dean shook his head.

"You're playing with them."

"I know."

"I don't make very good mashed potatoes. You won't hurt my feelings if you tell me they suck."

"I guess I'm just not hungry." Dean dropped his fork and rubbed his eyes.

"Want to finally talk about it?"

"I'd really rather not."

"Dean." Ellen reached out and grabbed for his hand, Dean pulled away. "About what you saw today at . . ."

"Ellen. I told you. I don't want to talk about it. I don't." Dean stood up.

"We need to." Ellen stood and followed him to the living room.

"I walked in. I see you in Frank's arms. I see him kissing you. Is there something there I didn't understand?"

Ellen's head dropped.

"I didn't think so."

"He was hitting on me Dean." Ellen tried to explain. "That's all. Frank has always hit on me our entire lives. It doesn't mean I give in."

"Really."

Ellen closed her eyes. "Why can't you believe what I'm telling you."

"Why should I?"

"You have never gotten over what happened between me and Frank when we first . . ."

"Ellen." Dean said her name strongly. "Listen to you. You act as if what happened between you and Frank was nothing. It was an affair. You slept with him, not only while you were with me, but while you were pregnant with my children. Something like that tends to stick with you. It's not like you danced with him."

"Dean. Listen. I know today upset you." Ellen paused when Dean nearly huffed at her. "But if you and I could sit down and discuss this Frank situation, I think we can work things out. I don't want you hurt."

"Too late." Dean stepped back and moved to the steps. "It's way too late for that Ellen. And tonight . . ." Slowly Dean swayed his head. "Tonight, I just don't want to think or talk about you and Frank. I have a feeling, it's a situation I'm going to have to deal with for the rest of our lives."

"Dean." Ellen reached for him but he kept moving. He walked to the steps, quietly and then up them, leaving Ellen alone in the livingroom.

^^^

The blaring horns of the bad eighties disco song played in the social hall, and Frank decided it would be the last time. Finishing his drink, he stood from his bar stool, pulled out his revolver and fired once into the juke box causing 'Kool' from 'Kool and the Gang' to slow his singing down to a demonic tone. Then Frank snapped out of his fantasy, cringed at the wedding song that he always hated and yelled to John Matoose. "Why the fuck do you have to play this song every day?"

"It reminds me of my brother's wedding." John answered staring at the jukebox with a huge grin on his face. What he really wanted to do was get drunk and dance, but he figured he annoyed people enough by playing that song.

Jenny didn't mind. In fact she danced her way across the social, anxiously awaiting Jonas who always danced with her on a Friday night. She pulled out a chair next to John and sat with him. "Frank is just miserable. He's always been like that."

"Really?" John asked.

"Oh, sure. I can remember being seven and hating when he would come home for leave and visit Kelly."

"Did he get along with his wife?" John asked, looking at Frank who sat at the bar like an old drunk.

"I think the only female Frank has ever gotten along with is Ellen."

"And even they fight." John commented.

"Speaking of Frank and Ellen. Did you hear what happened today?" Jenny scooted her chair in closer to John.

"No. What?" John asked wanting to hear the 'big secret' Jenny prepared to present him.

"I heard that Dean walked over to that containment place to pay his wife a visit and busted Ellen and Frank, well, having sex."

"No way." John immediately looked at Frank. "I know Dean didn't beat him up or try."

"No. I don't know what happened after he busted them I just know that he did."

"How do you know?"

"I overheard him complaining very loudly to William at the clinic."

"What were you doing at the clinic? Were you sick?"

"No." Jenny shook her head. "I was discussing a medical problem. See Dirk . . ." Closer Jenny drew to John. "Dirk has been having some trouble preparing to make love."

"I don't understand."

Jenny slowly lifted up her finger.

"Oh." John nodded. "That's because he's old. That's understandable."

"See, everyone keeps on saying that to me, yet no one will explain what that means. So what if he's old. He still a man."

"But not a young one." John told her. "Hell Jenny, young men, they get physically prepared to make love even when it's a very inopportune time."

“Really?”

“Really.” John lifted his drink.

“You too?”

“Of course.”

Jenny’s eyes lit up.

^^^

Robbie had forgotten about everything. It had never been in his nature to hold a grudge. He walked into the social wanting to talk to Frank. Actually he wanted to compliment Frank and thank him for the good laugh. Having just seen a very macho walking Jonas and finding out the reason for it wasn’t anything that Frank had taught him, it was because Frank had him walking around with stones in his tightie whities.

Smiling, like he usually did, Robbie laid a hand on Frank’s back while reaching around him for the bottle. “Hey Frank.”

Frank didn’t answer.

“I saw Jonas, man, I have to tell you.”

“I’d rather you not.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Robbie asked, really not knowing.

“I’m fuckin pissed at you.”

Henry was the last person Robbie wanted to interrupt them at that second. But there he was getting a drink and overhearing Frank. “Join the club Frank. I don’t think there’s a person in Beginnings who doesn’t get pissed off at Robbie.” Henry poured his drink. “You blew me off today. You never showed.”

“I was busy with . . .”

“Robert.” Joe who had just walked into the social hall spotted Robbie. “I distinctively remember telling you to finish that inventory in warehouse ‘B’.”

Robbie tried to talk again. “But I . . .”

“See.” Henry pointed at him. “Another person.”

Robbie prepared to tell them, he blew off Henry to do inventory for Joe which took most of his time. But he didn’t turn in the sheet because Miguel asked him to help move crops from the greenhouse. And as soon as Robbie readied to say all that, Miguel jumped in.

“Robbie.” Miguel approached. “Just the man I need to see. You did not put those last three bins far enough inside the storage facility. The rabbits got to them.”

Surrounded. Robbie was surrounded by angry faces and accusing voices.

Frank spun some on his stool. “Seems to me that you’re the popular person in Beginnings tonight.”

Robbie slammed down his glass and walked away from them. “Fuck it. I’m gone. Bitch about me when I’m not here to listen.” Walking out of the social hall he heard his name a few more times and he was grateful that he left. The last thing he was going to do was stand there and play defense attorney against a bunch of people who could care less about what he had to say. Robbie decided to just go home. He thought it was going to be a good night. It turned out to not

only be an early one but a ‘Robbie free for all’ as well. Uneventful, boring, stupid were the words Robbie would have used had he made it to his home without running into Jenny the second he entered the living section. A peeping sound precluded the vision of a half naked Jenny holding a sheet against her.

“Robbie stop him.” She flew by him toward center town.

He spun around to ask her who she was talking about, but Jenny moved quickly. The sheet flapping in the wind, her bare ass exposed. Robbie, still curious and scratching his head, turned back around and when he did, John was running his way. John chasing Jenny. The closer John got, the more intrigued Robbie grew when he saw through the darkness a naked John. “John are you . . .”

“Help.” John kept running, and he ran, faster than Jenny.

Jenny in a sheet. John buck naked. With a ‘hmm’ and a snicker, Robbie got his answer on why Jenny and John were sprinting so daringly across Beginnings and it wasn’t just on a whim to feel free.

“Where day go?” Dirk asked huffing as he ran with a giant stick. “Ja see em?”

“Uh . . .” Robbie pointed in the correct direction. “Ran that way.”

“Thank you.” Limping and trying his best to run, Dirk, holding that switch, continued in his crusade to get Jenny and John.

Robbie kept on walking. Even if he was going home a lot earlier than he wanted to, he was going home with a smile over the amusing scene he just witnessed and also convinced of the fact that he was one of the last men left on earth that still possibly had scruples.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

March 11 - Beginnings, Montana

Frank had to wonder when he looked down at the expression Jonas had. Was Jonas confused? Did Jonas know that was a revolver he held in his hand. "What's the problem?"

"There are no bullets in this gun Frank."

"Clip, and no. I took it out."

"If I've no bullets how am I supposed to shoot people."

"First." Frank held up his hand to Jonas. "You're not shooting people."

"Then why do I have a gun?"

"To look tough."

"What if they try to shoot me first. I wouldn't be threatening without bullets."

"Jonas." Frank stated his name. "Who in Beginnings is there that you would shoot. Besides Dean."

"Oh I wouldn't shoot Dean." Jonas looked at his empty gun. "I would shoot Dirk."

"You would shoot Dirk?" Frank asked surprised. "Why?"

"Nasty. Nasty old man." Jonas tsked and put his revolver in his shoulder harness. "He beat John and Jenny with a switch last night."

"He caught them screwing."

"Still." Jonas shook his head in a swaying manner. "I don't like him. He's nasty. Mean and nasty. Not to mention vulgar."

"Vulgar?" Frank was confused.

"Yes. Breaks wind all the time in the greenhouse and never says, pardon me."

"Jonas the man is . . ."

"It's humid in there Frank."

"But he's old and . . ."

"And hot in there." Jonas griped. "Do you know what bad wind mixed with humidity and heat all in a closed in area makes for? A very uncomfortable time."

"Say something to him."

"That would be rude. And . . ." Jonas held up a finger. "He could do that thing where he blames me because I recognized the odor first."

"Smelt it, dealt it?"

"Yes. I hate that." Jonas stood up straight. "Ready. How do I look?"

"Perfect for your first day."

"Which perimeter am I walking Frank?" Jonas asked.

"You're not. I walk perimeters."

"But I'm all dolled up."

Frank winced with one eye closed. "Jonas. You're dressed in military issued clothing. You aren't dolled up."

"I feel handsome."

“Still you . . .”

“There is just something so handsome about a man in uniform.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you look handsome in a uniform.”

“Jonas.” Frank snapped his name. “Will you quit with the . . . I look handsome in a uniform?”

“Very.”

“Thanks.” Frank looked proud then cleared his throat. “All right. Enough of the flirting with me.”

Jonas snickered.

“Anyhow, you’re first job here in Beginnings is to walk a beat.”

“You mean like I dance to a beat at the social . . .”

“No.” Frank nearly yelled. “You’ll walk town making sure all is well. Making sure there is no trouble. Like the cop who walks the street all day.”

Jonas snickered covering his mouth.

“Quit that.” Frank pulled down his hand. “Why are you laughing?”

“How is there going to be trouble in town. No one’s there.”

“There was trouble last night.” Frank told him. “Wasn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“See. You just walk around and be authoritative.”

“Good word.”

“Thank you.” Frank gave Jonas a swat on the arm. “Get to it, and Maggie said she’ll make you coffee and donuts.”

Jonas rubbed his arm from the sore spot Frank just caused. “Got it.”

“Now go. Practice for when there can really be trouble.”

“Got it.” Giving a thumbs up, Jonas began to walk.

“Jonas.” Frank called him. “Don’t take no shit.”

“Got it.”

“Be mean.”

“Got it.” Jonas looked excited. “I think I’m up for this.”

“Excellent, now hurry. And be tough, and sound like Sly.”

“Yo.”

Frank laughed and in his shaking of his head he watched Jonas walk and he realized something was wrong. Not only did Jonas swish, he also sort of skipped. “Jonas!”

Jonas stopped. “Yes?”

“Where are your rocks?”

“In my back pocket.”

“Put them in your drawers.”

“Oh Frank, I’m getting chaffed.”

“Tough, then you’ll walk better. Do it.” Frank ordered.

After a short moaning whine, Jonas reached in his back pocket, pulled out his stones, and reached his hand far down the front of his pants. His face made a squishing uncomfortable look as he shifted around, but Jonas accomplished the task, waved to Frank and walked, with a John Wayne limp into town.

^^^

Alexandra whined loudly and ear piercingly. She kicked her thin leg out nailing Dean in the gut. He grunted and continued his examination of her on that table at the clinic

“What in the world are you doing to her?” William asked as he walked in.

“Checking her out. What are you doing here?”

“I heard my granddaughter screaming.”

“She’s being irritable.” Dean said with edge, “Hold still Alex.”

“Dean. She’s a baby.” William grabbed hold of the little girl. “Come to Pap.” He lifted her up and she clung to William. “Why are you examining her. What’s the problem.”

“She was fussy all night and morning.”

“Maybe she hasn’t been fussy, maybe you just aren’t in the mood to handle it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you checking her ears?”

“Yes.”

William set Alexandra on the table. “First of all she isn’t an infant. She’ll get pissed at you if you lay her down.” William hunched down to Alexandra. “Sweetie, yes.” He spoke in a high voice lifted his instrument from his pocket. “Look what Pap has. Look.” He flicked on the light a few times making a mini strobe. “Look!” He smiled and slowly brought the aural instrument to her ear and checked. “Good girl.” William looked at Dean. “Right one is fine.” He moved around to Alexandra’s other ear. “Left is fine too.” He tossed the tip of the instrument in the sterilizer bin. “She’s not warm.” William’s hand moved about.

“She’s been really whiney and fussy.”

“Like her father.” William commented.

“Thanks.”

“Has she been coughing.” William asked.

“No.”

“Throwing up?”

“No.”

“Runny nose?”

“No.”

“Drooling more.”

“A little.” Dean twitched his head.

“Watch she doesn’t fall.” William told Dean then walked to the sink and quickly washed his hands. He returned back to the table, placed his index finger on Alexandra’s chin, opened her mouth and placed a finger inside to feel her gums. “She’s teething, you idiot.”

“Dad.”

“No, Dean. You’re going to be a doctor act like one.”

“How am I supposed to know she’s teething.”

“You’re a doctor for crying out loud.”

Dean, so frustrated ran his fingers through his own hair then rubbed his

head messing up his hair. "I'm sorry, but I was in research for ten-years-plus. I do that here as well."

"Excuses, excuses." William picked up the baby. "Now. What's wrong?"

"Alexandra is sick."

"No she's not. And if you had a level head, you would have thought of the teething thing. Moronic research doctor or not."

"I wish you wouldn't insult me."

"Then don't give me a reason to. What's wrong?"

Dean hesitated. He really dreaded telling William about his problems. But his father was the only male he really talked to. Dean hoped that perhaps in the low point he was suffering from, William would shine through with compassion. "It's Ellen. I'm still upset about her and Frank yesterday."

"Get over it."

Dean's hopes were shattered. "What is wrong with you?"

"What is wrong with you?" William bounced a now happy Alexandra. "Obviously this pissy mood your in is effecting your children. Or why else would you have Alexandra here?"

"You said she was teething."

"Yes but, you're probably agitating that."

"How?"

"Children sense these things."

"She's one." Dean argued.

"She senses it. Trust me. You sensed it when your mother and I fought."

"No I did not. That's bullshit."

"Oh really?" William said. "You puked every single time your mother and I argued."

"I never remember you arguing."

"That's because we waited until you weren't around. We got tired of watching your regurgitate wherever we were at."

"Dad."

"You know Dean. They say you marry a woman who is most like your mother. You say Ellen's an unfaithful wife, your mother was a very unfaithful wife. At least Ellen cheats with the same man."

An offended look took over Dean. "Why do you make my mother out to be such a . . ."

"Slut?"

"Dad."

"She was." William shrugged. "But we got past it. And so will you and Ellen. It's a Hayes Man tradition. My mother cheated on my father, your mother cheated on me. Billy's mother cheats on you and his wife will cheat on him. It probably goes further back. We just like those types of women."

"You may." Dean stated. "I don't."

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dean." William leaned with one hand on the table. "You don't like the type of woman Ellen is then do something about it and quit bitching. You either deal with it or you don't."

"I don't know." Dean swayed his head. "I'm really confused."

"Where is the confusion. There are nineteen people in this community. She's here. You're here. You are either with her or you aren't. Period. And, keep in mind, every day that passes is another day that the women that wait outside these walls are not gonna be a good selection."

"Another woman is not what I want. My worries aren't if I'll ever find another. I don't view Ellen as my only choice. I love her."

"Then you work with her." William told him.

"How? How do I work with the fact that she cheats on me with Frank?"

"Has she told you she has, except for that one time?"

"Come on Dad, I'm a smart man."

"I don't know about that Dean." William shrugged. "You didn't know your daughter was teething." William smiled when Dean quickly looked up. "*Your* daughter Dean."

"What about her?"

"You have two children now. That should tell you something. Out of all the death, life emerged. From you and Ellen. Of course, that can also tell you how pathetic you actually were. That at almost thirty-eight years old it took for the world to end in order for you to actually secure a woman."

"Dad." Dean slightly rolled his eyes.

"Which is a pretty big task. Doesn't your research show women are less likely to be immune." William raised his eyebrow. "If you want it to work, you have to work on making it work. Talk about it, fight about it, but don't walk away when it happens."

"But what about Frank?" Dean asked with passion. "Why do I get the feeling, no matter what, Frank will always get in the way."

"Because unless you get some balls, Frank probably will. He was in the way of her first marriage, he'll be in the way of this one. Just do what you can to stop it. Kill him."

"Right."

"Just a suggestion." William handed Alexandra back to Dean. "And I'll leave you to torturing your daughter. But think about what I said."

"I will."

"It's a big empty world now Dino. And you aren't with someone you're stuck with, you're with someone you love. Arguments, struggles and most of all, time, are what makes a marriage strong, not just love." William winked. "Think about it."

Dean only nodded to his father as he left, and then in thought, Dean held his daughter close to him.

^^^

"Gash dang it, Joe." Dirk shook his head. "Was a man s'pose ta do?"

Joe cringed then looked to George. "Any answers?"

"Not beat them perhaps?" George tossed out a suggestion.

"That thar core-pree-ail of yours was a plowin my field if ya get my drift."

Dirk winked. "Tends to anger a man might. How would chew like et if some young in man was pokin his willy . . ."

"O.K.!" Joe said loudly holding up his hand. "That's about all I need to know."

"Me too." George added. "Look Dirk, your seventy-seven years old."

"So." Dirk stated.

"Well don't you think at seventy-seven, you should have expected this?" George asked.

"Wasin specting it at thirty. Why shoe I spect tit at near eighty."

"Well Jenny is a young girl." George added.

"Yes her is. Mighty fine Lil dumpkin too."

George took a breath. "What about the fact that physically she needs more."

"I'll give it." Dirk said assuredly.

Joe looked at George stopping any further questions. "When in your entire life have you been diplomatic?"

"Tactful Joe." George corrected. "I'm being tactful."

"Or that." Joe turned to Dirk. "What George is trying to tell you is . . ."

"Joe." George interrupted. "Tact."

"You think I won't use tact?" Joe scoffed. "Please. I'm sensitive. Dirk." Joe paused then continued. "What George here is trying to tell you is, you're goddamn old. You didn't expect to be getting laid from some nineteen year old kid forever, did you." Joe didn't notice George sliding in his seat. "Christ, George is trying to drive the point home that no matter how seasoned you think you are. In the big scope of things, you're a small container of oregano compared to a man say . . ." Joe tossed up his hands. "A *third* of your age. Now you had your fun. You played the teacher. You couldn't keep. . . excuse the terminology . . . up with Jenny. So get over it and move on and don't beat any more goddamn people in Beginnings with a big stick."

Dirk saw red at Joe's words and immediately he stood up. "Why you." He turned to George. "Get chore old ass up out dat chair. Right now. You insult me like that. Let's go." Dirk held up his fist. "Prezi-dent of the U-nited states or not. You an I are goin round din round. I show ya old."

"Joe." George looked to a laughing Joe. "Dirk, those words came . . ."

"Speaking of fights." Joe looked at his watch. "Dirk, knock it the hell off. We gotta go. George." Joe hurriedly shuffled from behind his desk and to the door.

George sprang up. "Maybe another time Dirk." He raced out of Joe's office with him.

Dirk, alone, lowered his fist. "Ain't lost my touch chet." He nodded. "Scare dem away." He moved to the door mumbling. "No buddy wants a piece of Dirk, that's fir sure."

^^^

It was a cloth sack, one Maggie had made for the working men to take food

with them. Frank tossed his high in the air over the back gate fence. It landed on the ground. "You're lame. You missed."

"Sorry. Thanks." The bulkier man, bent down and picked it up. His name was Greg. His hair was balding on top, and he looked as if he cut it himself to try to keep it short. He would have been thin had his bone structure allowed for it. "You don't have to do this. I'm capable of hunting for my food."

"Nah." Frank waved his hand. "I would have just thrown it out. It's only bread and a little stew."

"I appreciate this." Greg said.

"No, problem. But I want my Tupperware back."

"I'll rinse it out in the stream and toss it over before your six a.m. rounds."

"Excellent." Frank nodded.

"I saw those three people you turned away this morning."

"Fuckin idiots, weren't they."

"I agree."

"You show up." Frank holds out his hand. "You're clean. Not an animal. Those three people looked like they've been living on the street or something."

Greg raised his eyes and shook his head. "I'm afraid not to be clean." He sat down and lifted the pink lid from the Tupperware. "You can't be too careful about infections in cuts, lice and such."

Frank scratched his head. "Dean warned us about that." He scratched again. "Bet me them people had fuckin lice. That hair all long and dirty."

"Long hair attracts them and if you don't get those eggs, they keep hatching and coming back. I worked with this weird chick, I think her name was Renee. Man, every time you turned around she was getting . . ."

"Stop. I'm fuckin itching here." Frank shuddered and scratched his head.

"Sorry. This is very good."

"Made it myself." Frank sniffed proudly. "George is taking my son fishing today, so I should have fish for you tomorrow."

"I'm very glad you didn't threaten to shoot me like those people."

"I get instincts about people." Frank pointed to his own temple. "I got good instincts about you. Why else do I let you camp out up here?"

"So, did you talk to them yet about letting me in?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I can't bring up survivors until the next meeting. My Dad will get pissed. He's say, 'Frank, why the fuck are you bringing up survivors before the next meeting?'"

"When's the next meeting?"

"A week. But don't worry. I promise to bring you up."

"Hey, I've been out here this long right?" Greg shrugged and ate. "So, I saw you and your brother talking this morning."

"Yeah, that Dirk beating up John thing helped us make up. Oh!" Frank snapped his finger. "And speaking of brothers." He looked at his watch. "I have to go. I don't want to be late."

"The big first event."

"You bet." Frank backed up.

"Let me know how it went."

"I will. See you next rounds." Frank hurried and raced away up over the

grade and out of sight.

Greg let out a breath as he enjoyed his stew. "Nice guy he is."

^^^

Ellen was hesitant before she stepped all the way into Dean's lab. He leaned over paperwork at the center counter "Your Dad . . ." She waited until he looked up at her. "Said you made a remarkable diagnosis with Alexandra."

Dean looked curiously at her. "He told you that?"

"Yes and . . ." Ellen walked in. "He said you wanted to see me."

"I do." Dean stood up.

"First." Ellen raised her hand to silence him. "First of all, let's get one thing straight."

"All right."

"I'm not a patient. Nor am I a business partner. This is our marriage and I don't appreciate being summoned."

"You're the one that was wrong."

"And I gave you ample opportunity to talk to me. If you want to talk to me. You ask me yourself." She turned and started to leave.

"Is that why you came here." Dean walked around the counter. "To bitch because I called for you?"

"Yes."

"Not to talk?"

"You heard what I said." Ellen moved to the door.

"Ellen." Dean called out to her. "Stop."

Ellen did.

"Can you talk to me?"

Smiling first Ellen turned around and drew up a serious look. "Sure."

"Thank you." Dean took a deep breath, "I've been thinking a lot about us. And . . . I want you to know. I love you. I want very much to make it work with you but . . ." Dean closed his eyes. "How can we?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not dumb Ellen. I don't care what you tell me. I know there's something going on between you and Frank."

"Then that's what you think."

"Why are you being so pig-headed about this."

"Pig headed?" Ellen stepped to him. "What do you want me to tell you Dean. If I say I'm not, you'll believe I am. If I own up to sleeping with Frank, will you say 'thank you' and we move on? No. I'm at a loss here at what you want me to do."

"Stop seeing Frank."

"I will."

"I don't believe that."

Ellen tossed her hands up and dropped them with a slap.

“Ellen, do you want to make it work with me.”

“Yes.”

“We can’t do that here.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen asked.

“Here in Beginnings. It’s impossible for us to start and build a life here. I really think that. See, I can’t live my life sharing you with Frank. I’m not Pete. And the way I see it, we only have two choices. We either end it now, or we leave.”

“Leave Beginnings?” Ellen questioned softly. “Are you nuts?”

“No. I want you to leave with me. I am perfectly capable of not only securing my family’s health, but I’ve learned about farming, and contrary to what the Slagel testosterone tag team believes, I was in the military for over ten years, I can protect my family too. I want to leave. I want to pack up you and the kids. I planned it out. We can fuel up the chopper and have Robbie take us west. He can fuel up again there with the pump. Fly us to one of the small islands off of Hawaii. Fuel up again and leave us. An island. Isolated, we can fish, grow our food. Climate is good . . .”

“Stop.” Ellen held up her hand. “Just leave?”

“It’s our only choice if we want to make it work.”

“If it was just Frank you were asking me to leave, as much as I care about him, I would. But these people here are our family. My father is here. Robbie? I can’t leave *them*. They aren’t just new family, they have always been my family. And what about your father Dean? Your father is here.”

“I would leave. He’d understand.”

“I wouldn’t. I don’t even know how you can begin to think about leaving him behind.” Ellen nodded slowly. “That’s the choices. Pack up and leave or break up?”

“Yes.”

“Then I guess, Dean. We’re over with.” Ellen turned and walked to the door.

“Is that your choice?” Dean asked.

Ellen stopped. “That’s my choice.”

“Then I want one of us to be out of the house by tonight. I can’t live with you if I’m not going to be with you.”

Coldly Ellen looked over her shoulder at him. “I’ll pack up Dean. Don’t you worry.” She took a step toward the door.

“I guess you never really wanted it to work.”

A gasp escaped Ellen as she turned back around. “Make it work? Yes I do. But you gave me two choices. Two. Break up or leave everyone I love. Those choices are not validated. There could be other ways, but you Dean chose the ultimatum route. Let tell you something. When give people an ultimatum, you force their hands. You forced mine. Don’t ever let me hear you complain about it.”

“I’m not the bad guy here.”

“I never said you were. You just have a pretty fucked up way of dealing with things. Bye Dean.” Without saying anymore, Ellen walked from the lab.

Dean stared for moment really wanting to chase her down, talk more. The

digs he tossed out to continue the argument failed. Ellen made her choice in the stand Dean had made, and he would have to live with it. And now live with it alone.

^^^

“Shit.” Robbie flew from the last storage building staring at his watch. Why he agreed to help Frank do armory inventory was beyond him. He knew it would take three hours, and that in turn made Robbie two hours late for meeting Henry. But Frank came before Henry, and since he and Frank made up he didn’t want to turn him down and start a fight again.

From where the storage buildings were to center town Robbie raced at top speed. He promised not only himself but Henry earlier in the day that he would not be late for doing drywall. And when he saw Henry storming from containment, Robbie knew he wanted to stop him first then apologize. “Henry.” Robbie called as he jotted to him.

“Robbie. Where . . .”

“Look.” Robbie came off humble. “I am so sorry. Frank asked me to do armory inventory and I . . .”

“I’m really tired of your excuses Robbie. It’s always. Frank asked me. Joe asked me. What about your responsibility to the job you agreed to take.”

“Stop.” Robbie held up a hand. “Didn’t I just apologize to you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you bitching.”

“Apologies don’t always cut it. You always apologize and never mean it. You promised this morning you would be there to put up the skills room drywall.”

“I know.”

“You failed to show up.”

“Henry, I know.”

“Then you expect me to . . .”

“Henry!” Robbie screamed. “I’m telling you right now. I apologized. If you ever take this dick stand with me again I swear I’ll lay you out.”

“You think you scare me Robbie?” Henry tilted his head while questioning him. “You have a responsibility.”

“I have many.”

“Then live up to them all.”

“I do!”

“Bullshit!” Henry bodily yelled. “I see you every single night at six o’clock doing nothing.”

Robbie laughed. “What? You think I should work all the time like you?”

“What the hell else do you have to do? You complain you took on all this work. Well, if you are going to take it on then you’d better find the hours to do it. We all have things we have to do. We’re all putting in extra everywhere. You made it clear that containment was your baby. Raise your baby Robbie and quit

making everyone do your work.”

“Quit bitching at me.”

“Quit being so lazy.”

“I’m doing the best I can. So get off my back!” Robbie leaned into Henry.

“Bullshit!”

“Bullshit?” Closer Robbie leaned.

“What is this? Some sort of intimidation tactic. Back off.” Henry shoved him.

“Don’t ever fuckin push me again Henry.” Robbie shoved him back.

“Stay out of my face.” Both hands went out and Henry slammed them against Robbie’s chest.

Robbie took a step back and immediately grabbed for Henry’s shirt, raising a fist at the same time Henry’s raised his.

The voice was loud and deep and the tromp-tromp-tromp of combat boots was right behind the blast. “Knock it off! Right now! What the fuck.” Jonas reached in-between the two men, extending his arms separating them and pushing them away from each other. “You want to settle this petty shit physically, then you find another way without using your fist. And you find another place other than town!” Jonas scolded them both. “Now keep up the petty arguing and I’ll have Joe, tie you both up and lock you in a room together. You got that!”

Robbie and Henry no longer thought about fighting. Both of them stared wide eyed, mouths open with a shocked expression at Jonas.

“I asked . . . do you got that!” Jonas, red faced looked at them both.

Robbie and Henry nodded.

“Good.” Jonas stepped back. “Shake hands.” He saw neither of them did. Then deeply and sounding like Frank, he yelled again. “I said shake hands!”

Quickly Henry and Robbie, half-ass, shook hands.

“Now get back to work.” As soon as Jonas turned around, he was greeted with an abundance of applause from everyone who must have stood on the street watching. “Oh.” Jonas giggled, his voice returned to normal.

Frank walked up to him still clapping. “Excellent job. You do that when we get those survivors in here and no one will give you shit.”

“I really did good?” Jonas gasped out with enthusiasm.

“Yes.”

“Oh.” With a double snappy clap, Jonas did a quick jumping skip. “Oh.” He turned around to everyone. “Did you see me? Did everyone see me?” He laughed “I have to tell Maggie, she’s not here.”

A tad of disappointment hit Frank’s face when he watched Jonas, arms up some, hands flopping about with each step, running fast tiny steps to the bakery.

Joe saw Frank’s face. He walked up to him and laid his hand on his back. “You did the best you could. Good job with Jonas. Just remember Frank. Like you can’t take the country out of the boy, there are just some things you can’t take out of Jonas.”

Frank swayed his head to his father so confused. “Like what?”

Joe’s hand immediately went to his own face and he slid it down across the bridge of his nose as he turned and walked away.

“Dad?” Frank followed. “Like what?”  
Joe kept walking.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There was something so eerie that William just loved about the clinic at night. All the lights off, except for Dean's lab and occasionally Andrea's office while she studied. Dinner had come and gone and William searched out his son.

"Burning the late night oil?" William asked as he walked into the lab.

"Yeah."

"On?" William moved closer. "I thought we finished all the work ups today."

"We did. But with the survivor thing happening soon. I have the lice problem to deal with."

"None of those agents we brought in from the runs worked?"

Dean shook his head. "No. Gone bad. And I have to wear bio hazard gear to work on them in the last room in the far wing of the clinic."

"Andrea and Ellen are pretty bad about that."

"I guess I don't blame them."

"Population?" William questioned.

"Keeping it low. I burn them if I don't get immediate results. The larva are tough."

"Always have been. I told you I'd work on that." William rubbed his nearly bald head. "I have no fear."

Dean chuckled. "Right now I found that what seems to work on the fruit flies we have near the field works on them as well."

"The fruit flies are under control."

"Oh sure." Dean nodded. "But what I use on the fruit flies cannot be used on animals. Did you see Fred?"

"The rabbit?"

"Yeah. Go see him. Bald as a cue ball."

William chuckled. "And speaking of bald. I went to see my granddaughter."

Dean had to laugh. "Alexandra's not bald."

"She doesn't have much hair." William nodded with a smile. "Anyway, I wanted to see how she was doing, you know and see if Ellen tried any whiskey on her gums."

"I'm sure she has. Whiskey to the Slagels is like milk to a baby. It's a nourishment requirement. So how is Alex?"

"Oh fine. Surprising though. I went to the house." William leaned into the counter "Ellen and the children are gone."

"Ellen and I decided to call it quits today."

"I see." William shrugged. "Well, not like you won't see your family right?"

"Right. She can't move that far away."

"My thoughts exactly. So . . . still needing to see my granddaughter I went to Joe's. And . . . she wasn't there."

Dean looked up for his notes, shocked a little, but not completely.

"So, I tried the next logical place. Robbie's."

"How's Robbie handling them?"

“He would be fine if they were there.” William held back his smile. “But they weren’t. So I went back to Joe’s and asked where he put Ellen and the children. Did he give her new housing. He said no, he wasn’t going to use the energy when she had plenty of places to go. Including home.” William pointed to Dean. “So thinking ‘no way did she go there’ I went there. And I have to tell you Dean.”

“What?”

“What a happy little family, her, the twins, Johnny and . . .” William grinned. Before he could even get out the name ‘Frank’ Dean was out the lab door, his little high tops squeaking the whole way out. “Yep.” William stood upright talking to himself. “Task accomplished.”

^^^

Alexandra laughed her baby laugh as if she was witnessing the funniest thing. And to her she was. Balancing on her diaper, she held a wooden spoon as she sat on the floor and laughed loudly, almost in a scream each time she whacked Frank on the head. Frank would fake scream in pain, drop his head to the floor, lift it back up as he lay on his stomach and let her hit him again.

Ellen shook her head as she stood from the couch where Billy slept. She moved to the door to answer it.

“Let’s go.” Dean walked in. “Get your things. Let’s go.”

“Excuse me?” Ellen was shocked.

“I was wrong in my methods. I would like you home to work this out.”

“No.”

“Ellen get your things please.”

Frank stood up from the floor holding Alexandra. “Dean, if she doesn’t want to go. Too bad.”

“And . . .” Dean marched to Frank. “Don’t hold my daughter. *My* daughter Frank. You already have control over one woman in my life.” Dean snatched Alexandra from him. “I don’t need you taking control over this one as well.”

“Hey!” Frank yelled. “El, tell him he can’t snatch her from me. He took the baby.”

“Dean.” Ellen marched to him. “That is so wrong.”

“What? I don’t want him holding her.”

“Too bad.” Ellen yelled.

“Yeah!” Frank charged out.

“Frank.” Ellen snapped his name. “I don’t need help. And Dean like it or not he’s her family and he’ll be a part of her life. You’re being silly.”

“Yeah I know.” Dean had a rambling tone to his voice. “I want my family home. Can you come home.” He moved closer to her dropping his voice so Frank wouldn’t hear. “Can we go home and talk. Work this out the right way. I don’t want you here.”

“What about what you said. The choices.”

“I was . . .” Dean took a deep breath. “Frank, do you mind.” He huffed out to Frank who had inched his way closer and placed his face near to them to hear.

"It's my house." Frank told him,

"And she's my wife."

"You kicked her out."

"But not to live here."

"Too bad. She's staying. El, tell him your staying."

Ellen looked at Frank then to Dean.

Dean had pleading eyes. "Just come home and talk to me. We'll work this out. And about what I said." Lower his voice got as he pulled Ellen further from Frank. "El, I would never think about taking you from Beginnings or your family. I just . . . FRANK! Do you mind!"

Ellen looked over her shoulder to Frank who was right there again. "Frank, please?"

Frank stepped back.

Dean waited until he knew it was safe to talk again. "I would have never made you leave. I guess I'm just relationship illiterate. I just . . . I just wanted you to tell me in one way or another you would do anything to make it work with me. I just wanted to know that you would. I was wrong to give you choices."

"I would do anything to make it work with you. I make mistakes Dean. But I want to try. I do."

"Can we go home?" Dean asked. "Please." He stepped to her, holding Alexandra who seemed preoccupied looking at Frank. Dean softly placed his lips to Ellen's and kissed her. "I love you. Come home with me." Just as he widened his mouth to kiss Ellen more intensely, he stopped when the hard crack of the wooden spoon hit against his head.

Alexandra squealed in laughter and so did Frank.

Dean rubbed his head and took the spoon from Alexandra. "Can we go home El."

"Yeah, I'll get Billy." After handing Dean the bag that still sat by the door, Ellen walked over to the couch for Billy.

"El." Frank stepped to her. "No."

"Frank." Ellen picked up Billy.

"No El. Don't go home with him. Don't do it." Frank told her with passion. "Come on. He kicked you out. Stay here. It's a sign. Stay here." Frank softened his voice.

"Frank." Ellen closed her eyes. "I have to work it out with him."

"No you don't." Frank grabbed her arms. "Fuck him. Stay here."

"Don't do this Frank." Ellen pulled away.

"I . . . I want you here El." Frank tried to get through to her. "I need you here."

"And I'll always be here for you. But I go with Dean. That's where my obligation is. He's my husband." Ellen moved toward the door.

"What about me?" Frank's hand went out and dropped. "What about us. Our friendship. Our years. What about me?"

"Dean's my husband." Pain filled Ellen's eyes and she turned away not wanting to see Frank's expression. With Dean and her children, Ellen walked from Frank's home.

Frank's head dropped when the door closed. A lot of emotions filled Frank at that moment. Hurt, loss, anger. But more so hostility. Hostility toward Dean, and Frank knew right then and there, Dean taking Ellen from his home was not the end. It was just the beginning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

March 21 - Beginnings, Montana

The fresh paint of the containment center filled the place with the aroma of 'new' as everyone sat in what would be the skills room, at the little tables set up there. It was finished. The final thing was the security door and that would only be a matter of minutes.

"And that's the process they will go through." Joe explained. "Through our gates, and into these doors. No more than twenty four people or twelve men and twelve woman at one time. We'll have survival pair offs, but since most of the pick ups will be done by chopper, either George or Robbie will go on the runs. Until Johnny is flying on his own." Joe gave a wink to his grandson. "Now, Robbie, you and Ellen have the list. You want the honors?"

"Yeah." Robbie stood up with a grin. "El and I have been working hard and William reviewed everything." Robbie began to pass out paper. "This is a list of what we will look for. Not everyone gets picked up. We will ask them questions as listed here. They are preliminaries. They'll answer more once they get through the first screening." He had passed out the sheet to everyone. "Mental state is vital. You leave people behind if you find them and they don't fit the criteria as outlined. Their eyes are important. Look at their eyes Are they far off. Distant. Cold. Lifeless. None of ours are. Look at their physical appearance. Are they strong. Fit, Clean. Now we aren't expecting immaculate survivors, but we want people who have at least made n attempt to care for themselves. That shows surviving. Also, what have they been eating. Are they hunting? Growing? Working for their food. You'll be able to tell by the description here, if they are trying to eat properly. If they aren't, they aren't workers and we don't want people who want hand outs."

Frank reviewed the list. "Dean has illness symptoms listed here. If I run across a sick person who is mentally strong, but ill. I leave them to die?"

"Depends." Robbie answered.

"Yes or no, doesn't matter to me." Frank said.

"Frank." Dean spoke up. "Some illness are simple. Some are not. Just review your list. We'll take sick people if they show signs that they can be of value and get better. Exercise precaution everyone." Dean warned. "Tuberculosis will be a killer."

Robbie continued. "And children. We will take all children, sick or not in here. Unless their biological parents don't come and they won't give up the kid. A child does not give an adult a buy into Beginnings." He saw Henry raised his hand. "Yes Henry?"

"That sounds cruel. Say we find a man and a child. The child is ill, needs food, shelter, what we can give him. His father, won't give him up. But obviously can't care for the child. We just leave that child to eventually die?"

"Take him." Ellen said coldly. "Take the child." She heard the gasps. "If his father or adult with him can not see that they are not doing what's best for the child, then they aren't fit to have them. Take the child."

A hush took over the room.

Joe broke the silence. "I know it sounds wrong. It probably is. But what is more wrong. Dean says another year or two, the ones that aren't healthy will die. The others who aren't providing for themselves will get worse, possible turn more barbaric. If the kid is sick and suffering from malnutrition, then their care giver is not providing. We're trying to build a future here. We can't do that if we lose all the children beyond our walls. Enough children died in this world. It's time to make up for that and save a few."

George had his own questions. "So basically, say we come across a group of people. Ten, fifteen. Four are children. We speak to all the adults. Interview them. And we can possibly end up leaving there with only the four children? Is that correct. We will leave people behind?"

"Absolutely." Robbie answered. "I realize there is no such thing as a utopian society, but we're doing pretty good here. We've worked hard to build this place, to make it flourish. We don't want people in here who don't want the same."

Joe interjected. "You work for what you get. You get what you work for. Everyone pulls their weight. Everyone."

William raised his hand and then stood. "I've had some psychology background and my medical experience has given me a lot of people experience. As did Joe's job. I think the screening process and containment process is a wonderful idea Robbie and Ellen have. We weed out the bad ones, pick the good ones. Train them all over again to be civil. And as brought up before, if it doesn't work, oh well. They go back out. They'll be no worse off. But if they stay, they will be better off. That's for sure."

Joe waded through the silence and took back over. "All right. We'll start moving on this in a few weeks. We'll start with a couple survivors at a time. Robbie and Ellen can't work with too many at first. So, I'd like over the next few weeks to find at least one survivor for them to practice on. Frank."

"Yeah." Frank looked up from his sheet.

"You turn away the people that seem to show up after rubbish day. Find me one who fits the criteria on the sheet and we'll put him or her through the process."

"O.K." Frank agreed. "What about the guy living beyond the back gate?"

"What guy living beyond the back gate?" Joe asked.

"Greg." Frank stated as if everyone should have known. "He's a nice guy. Clean. Healthy and he meets this criteria. We should let him in and practice on him. I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

"Frank?" Joe walked near his son. "You've talked to him."

"Dad. He lives in a tent out there. I see him everyday. Nice guy."

"How long has he lived out there."

Frank looked up to the ceiling in remembrance. "Two weeks. Yeah."

"Two weeks?" Joe was aghast. "A man camps out at our back gate for two weeks."

"He's safe. I swear Dad." Frank stated. "Or I would have gotten rid of him." Frank nodded. "That's for sure."

"Frank, you asshole." Joe blasted. "If he's so goddamn safe and nice, why

didn't you let him in."

"Because we didn't have our survivor meeting yet. We're having it now." Frank defended. "So I'm bringing it up. I told him I would."

"Frank." Joe tried to remain calm. "Did it occur to you to possibly bring it up sooner?"

"Yeah. But I didn't want you to yell. And since it's brought up, can he come in. It's still cold out there and I told him he's not allowed to light a fire to stay warm."

"Frank." Joe said his name.

"Yes."

"Go get the man."

"O.K." Frank stood up and walked from the skills room.

Joe looked at the faces who stared at him so puzzled. "Oh no People." Joe held up his hands. "I gave you all my genetic disclaimer about Frank when we first got here. I'm still not convinced he wasn't switched at birth."

^^^

With his eyes fixed on Greg who stood at the back gate holding his things, Frank spoke into his radio. "Back gate down Robbie." A soft humming occurred, followed by a clicking. After it stopped Frank stepped forward. He reached for the keys and unlocked the back gate.

Greg hesitantly stepped inside. "Wow, this feels weird."

Frank shut the gate and lifted his radio. "Perimeter up Robbie." He walked to Greg. "We'll head over the grade. You understand the process I told you about."

"Yeah. I'm a guinea pig. No problem." Greg smiled as he carried his stuff. "Frank. Thanks a lot. I knew you'd pull through."

"I had to uh . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "Pull some strings to get you in here early. But, you can owe me."

"For sure."

"Beginnings." Greg stated the name. "Is that what you call this place?"

"Nah." Frank shook his head as he walked with Greg. "We call this place home."

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

October 2 - Beginnings, Montana

Henry and Dean nodded to each other with a closed mouth as if they were posing for some Sears and Roebucks catalog. How impressed they were listening to the harmonizing Slagel brother voices, complete with an echoing effect, courtesy of the tunnels they were in. The ‘ooh-wa’ didn’t sound bad and the title line ‘Why do fools fall in love’ was even better. They didn’t even expect the baritone raspy sound of Frank’s lead singing to be as good or as amusing as he sang the opening line to the song.

“*Why does Hal seem so gay.*”

Hal took the second line. “*Because Frank taught him to be that way . . .*”

And then, the brothers not ten minutes earlier who were at each others throats, were laughing.

“Robbie.” Frank blasted out. “You stopped singing.”

“My mouth hurts Frank.” Robbie touched his swollen lip. “I feel like you when you get those cold sores.”

“Never cold sores Robbie. Infectious mouth decorations, but never cold sores.”

“You still get them?” Hal asked. “Man you used to be cursed with them when we were younger.”

“See.” Frank held up a finger as they walked through the tunnel. “I stopped, O.K., then I got them back after Henry fuckin kissed me.”

Hal spun around to look at Henry who walked with Dean behind them. “Why were you kissing my brother.”

Frank answered. “Because he has a crush on me.”

“Frank, you lie.” Henry corrected him. “You were making fun of my lip, so I spread the cankerous thing to you.”

Dean interjected. “Now everyone who got them before gets them again.”

Hal was confused. “I’m not understanding. Did people stop getting them?”

“Oh yeah.” Dean answered. “For nearly six years the virus that caused them was non existent.”

Hal snickered. “What did you do Dean, bring it back in a lab?”

Very seriously Dean answered not picking up on the sarcasm in Hal’s voice. “No. Not at all. The scientist brought it back. When they woke up, they brought with them infections from the past that we thought were long gone.”

“Woke up?” Lost would be the best way to describe Hal. “Were they sleeping?”

Quickly Dean looked at Robbie, Frank and Henry, then back to Hal. “You don’t know.”

“Know what?”

“You don’t. Frank, he doesn’t know. Didn’t you tell him?” Dean asked.

“No I didn’t tell him,. Why would I tell him?” Frank answered. “I thought he knew.”

“He didn’t.” Dean stated. “Robbie did you know your brother didn’t

know.”

“No.” Robbie shook his head. “I assumed he knew. Had I known he didn’t know, I would have made sure he knew.”

“Know what?” Hal asked.

Henry was shocked. “I can’t believe you don’t know. We should let him know.”

“What?” Hal asked again.

Frank stepped in. “Maybe it’s best he didn’t know. Really though, how would he know. I know, If I didn’t know and someone told me, I wished I wouldn’t have known.”

“Me too.” Robbie agreed.

“Not me.” Dean stated.

“Me either!” Hal shouted. “Someone let me know what I don’t know.”

“All right.” Dean tried to use a calming voice. “We’ll let you know. Frank tell him.”

“You tell him.”

“No you.” Dean said.

“Robbie.” Frank looked at his brother. “You let him know.”

“No. No. I’d rather not.” Robbie shook his head. “Henry.”

“He’s your brother.” Henry refused. “He’s your brother so one of you should . . .”

“Hey!” Hal yelled again. “Some one let me know and let me know now! I’m getting pissed here.”

Dean upped his nerve. “O.K. see, you know that lab in the tunnels down here that Ellen and I use for experiments.”

Henry interjected. “The one with all the sick, disgusting, mutilated dead things.”

Hal shifted his eyes to Dean. “Yeah, what about it?”

“It was originally a cryo-lab. Cryogenics.”

“Hey.” Robbie snapped his finger. “Let’s go take him there since we’re already down in the . . .”

“No.” Dean quickly interrupted Robbie. “No. It’s uh . . . smelly and I just did some uh . . . autopsies on those killer babies.” Dean cringed. “It would be best if we didn’t.”

Hal nodded in agreement. “I’d prefer not to see any open killer babies. So tell me about this cryogenics lab.”

Dean stopped walking. “Well, once upon a time there was a group of scientists frozen prior to the plague. And see, they were frozen in this little cryogenic lab here in Beginnings. And then they woke up.”

“Where are they now?” Hal asked. “Living in Beginnings?”

Frank answered that one. “Living in the east. They were the start of the Caceres Society. Little did we know not only was there a lab here, but all over the place and they went about defrosting their buddies.”

“Wait a second.” Hal held up his hand. “Do you mean to tell me, that the whole entire reason that there is a war going on is because you people defrosted the founders of it.”

In a spinning point, Frank indicated to Henry. “His fault. And Dean’s.”

“What?” Henry was shocked. “Why is it my fault Frank?”

“You found the wall.” Frank said. “You and Ellen playing Beginnings private Eyes. Don’t deny it Henry, you did.”

“Yeah, but he . . .” Henry pointed to Dean. “Defrosted them. I couldn’t have done it Frank and you know it.”

“And just so you know Hal.” Frank defended. “Out of everyone who voted, I was the only one who voted to pull . . . yeah.” Frank’s eyes lit up. “I was wasn’t I? I was the only one who voted to pull the plug and let them die. *If* everyone would have listened to me. This whole thing wouldn’t have started. DEAN.”

“What?” Dean laughed. “I merely did my job. Once they were defrosted, everyone voted to kick them out. Who knew the trouble they would have started.”

“Me.” Frank stated.

“Oh you did not.” Dean argued.

“Did too.” Frank placed his hands on his hips. “Robbie in your history. Did I warn everyone.”

“Yep.” Robbie nodded. “Frank hated them. He was mean from the get go to them. In fact he didn’t want Ellen to go with them.”

“That’s right.” Frank stated. “I duct taped her if I recall and Henry freed her.”

“That’s because it wasn’t nice Frank.” Henry responded. “You couldn’t do that to her. And, by the way, I’m surprised Robbie, in that history, with the way you are with Ellen,. You didn’t go to Colorado with her.”

“I was supposed to, don’t you remember?” Robbie asked. “Oh, yeah you wouldn’t. You weren’t really there. Yeah, I was supposed to go to Colorado with her. And the night before, when I was working under one of the jeeps, the jack gave away and I rolled out but not in enough time. I broke my leg. Frank couldn’t go because of Brian, so Miguel did.” Robbie shrugged.

“Who’s Miguel?” Hal asked.

“Mom’s previous husband.” Robbie answered.

Dean saw the lost look on Hal’s face. “Andrea.”

“Oh.” Hal nodded. “What happened to him?”

“George shot him in the head.” Frank nodded. “Pow. But . . . we didn’t find that out until later. Nice guy. I like him.”

“Me too.” Henry said sadly.

“See Dean.” Frank pointed to him. “Another person you killed.”

“How do you figure Frank?” Dean asked. “How am I responsible for killing Miguel?”

“You defrosted the scientist.”

“But I killed a bunch in Colorado now didn’t I?”

“Oh.” Frank said dramatic. “Oh now you own up to it. Before it was.” Frank whined his voice. “No, not me. I just made the chemical. I didn’t kill them.”

“You’re an asshole Frank.” Dean snapped.

“Bite me, Dean.”

“No thank you. But I will kill you.”

“Yeah right.” Frank scoffed.

“Wait and see.”

“We’ll see.” Frank argued. “Anyhow Hal. That’s the story.”

Hal scratched his head. “I swear I’m more confused now than I was when you started.”

“Let me reiterate.” Frank said.

“Whoa.” Dean spoke sarcastically. “Big word.”

“Shut the fuck up Dean. So.” Frank continued. “As I was saying . . .”

“Frank.” Hal stopped him. “Can Robbie tell the story since he is the only one that was around in the time frame we’re dealing with now.”

“Huh?” Frank paused. “Oh yeah. Robbie. Tell it right.”

Robbie winked. “Got it.” He cleared his throat. “O.K. We have these tunnels, which we’re in now. Henry is neurotic . . .” He snickered at Henry’s tsk. “He swears he senses something else. Actually he picked up that something was draining power. So being neurotic and lonely Henry with nothing else to do he starts this investigative crusade. Which leads him to . . .” Robbie’s hand went out. “The wall. He swears something is behind the wall. We all think he’s nuts until Chester shows up.”

“Who’s Chester?” Hal asked.

Frank answered. “Some goof with yellow trim on his coat.”

Robbie swayed his head. “Chester was from the lab in Cleveland. The main group of scientist who were on a timer to defrost. Only problem was, Chester was the only one immune to the plague. So all but Chester died. So Chester comes here, looking for the Garfield project. We let him in. Henry and Ellen go through his stuff. Find the plans to the lab. George kills Chester, which we didn’t know. Henry opens the wall and finds the cryo-lab. In comes Dean. He follows directions there and defrosts them . . . and cures them since none of them were immune to the plague. Except Jason.”

“See.” Frank interrupted. “Dean is responsible.”

“Yeah.” Robbie agreed. “Dean started this whole mess. And the scientists ended up being assholes, like most scientists are.” Robbie grinned at Dean. “We kicked them out. They went to Colorado and the rest is at history. Read it if you want to know because I’m getting bored right now.”

Hal was utterly confused. “You ramble Robbie.”

“But he rambles good.” Frank nodded proud. “Got that whole story out in less than two minutes. Good job.”

“Yeah.” Robbie agreed. “And I got to blame Dean in there.”

“Yeah.” Frank repeated. “You suck Dean.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Fine. Blame me for the scientist if you want, but if you do that, you have to blame me for Hal as well.”

Frank snickered. “Dean, uh . . . I think my Dad and Mom get those honors.”

“No, Frank you idiot.” Dean snapped. “Had I not been responsible for releasing the scientists, then Hal wouldn’t have joined the society . . .”

“Traitor.” Frank looked at Hal.

“May I continue.” Dean asked ignoring Frank’s ‘no’. “He wouldn’t have joined the society because there wouldn’t have been a society and he wouldn’t

have a cause to fight. Therefore he would be settled up somewhere probably further east. And you guys would have never known he was alive.”

“Finished?” Frank asked.

“Yes.”

“Good.” Frank twitched his head. “Man, Dean, do you just sit around all day thinking of ways to glorify yourself. You must.”

“He does.” Henry commented.

“I agree.” Robbie added.

“You guys are mean.” Hal said.

“Just the facts, little brother.” Frank held his hands up in defense. “Just the facts. He always has to come up with some lame story to make his little-man self look big man important. That’s O.K. Dean.” Frank winked and patted Dean on the head in a pacifying manner. “You just do that. But keep in mind, no matter what you do.” Frank snorted a snicker. “No one will ever look up to you.” He laughed. “They can’t.” He turned around and started walking. “Shall we continue on?” Whistling first, Frank then began to sing again as he led the way through the tunnels.

Dean grumbled with a sneer to his face. He stood there and watched as Robbie and Hal, along with Henry followed Frank down the tunnels. Each one passing him with a slight snicker to their face.

Frank stopped singing and walking. He looked back to Dean who still stood there. “You coming Dean?”

Dean hesitated, but not for long. He tossed up his hands. “Sure why not.” Figuring Slagel brother torture and Frank’s singing would be better than Joe finding him, Dean hurried to catch up to the four who were making it well ahead of him.

## IN RETROSPECT . . . THE THIRD YEAR

### Trial and Error

CHAPTER TWENTY

June 10 - Beginnings, Montana

How different Greg had looked since he walked through the gates nearly two months earlier. What hair he had left was shaved close to his head. He had gained weight. At least fifteen pounds, more bulkier than anything else. Joe buzzed himself through the security door of containment looking down to Greg who sat in the small front office reading.

“How’s it going Greg?” Joe asked.

“Good Mr. Slagel. Just reading the bible that Andrea dropped off.”

“She’ll do that. If she starts to pester you with religion let me know.”

“She did invite me to that chapel you have set up.”

“Yeah, she’s doing that to everyone. I’m as up for a minister as she is, but I’m not going to keep recruiting everyone.”

“Do you think that’s what she’s doing to me?”

Joe nodded. “Most definitely. She mentioned it already.”

“Oh.” Greg shut the bible and pushed it aside. “I think I’ll tone down some. Jenny left a nice book.” Greg held up the tattered copy of *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*.

“That has certainly made it’s rounds.”

“Robbie used a high-lighter on his favorite parts.”

“Figures. And I’m out of here.” Joe moved to the main door of containment. “Robbie and George are stopping at that town. They looking to pick up four to six.”

“I’m ready.”

“And if there’s any trouble . . .”

“I’m ready.” Greg tapped his revolver with a wink.

“Good boy. See you in a bit.”

Greg gave a goodbye nod to Joe and opened up *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. His eyes skimmed across the bright yellow highlighted section Robbie had done and the sexual content there. Greg let out a deep breath and closed that book. His eyes shifted to the Bible and he picked it back up. He figured since it had been such a long time since he was with a woman, the bible was the best place for his eyes to be.

^^^

Ellen looked at her watch and she got a certain twitch of nervousness when she realized Robbie was close to landing for survivors. She hated Robbie being out there, especially with the stories of survivor encounters she had heard. With uneasiness and worry for Robbie, she said a little prayer, just a little one because she didn’t pray much and didn’t want to push her luck.

The survivor process was about to move into full swing. Twenty were planned to be brought in before winter. Which by what Ellen knew, that meant

they would pick up fifty. Prior to containment and during, thirty of them would weed their way out.

Ellen and Robbie had three people in containment. Two weeks earlier there were eight. A week before that Robbie arrived with twelve. Four never made it to containment.

With an activity planned for the afternoon. A short one before greeting the survivors that Robbie and George planned on getting, Ellen left her small office and walked to the skills room.

She saw Dan, the only male survivor to remain. Long hair, Dan had and he kept it pulled back. Thin and not too tall, his face was scarred from the battles he had seen in the world outside the walls of Beginnings. He looked up to her slowly as she walked in, the other two, children, both boys about eight, chewed on puzzle pieces.

“No-no.” Ellen approached the children. “Maggie makes cookies for you to snack on.” She took the piece from the ones mouth. He growled at her. “Nice, very nice. After three weeks you would think you would stop being children of the damned. Now if you hungry . . .” Ellen heard the squeak of a chair and a bang as it hit the floor she turned around to see Dan charging her way. Her eyes widened and she reached for the radio on her belt. Grabbing it she started to run for the door calling out. “Greg. Trouble. Hurry.” Just as she reached the skills room door it slammed closed and Dan grabbed hold of Ellen.

Greg pressed the button under his desk. The security door buzzed and he bolted to it. It stopped buzzing and locked by the time he tried to open it. Again. He raced to his desk, pressed the buzzer, ran to the door and again it stopped. “Shit.” Pulling his revolver and stretching as far as he could go, with a grunt he used the gun to press the button and when the buzzing sound started he pulled open the door, tripped a little then raced through.

Down the very long corridor he flew looking quickly in the men’s and women’s quarters as he passed them. No Ellen. When he arrived at the skills room, he burst open the door.

Ellen screamed as Dan held on to her and the children gnawed on both her legs. With instincts he was supposed to have, Greg extended his revolver and fired at Dan’s leg.

“Ow.” Dan peeped out but let go of Ellen.

Greg fired a second shot, this one into Dan’s chest. Another ‘ow’ came from Dan but still he went for Ellen. The Children. It had to be the children that were stopping Ellen from getting away. Obviously if they were gnawing on her legs. So without hesitation, Greg fired two shoots, both hitting the children, then he raised his revolver and shot on last time. That one hitting Dan in the forehead. Dan flew back.

Frank clapped. “Good job. God job.” He walked from the corner of the room. “Only thing is, you shot the kids.”

Greg swayed his head. “They were attacking Ellen.”

“Kids Greg. Little ones too.” Frank looked down to the two children who were covered with red paint. They laughed. Frank then quickly looked to a whining Dan. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Aw Christ.” Dan held his forehead. “Those pellets sting. He wasn’t supposed to hit me in the head.” Dan looked angry. “I agreed to do this if there were no head shots. He could have put an eye out.” Dan walked to Ellen. “Can you see if there’s a mark. I know it left a mark.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “All right Tommy Boy, look, the kids aren’t whining.”

“The kids are layered in clothing.” Dan pointed.

Greg stepped forward. “I’m sorry. I am.”

“What are you doing.” Frank snapped. “Don’t apologize. This was a drill.”

Dan pouted. “He should apologize. Ellen, how bad?”

Ellen smeared away the red paint from his forehead. “It’s a lump all right.”

“See.” Dan shook his head looking in so much pain. “I knew it.”

“Dan!” Frank yelled. “Do you want to be in security or the fuckin fields forever.”

“Security.” Dan answered.

“Then quit crying. You’ll get your chance to fire paint pellets at someone’s head the next male survivor who’s ready to get out.”

“Am I getting out soon?” Happily Dan looked at Ellen. “Am I?”

“Sort of.” Ellen answered. “We’re supposed to get more people in today, so you may be in here part time incase of trouble.”

“I can handle that.”

Frank bobbed his head. “Yeah, right. If you can stop being a baby.”

Ellen would have defended her survivor, but she realized she didn’t have time. “Frank. I have to go. You’ll have to get this cleaned up.”

Frank saw Ellen race from the skills room. “Where you off to?”

Ellen stopped. “Robbie and George are bringing people in and I have to get supplies to take to the examining room.”

“I’ll see you up there I a little bit.”

“Thanks.” Ellen started to run. “Oh.” She stopped, raced back to the skills room and popped her head in the door. “Forgot. Good job Greg.”

Greg lowered his head in a blush.

Ellen continued to run, smiling at Frank and taking her usual five or six attempts to put in her security code before she was able to get out.

^^^

It was a little house, set in the middle of a corn field overgrown and wild. Smoke came from the small chimney.

“There it is again.” Robbie pointed.

“We really should stop.” George said. “This is the third time we passed this house and the third time we saw smoke.”

“Someone definitely lives there.”

“Wanna drop down.”

Robbie shook with a chill. “I don’t know. I get a spooky feeling. Like I been here before. OR seen this before.”

“It’s the isolation factor of the place. Let me know now, I swoop around before we hit where we saw those survivors in Laurel.”

Robbie thought for a second. “You know what. How many could be down there. If there are too many, we’ll just save Laurel for the next run.”

“Sounds good.” George tilted the helicopter and turned it around.

They had to land a distance from the small farm house, finding a spot clear enough to set down. So official George looked as if he dressed for the occasion. A dress shirt buttoned up and brown dress slacks. He carried a clip board, wore that pair of hundred dollar sunglasses he received from his wife years earlier and a revolver was hooked onto a belt around to his waist.

Robbie on the other hand, looked like he had years before when he was in the service. Plain green military pants bloused at the boots. A green tee shirt to match. His name ‘Slagel’ in black letters was written on the back pocket of his pants. Robbie wore sunglasses also, but he carried an M-16.

Through the high corn stocks they walked following the only indication they could see of the house. The small trickle of smoke that lifted to the sky. The closer they got, the more they heard it. A fragile, female voice quivered and sang ‘*what a friend we have in Jesus*’ and a guitar played notes that didn’t even form chords.

Robbie looked oddly at George as they both emerged from the field and faced the front porch of the house. “Fuck. I told you I was here before.”

“IS she for real or is she screwing around with us.” George asked.

“Maybe she’s whacked. She’s old, but at least she’s not an old black woman.” Robbie lowered his sunglasses and whispered to George as they drew closer to the porch. “This is too eerie. If she says she’s been expecting us. I’m fuckin running and leaving her ass here.”

“Oh, you’re nuts. Coincidence.” George took a deep breath.

The little old woman stopped randomly strumming the strings of the guitar. She set it down next to her. So small and petite she was as she stood up wearing a pink flowered housecoat.

“Mam.” George nodded.

The old woman clapped her hands and smiled with enthusiasm. “Welcome. Welcome. I’ve been expecting you.”

George held back a snicker and cleared his throat. “Yes. We’re uh . . . we’re from Beginnings Montana. I’m George and this is . . .” George turned his head. Robbie was gone. He spun around only to see the swaying of corn stocks from where Robbie had just bolted through.

^^^

Ellen finished pulling her hair back into a ponytail and she looked at her reflection in the mirror above the sink in the examining room adjacent to Joe’s office. “They should have been back.”

“Do you have all that you need as far as supplies go?” Frank asked as he put his shirt on.

“Yeah. I’m good. It’s just a matter of waiting.”

Frank finished tucking in his shirt, then he fastened his belt. “I’m glad they’re taking so long.”

“I’m sure.”

With a shitty smirk, Frank picked up his shoulder harness. “But I have to go. I’ll make another set of rounds and meet them at the hanger.” He moved to Ellen. “You don’t mind?”

“No.”

“Those six people keep coming back. I don’t trust them and they annoy me. So . . .” Frank reached to her face and picked something from her cheek. “Chest hair.”

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Swell.”

Frank snickered. “Gotta go.” He kissed her quickly. “See you in a little bit.” Harness in hand, ready to fasten it, he moved to the door. It opened as soon as he reached for it. “Dad.” Frank said shocked.

“What uh . . .” Joe’s eyes shifted to the both of them. “What are you doing up here Frank?”

“Helping Ellen get ready.”

Joe looked to the shoulder harness Frank fastened on himself. “I’m sure.”

“I’m the helpful guy.” Frank looked back at Ellen, smiled to his father and walked out.

“Hey Joe.” Ellen said nervously. “I got everything ready and I can’t understand what’s taking Robbie and George so long. Did you hear from them? Did they radio . . .”

“Ellen.” Joe halted her rambling. “What are you doing.” He questioned fatherly.

“Getting ready for the survivors.” Ellen asked in a ‘don’t be silly’ fashion.

“No. I mean with Frank.” Joe said.

“He was helping me carry things up.”

“Dean was looking for you.” Joe expected it, and then he saw it. The horrified look Ellen could never hide. “Tell me again Ellen, nothing is going on between you and my son.”

“We were talking.”

“Ellen, don’t bullshit me. All right? Do you . . .”

“Joe.” Ellen said with eyes closed. “We were talking.”

“Ellen, Dean is your husband. Don’t do this to him.”

“Do what Joe. Talk to Frank? Spend time with Frank? Frank is my . . . my . . .” Ellen turned from Joe and fiddled with things that were already arranged on the counter. “He’s my friend and he needs me. I can’t let him be alone.”

Slowly through his nostrils, Joe took a heavy breath. “Just keep your talks and time spent in perspective. I know your history with him. And I know this community is too small for waves to start.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“All right.” Joe had a disappointed tone. “I’m gonna try to radio Robbie and George and see what’s taking them so long. I’ll check back.” he watched Ellen nod. “And Ellen?”

“Yeah?”

Joe reached his hand to her tee shirt. “When you and Frank have your little talks, you might want to watch how close he stands to you. Seems my son . . .” Joe lifted a black hair. “Sheds his chest hair at an astronomically far distance.” Joe released the hair and walked out.

And the moment he left, Ellen released the breath of tension she was so diligently holding in.

^^^

Plunk-plunk was the sound of the old, out of tune guitar and the old out of tune voice sounded nearly the same as she sang, ‘What a friend we have in Jesus’ and it carried out of the open side door of the landed chopper.

Robbie’s hands slammed on the door as he stuck his head inside. “Josephine. Quit fuckin singing that!” He yelled.

“Scared huh?” She winked and giggled. “There’s a storm brewin . . .”

“Don’t.” Robbie held u his finger and walked away. He could hear her instigating snicker coming from the chopper. “I’m dropping her off again.” He told George as he approached him while he interviewed a man.

“She’s old Robbie. Your dad will have a fit.”

“Ask me if I care if my Dad gets mad.”

George shifted his eyes to Robbie. “Do you care?”

“Um . . . pretty much so. Yes.” He watched the smile cross the male survivor’s face. Robbie knew instantly, no matter what George wrote down, the man was putting up a front and he wouldn’t even make it to containment. A gurgling cough carried across the silence of the camp site and Robbie followed it. In the distance a small campfire burned, a cot was by that. A summer day and more warmth was needed. How sick was this person.

Symptoms. Symptoms. Kept running through Robbie’s head. What to look for and what to avoid. As soon as he neared the cot a woman jumped out in a protective mode. She turned her back to Robbie and hovered over the man on the cot. “Hey.” Robbie kept his voice low. “I’m not gonna hurt him.” His hand reached and she jolted her body. Her hair, long, auburn and tangled, hung over her face. “Can I see him?”

She shook here head, jolting her body at Robbie in a signal to get im to leave.

“I just want to help. What’s wrong with him.”

A male voice answered. “Insulin has gone bad.” His dark long hair and beard nearly covered his face. “He’s diabetic. He’ll die soon.” The man walked to the woman and moved her. “Melissa.” He spoke in her ear. “It’s all right. He’s not gonna hurt you. I won’t let him hurt you or Glen.”

“I’m not.” Robbie said. “How old is he?”

The man thought for a second. “Sixty-five. I think. I don’t know. Melissa.” He laid his hands on her shoulders. “Let the man take a look.”

Melissa moved, but behind the man, burying her face in his back.

Robbie was clueless. “Look, I’m no doctor. I don’t know what I’m looking

for as far as illness goes.” He stared to Glen, a bigger man, pale, shaking. “We have doctors in Beginnings. And medication to help.”

“Then you take him and get help. Please.” The man said. “I would appreciate it.”

“No.” Melissa whimpered from behind him. “Don’t take him. No. Don’t let him take him.”

“Melissa honey.” The man turned around to face her. “He needs help we can’t give him. O.K., I’m sure they’ll bring him back.”

Robbie tried to see the woman. “Is she O.K.?”

The man nodded. “Yes. She frightens easily of people. We just joined this campsite yesterday when Glen got too sick to travel anymore. There was some trouble in the last place we were at. People scavenged it.”

Robbie nodded. “And your name?”

“Mark.” He answered.

“You three have been traveling together?”

“Actually, living together. We had settled about thirty miles south of here at an old farm house. Were doing well until, well, like I said.”

“We’re from a place we call Beginnings.” Robbie told him. “We’re taking people in, but I’m going to be honest. We’re being very selective about who they are. We’re self sufficient. Our own civilization. There’s a process you have to go through in order to stay. Step one is this one. You’ve made it this far. If you want, you’re welcome to try the rest of they way.”

“And if we don’t make it?” Mark asked.

“We’ll bring you back here.”

Mark could feel Melissa’s hands digging into his back, again he turned to her. “We should go with him. At the very least we can see where they’re taking Glen. O.K.?”

Melissa nodded.

Mark faced Robbie. “Can we get our things.”

“Sure. But everything is checked prior to entering.”

“NO problem. “I’ll get our things and Me and Melissa will carry Glen to the chopper for you.”

“I’ll help you do that. Let me just tell my partner in crime I got the three of you.” Robbie pointed back to George. “I’ll be right back.” Getting agreement from Mark, Robbie walked over to George.

“Picking them up?” George asked.

Just as Robbie was about to answer he heard Josephine’s voice from the chopper yell something about a dark man. Robbie cringed. “If we have to take her, can I at least gag her?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Long clumps of red auburn hair fell to the floor of the women's locker room at containment. Ellen stood behind Melissa, repeatedly lifting her head. "Just a little more." Ellen ran the comb down as far as it would go. "I'm not taking much off." She spoke softly. "Just the really bad ends. Your hair is too pretty to not be long."

Melissa reached up and touched her hair. "Soft."

"Yeah it is. We've redesigned conditioner here in Beginnings. Actually Henry and my husband re-invented it. It works great. I don't use it much because my hair is too thin and I look pitiful." Ellen snickered. "Henry is the residential inventor. You'll meet him."

Melissa shook her head.

"Sure you will."

Again, Melissa shook her head.

"You don't want to?" Ellen received another shake of a head. "Then you don't have to. Not yet."

"Mark."

"Is that the man you came with?"

"Yes. Mark."

"He's still getting processed Robbie should be here with him shortly. Robbie says you two lived together with the ill man."

"Since the plague?"

"Did you meet after?" Ellen asked.

"Worked . . . worked together."

Ellen paused in her cutting. "Then you have bond. Last bit here." Ellen snipped. "Done." she looked up when she heard the buzzing. "That must be them." Ellen reached for a robe for Melissa who only wore undergarments. "Want to get dressed or greet . . . hey." Ellen chased Melissa who flew from the locker room. She stopped her before she ran out. "You have to put something on. Now if you were wearing a wonder bra, then I'd say go for it. But you aren't. Here." She extended the robe. "Cover up."

Melissa took it. "My clothes."

"We have clothes for you. You can put them on if you'd like or wait. What ever makes you comfortable."

"Mark."

"Mark makes you comfortable?" Ellen watched Melissa nod. "Then let's get comfortable." She tied Melissa's robe for her and opened the women's quarters door.

Robbie was standing at the men's room quarters. "Hey El."

Melissa flew right past him into the room with Mark, grabbing onto him and clinging.

Ellen motioned her head to them. "She doesn't want to leave his side huh?"

"Like glue, she was stuck to him."

Ellen looked in the room at Mark. No beard or no hair. "I see he got the Slagel trademark hair cut."

"Always. Where's Josephine?" Robbie asked.

"Eating. And speaking of which . . ." Ellen popped her head in the door. "We have food for you two. Would you like to eat?"

Mark peeled Melissa from him slightly. "Would you like to eat?" he looked to Robbie and Ellen. "We would. Thank you."

"This way." Ellen waved her hand and led the pair and Robbie to the small dining area. "This is the kitchen. We will cook for you and provide you with three meals a day. Have a seat." She pointed her hand to the table. She then lifted a basket of bread. "Home made. And your first meal is not a biggie.. We found out the disgusting way to feed you something light. So soup." She walked to the counter where a kettle was.

Robbie slid in at the table where Mark and Melissa sat. Josephine looked up to him and smiled. "Don't." He told Josephine.

She grinned. "I'm teasing you. You're a cutie."

"Thanks." Robbie replied.

"Like the way your name goes across that rear end of yours."

Ellen snickered as she set down the bowls for Mark and Melissa. "He does have a cute rear doesn't he Josephine."

Melissa looked at Robbie then Ellen. "Husband?"

Robbie answered. "No. Lover." He grunted when Ellen smacked him. "Actually, El and I have known each other for, What? Fifteen . . ."

"Eighteen years." Ellen corrected.

Robbie whistled. "You're old."

"Thanks." Ellen sat down and joined them. "How many years have you two known each other. Melissa said you worked together."

Mark looked at Melissa. "I guess, five years. We worked in accounting together. Weird huh? We found each other after the plague and stuck together."

Ellen smiled "That's nice. Were you both married before."

Mark shook his head. "I wasn't. Melissa was. No children though. Luck I guess."

Ellen nodded "You don't know how lucky you are for that."

"So we'll live here?" Mark asked.

"Yes." Robbie answered. "Actually, it's just process to break you back into civilization. Like I told you. And . . . there are three others here besides you three. Two little boys and man named Dan. But I think he's leaving to go into the community in a day or two."

Ellen agreed. "Dan is a great guy."

Mark had more questions. "We live in a community here. But with separate sleeping quarters?"

"Yes." Ellen said, then noticed the panicked look on Melissa's face. "What's wrong?"

"No." She shook her head and clung to Mark.

Ellen looked lost. "It's the rules. It's for a short time."

"We haven't been apart." Mark told Ellen. "Not for a minute."

"You'll still be together." Ellen tried to explain. "Just not at night. See, if Melissa was the only woman, I could let you two have the woman's quarters but, she's not."

Josephine spoke up. "I could stay with the men. I have no problems with that."

Robbie snickered. "Josephine. You're bad."

"Yeah." Josephine grinned as she ate her soup.

"El." Robbie looked to her. "The rule was set up for the women's protection. Dan is safe. And until they get out or we bring more men in. Why can't they just crash at night in the skills room together. It's like they're married and they should be together."

"You're right." Ellen said. "There's no reason you can't do that. We'll get blankets and stuff for you. But speaking of marriage." Ellen looked at her watch. "I would like to see my significant other before we get started for tonight Robbie. Take over?"

"Sure." Robbie shrugged. "I'll orientate, grab bite to eat and then we'll finish processing when you get back."

"Great." Ellen stood up. "I'll see you three in a couple hours. Thanks Robbie." She kissed Robbie on the cheek and rubbed his head as she walked past him to leave.

Robbie turned in his seat, watched Ellen walk out and returned to Josephine, Mark and Melissa. "In case you're wondering." Robbie folded his hands and leaned into the table with a grin and a wink. "Yes. We do have a sordid past."

^^^

William knew the second he stepped into the new survivor's room, that Andrea was in her niche. So natural she looked, adjusting the bed, fixing the covers, checking the intravenous and noting in the chart.

"Patient?" William questioned when he stopped in the room.

"Resting nicely as you can see, William. I've cleaned him up."

"Looks normal." William grabbed his chart. "How's his vitals?"

"Strong now. Good job."

"I really didn't do anything except determine what we give him." William set down the chart.

"That in itself is a task seeing how Dean has all those little names for things."

"Tell me about it. I had to tell him just let me know what they do."

Andrea smiled. "You were cute telling him fifty milligrams of thing-a-ma-jig, and one amp of what-cha-ma-call-it."

"Dean understood." William nodded impressed.

"I heard my name." Dean entered Glen's room. "Wow, this is so weird having a patient."

Andrea looked up from Glen to Dean. "Bring back fond memories of the past for you?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "I was in a lab. Anyway . . . his glucose is at 245. Still high."

"But a lot lower than 370." William commented. "We're getting there. And

you have to work on a therapy. I know this is something you dabbled in son, but it's something that will be a definite problem with the elderly."

"I will begin working on it immediately." Dean said.

Softly Ellen's voice called into the room. "Not right now I hope."

Dean spun around. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ellen walked in. "Is that him? Is that the new guy?"

Andrea nodded. "Glen. We have a patient."

"Wow." Ellen smiled. "Who's pulling the night shift then?"

"Me." Andrea smiled brightly. "Just like the old days. Well actually William and I are splitting it."

William pointed to Andrea. "And you should go see those children of yours and get some rest before you come back. You got the odd hours."

"You're right." Andrea looked once more at Glen then to William. "See you at Nine." She walked from the room.

In his turn of watching Andrea leave, Dean looked to Ellen. "So, why don't you want me working now?"

"We got the new survivors. I have to work containment tonight and . . ."

"El." Dean held up his hand. "I promise I'll be done in time to pick the kids up from Maggie."

"No. That's not it. Can I finish?"

"Sure." Dean shrugged.

"I brought us dinner." Ellen snickered at William's 'Aw'. "Funny. I thought you and I could just take an hour or two and spend time together. I feel like I've been neglecting you."

"What about me?" William asked. "I notice you neglecting me more than my son notices."

"Dad." Dean shook his head. "I don't know what to say El."

"Ellen." William stepped closer to the two. "Forget this asshole. What did you bring?"

"Dad." Dean quickly looked at William. "I don't mean about giving her a yes or no answer about dinner. I mean, I'm shocked. This is really nice El." Dean kissed her. "Thanks. And I'm as guilty as you with neglecting lately."

Ellen crinkled her face. "Yeah, I know. I just didn't want to say it. Ready? Dinner's at the lab." She pointed backwards.

"I'm right behind you." Dean laid his hand on her back and moved to the door with Ellen.

"Dean." William called out. "So I suppose this means you won't be working on our newest problem immediately." William didn't get an answer. He turned to Glen. "Guess not." He said to the sleeping man. "And did either one of them think to ask me if I was hungry? No. Meanwhile, Mr. Glen, I cook for the two of them every day. Unappreciative children."

"Dad." Dean stuck his head in the door. "We hear you. Why are you lying to that unconscious man?"

"It's called comatose brainwashing Dean. Not lying." William explained. "I have to ensure every new person, one way or another, doesn't like you."

^^^

How great Frank thought it was that it wasn't even dark and he was heading home. It was the first time in he couldn't remember how long that he was done early. Even though he had put in twelve hours, it seemed like a short day. He was grateful that Greg was such the eager-to-learn security guy, offering to do rounds for Frank for the experience. And Frank, being the helpful guy he was, shoved his rounds on him.

Pool. Darts. Card or talking. Frank went through his mind on what he could do with his fourteen year old son Johnny. It had been too long since he spent an entire evening with him, and quiet time alone was what Frank wanted. But he realized something wasn't right when he saw Johnny walking from the house with George. "Hey John."

"Hey Dad." Johnny, so tall, carried a sleeping roll. "What are you doing home?"

"Check this out. Greg wanted to do my rounds. So . . ." Frank clapped. "How about I make us dinner . . ."

"I ate." Johnny said. "Maggie always cooks for us kids."

"Oh." Frank nodded. "Then let me grab bite and a shower and how about we do something."

Quickly Johnny shifted his eyes to George. "Dad, you weren't supposed to be home."

"I know." Frank smiled "I am though so . . ."

"Tonight's the camp out on the hill. George doesn't work tomorrow and he's taking me and Denny. I thought you knew."

Frank cringed when it dawned on him. "That's right. I forgot."

George spoke up. "Frank, you're more than welcome to go."

Johnny softly whispered a whine. "George. We're supposed to make those things."

"Oh." George nodded. "Frank."

"Not a problem." Frank shook his head. "You guys have something planned and I have to do rounds at dawn anyhow. Maybe I'll sleep or get drunk." Frank smiled. "Haven't done that in a while."

"Frank." George dropped his voice low. "It's not you. It's just that with what we have planned, you can't be there. There's a . . ." George looked at Johnny who seemed impatient. "There's a special father's holiday coming up and Denny and Johnny are using the wild for gift reasons."

Frank nodded with a smile. "Got it. Thanks. Hey, have a good time." Frank lowered down and kissed Johnny on the cheek. "I love you."

"Love you too Dad." Johnny started to walk. "And you should go get drunk. Have a good time. I am."

Frank slowly nodded his head with a fake smile. Spending time with Johnny was what Frank wanted to do. Having a drink or two was an idea, but getting drunk really wasn't an option to Frank, and neither was being alone. And after watching George and Johnny disappear, Frank went into his house. He planned on showering, starting dinner and then he'd seek out his 'other half' for

the friendship and companionship he always knew he could get, especially when he needed it and was feeling like he did at that moment. Alone.

^^^

Empty plates, half full wine glass and candles were in the center counter in the dark lab. Ellen and Dean giggled some, sipping from their drinks as they talked.

“We have work.” Ellen said.

“I know. And I have to get home before Maggie has a fit and runs to Joe again about us being late.”

“I shouldn’t be too late at containment tonight and then you can head back down here.”

Dean shook his head. “Nah. I think tonight I’ll stay home too.” He brought his glass to his lips and sipped. “It’s not just you, it’s me as well. We both work here, then you go to containment, then you go home. We eat a quick dinner and I’m out the door. And if I’m not here during the day, I’m sleeping because I stayed up all night. Nice to see you tonight El.” He held the glass to her.

“Nice to see you too Dean.” She clinked the glass. “But.” She set it down after she took a sip. “I guess it’s the price you have to pay if you want to rebuild the world.”

“And uh . . .speaking of rebuilding the world.” Dean slid from his stool and inched to her. “I have been thinking about something. A lot.”

“What.”

Dean smiled an embarrassed smile and reached for her hair, playing with it. “What would you think about you and I maybe trying to have another baby.”

Ellen laughed.

“What?”

“Are you suggesting this just so we have an excuse to have sex.”

Dean laughed as well. “We really don’t connect too often there.” He closed one eye. “But no. I want to have another baby with you. I want to have big family El. We’ve already started one. Can you think about it.” He leaned closer to her. “For me?”

Softly Ellen winked. “I’ll think about it.”

Laying his hands on Ellen’s shoulders, Dean pulled her to him and Ellen stood. His hands roamed her face as he stared at her, then with a smile he kissed her. “I miss you.”

“I miss you.” Ellen too smiled through the small kisses that eventually led to something more intense.

Frank stood in the doorway of the lab, jaw twitching in jealousy and anger. Dean holding Ellen, his lips kissing her fully and widely. So close they were. Too close. Frank listened and watched for a minute before he walked away. The intimate moment and closeness he witnessed between Dean and Ellen bothered him, but not as much as the fact that they were so wrapped up in their little moment, that they never even noticed he was ever standing there.

^^^

“And you’re sure?” Joe questioned Robbie at containment with a tad of insecurity.

“Dad. Please don’t second guess me. Please.”

“All right.” Joe held his hands up and rocked in Ellen’s chair, taking over her desk as his own. “It’s your baby, but it’s still early . . .”

“Dad.”

“I’ll be quiet about it. Just understand where I’m coming from. Ellen is having a special class for Mark and this Melissa person in the dining room.”

“I think in a few days, Melissa will come around. She’s already increased her vocabulary to three words a sentence.”

“Swell. And this Josephine woman.”

“Well.” Robbie whistled. “She’s a different story. A little eccentric. But fun. She is saying she’s hoping to have sex real soon.”

Joe’s eyes widened. “O.K.” He chuckled. “Didn’t Henry just go back to see her.”

Robbie grinned. “They’d make a perfect couple. But in all seriousness. Other than being eccentric, funny and loose, she’s a sweet old woman.”

^^^

Josephine was humming something that sounded eerie as Henry walked into the skills room. Alone she sat in a corner, crocheting something, looking so stereo typically ‘old woman’. Henry didn’t want to frighten her. After all she had been out in the world alone for over two years. He smiled nice and kept his voice pleasant as he walked up to her. “Hello.”

Josephine raised her eyes from her crocheting. “Prick.”

Henry blinked. “Excuse me.”

“Prick.”

“Maybe you’re confused. My name is Henry, we haven’t met.”

“Ha.” Josephine had an edge to her. “You don’t think I can tell about you.” She pointed her crocheting needle at him. “You’re a real asshole.”

“What?”

“Dick.”

“Hey!” Henry stepped back. “That’s not nice. I’m a nice guy.”

“No you aren’t.” Josephine continued in her crocheting. “Prick.”

Henry stared at the old woman who started to hum again and totally confused and scratching his head he turned from her and started to walk out. “Bye.”

“Prick.”

Henry picked up his pace and moved rapidly to Ellen’s office. “Joe.” He

called out when he walked in.

“Hey Henry. Visit with Josephine over with already?”

“Joe.” Henry gasped out as he neared the desk. “She hates me.”

“What?” Joe laughed. “She just met you. Maybe she’s just being strange with you.”

“No Joe.” Henry shook his head flinging about his hair. “She called me a prick.”

“No she did not.” Joe argued.

“Yes she did.”

Robbie grinned. “She’s perceptive.”

“She’s nasty and mean. And . . . and . . .” Henry rattled. “She called me a dick.”

Ellen heard that when she walked in. “Who called you a dick?”

“Josephine.” Henry answered.

Ellen snickered. “Oh she didn’t. You had to hear her wrong. Maybe she said you look sick.”

“No.” Henry was adamant. “She called me a prick and a dick and an asshole.”

Joe slowly looked at Robbie. “Robert.”

“What?” Robbie tossed his hands up. “I haven’t been alone with her. So don’t look at me.”

“Something should be done, Joe.” Henry complained. “She’s very mean.”

“Henry.” Joe slammed his hand on the desk. “What do you want me to do about it. Besides, I met her. I doubt very much she called you those names. You had to hear her wrong. And if she did, so what?”

“So what?” Henry was offended. “It’s not nice Joe. You can’t come into a new community and start picking on people that have lived there. That’s not a way to make friends.”

Robbie shrugged. “If she’s picking on you, she’s instantly my friend.”

“Shut up Robbie.” Henry snapped

“You shut up.” Robbie came back.

“You probably put her up to it.”

“Blow me Henry.”

“You wish.”

“Boys!” Joe yelled.

“Joe?” Ellen had question to her voice. “Why are you sitting at my desk.”

“Because when I’m in containment this is my desk.” Joe told her.

“Oh.” Ellen nodded. “All right.”

Joe grabbed his head. “And can we stay on one goddamn subject here, my head is spinning. Where were we at.”

“Henry is fighting with me.” Robbie answered.

“No Josephine called me names.” Henry corrected. “*You* started fighting with me.”

“Oh I did not.” Robbie snapped back.

“Oh that’s right.” Henry quipped. “You never do anything.”

Ellen interjected. “I believe we were discussing why Joe becomes a tyrant and steals my desk.”

"Ellen." Joe snipped at her through the rambling voices in the small office..

"Fuck you Henry!" Robbie stood up.

Henry stepped to Robbie. "You know what . . ."

"Hey!" Joe shrieked out then whistled. "Enough!" Slowly he stood up, face red and he walked over to where Robbie and Henry stood face to face. "Two years." Joe graveled his voice as he scolded. "Over two goddamn years you two have been at each other's throats. Do you even realize how close I am to locking you both up and having you beat the shit out of each other."

Robbie bobbed his head. "I'm game."

"So am I." Henry kept his glare on Robbie. "Do it Joe."

"No. For as much as that's what this tension needs between you, I like you Henry and I'm not in the mood to watch my son kick your ass."

Henry gasped, he literally gasped in shock. "Joe!" Wide eyed he turned to Joe. "How can you say that?"

"Because I know my son. And I know my son can fight. Hell, Henry he used to get beat up on a daily basis by his bothers just so he would get tough."

"Still Joe." Henry shook his head at the unfairness of what Joe had said. "I can fight."

"Have you ever?" Joe asked.

"Once in the third grade I . . ."

"Christ." Joe turned away.

"No, Joe, that is so unfair . . ." Henry stopped to sneer at Robbie's snickering. "Shut up Robbie."

"No you."

"You."

"You."

"Boys!" Joe screamed. "Enough."

"Just for the record Joe." Henry stated. "I'm real tough."

Mixed in with Ellen laughter, came Dean's. "Sorry." Dean stopped laughing. "I came to steal my wife."

Ellen spun in surprise to see Dean. "Who's with the kids?"

"My Dad. So I thought while he was there. I would walk you home. Can you leave now?" Dean asked her.

Ellen smiled widely. "You bet." She looked back as she walked to the door with Dean. "Robbie, see you in the morning. Night Joe. Henry."

Joe lifted his hand in a wave as they walked out. "Night." He noticed Henry still staring at him. "What? You have more to say?"

"What about Josephine and her nasty mouth and attitude toward me?" Henry asked.

"Henry." Joe stopped himself from getting angry. "Let's go. Come on. The woman just got here and already you are harping on her. No wonder she called you a prick." Joe led the way to the skills room with Robbie and Henry behind him. Josephine still sat there crocheting. "Evening Josephine."

Josephine lowered her crochet and looked up with a smile. "Evening Mr. Slagel."

"Have you . . . have you met Henry." Joe pointed to him.

"Yes." Josephine nodded. "We chatted. Sweet boy he is."

“So you didn’t call him any names?” Joe asked.

“No. I told him he seemed like a gem.”

Henry pivoted in a spin fast to a snickering Robbie. “I hate you.” He whimpered at him and stormed by.

“What?” Robbie laughed and tossed his hands up.

^^^

Frank took another loud, splashing drink as he sat on his front porch. He rolled the whiskey bottle between his hands. So quiet Beginnings was. So quiet that he could even hear Dean and Ellen’s whispering conversation as they neared him. Frank brought the bottle to his lips getting ready to take another drink, and getting ready for when he saw them.

Ellen swung Dean’s hand a little as they walked. “This is nice thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you wanting to get back to the clinic.”

“No. I wanted to be with you. Spend time with my wife.” They drew closer to their row of houses. “So, uh, have you thought about what we talked about after dinner.”

“The baby?”

“You remembered.”

“Of course.”

“So did you?” Dean asked as they slowed down. “It’s O.K., if you didn’t, yet. I was just curious.”

“I’ve been thinking about it.”

The arrived at their home and Dean stopped walking, turning around to face Ellen. “I just . . . I just want this. I love having a family. Please don’t think I’m pressuring you.”

“I don’t.”

“So uh . . .” Dean moved closer to her. “What’s the uh . . . odds.” He snickered and looked up almost with the bashfulness of someone on his first date. “What’s the odds of us at least practicing tonight.”

“We can’t tonight.”

“The kids should be asleep.”

“No, that’s not why.”

Dean cringed. “El, don’t tell me you’re on your period again.”

“I’ve had problems Dean since the twins were born. Spotting.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do.” Ellen raised her eyebrows. “I’d rather not. Not because I don’t want to be with you, but because my body . . . you know.”

“I should re-invent the pill. If nothing else but to make you regular again.”

“Then I wouldn’t get pregnant.”

“But.” Dean leaned to her, brushing his nose against hers gently. “We’d get lots of viable practice.” With a smile he kissed her. “What do you say about,

kicking my dad out. And then you and I get close. We don't have to make love, just everything up to that point." He winked. "You game?"

With an ornery snicker, Ellen bit her bottom lip. "Can we kiss?"

"Oh you know it." Dean answered with a soft voice.

"I love kissing you." So close Ellen moved her mouth to his.

"Then let's go." Dean kissed her quickly and turned back around. He stepped up first to the steps with Ellen behind him.

Frank's hand came down hard and loud with a bang on the railing, causing a barricade. He stepped in between them keeping his back to Dean and looking down to Ellen. "I need to talk to you."

Ellen peered up at him. "You're drunk."

"I don't care. I know." Frank closed his eyes. His words were slurry and soft. "I need to talk to you. Now. Right now."

"Frank." Ellen tried to use reason. "It's late and . . ."

"El. Come talk with me."

Dean stayed silent long enough. "Frank. I don't want her to go with you. I . . ."

"Dean." Frank merely looked over his shoulder at Dean. "If you don't want her to go. You'll have to physically stop me. And you can't do that." Frank looked at Ellen. "I'm having a bad night. A really bad night. Please. Please. I need you." Frank's voice dropped to a barely heard level. "Please."

Ellen looked beyond Frank to Dean. "Dean."

With his jaw shifting in his anger, Dean stared at Ellen for a second. "Go. You go." He said with a hardened edge and flung open his screen door stepping with rage into his home and slamming the door.

"This better be good." Ellen told Frank..

"Come with me." Frank stepped by her grabbing her hand.

"We can talk here."

"Why don't you want to go with me?" Frank asked. "Huh."

"I'd just rather . . ."

"So you can be with him?" Frank lowered his head to her. "Get close to him?"

"Frank please." Ellen closed her eyes.

"It's not fair." Frank whispered in his drunkenness. His glossy eyes stared deep into hers. "It isn't fair."

"Do you think it's fair to Dean? He's mad right now."

"What." Frank's voice raised some. "And you don't want to fight with him."

"Frank."

"No El. So what. So the fuck what if he doesn't . . ."

"Frank." Ellen tried to silence him.

Frank's arm went out and he pointed to the house with a louder voice. "No. I need you. He has you."

"Frank." Ellen spoke louder then looked to the house. "Let's go. All right?"

Holding Ellen's hand and stammering in his walk, Frank moved to his house. At the steps he bent over, picked up the bottle still on the steps, tucked it under his arm and opened his door.

"Where's Johnny?" Ellen asked standing just inside the door.

"Camping." Frank set the bottle on the floor and closed the door. He moved into Ellen, grabbing hold of her and bringing her into him. Immediately his lips parted and he pressed them to Ellen's as his hands sliding, moved up her arms in such a grip he began to lift her from her feet. He didn't stop. He didn't want to stop, almost in a hunger he kissed her. Wide. Deep. Biting.

Ellen gasped as she pulled back. "Frank, stop. I thought you wanted to talk."

"I said I needed you." Frank turned to kiss her again.

"You said you wanted to talk."

"Don't do this."

"Don't do what?" Ellen asked.

"Don't push me away." His lips went to her neck, gliding them up her. "Don't."

"Frank, you're drunk."

"And I'm alone." He stopped kissing her. "I feel so alone. And you're . . . you're the only one I want to be with and you're . . ." Frank released the grip he had on her. "You're with him."

"He's my husband Frank."

"I don't care!" Frank blasted out. He stumbled a few steps away then spun around to Ellen. "All my life you have been there. All of it." His arm flew out. "And now . . ." Frank's eyes squinted. "There's no one in this world and you aren't there."

"Bullshit." Ellen walked to him. "I am always here for you. You snap, I jump. I do what ever you want."

"Leave him."

"No."

"See." Frank yelled. "You don't do what ever I want."

"You don't want me to leave Dean."

"Yes, El." Frank walked to her stammering. "Yes I do. You, him. It's not right. You . . . me." His dropped his voice. "Now that's right."

"Frank. Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Talking like this." Ellen tried reason. "This isn't you. All right? It isn't. You telling me you're lonely. You want me to leave Dean. You're having a bad night. All of this is the booze talking. I know you."

"Maybe." Frank took a second to rub his eyes. "Maybe the booze is making me say more than I would. But." Softly he dropped his voice and closed his eyes. "It can't make me feel what I don't. El . . ." So much pain seemed to lace Frank's words as he looked at Ellen. "I love you. I do . . ."

"Frank."

"No. I love you." Frank laid his hand on her cheek. "And I'm with you a lot. All the time. I've been with you forever. And a couple months ago. A couple months ago you stood here. Right here." Frank pointed down. "And you said to

Dean you would do anything to make it work with him.”

“He’s my husband.”

“And I’m tired of fuckin hearing that.”

“It’s the truth.”

“And what’s the truth about me?” Frank’s voice squeaked with his emotions as he tired unsuccessfully to keep them under control.

“You promised me you would never let the truth come out. You promised me.”

“I promised you I would never tell Dean what happens between us. I won’t. But that’s not the truth I’m talking about. I’m talking about me. How you feel about me? Do you love me? You never tell me.”

“Of course I love you. That’s a given.”

“Givens don’t cut it El in this world now.” Frank hunched down. “I need to hear more. Just every once and a while let me hear you say something else to me besides Dean is your husband.” Frank’s thumbs brushed again her cheek.

“Dean *is* my husband.” Ellen took a shivering breath as Frank dropped his forehead to meet hers and he closed his eyes. “But you. You always have been, and always will be . . . my soul.”

Frank kissed her at that second, taking in a deep breath as he did so. Loud and emotional as it seeped through his nostrils. He separated from the kiss so briefly. “Thank you.” And then for a long time standing there, Frank kissed her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

June 13 - Beginnings, Montana

Henry was beginning to get a complex. What was it about his effects on the new women in Beginnings. Did he smell? He always sniffed under his arms before going just to eliminate that possibility. He thought he was a cute enough guy. Not repulsive. And he himself enjoyed his personality, so why did the only two new women have such a bad reaction.

The second he stepped into the skills room, Melissa had her stock reaction. Whatever was in her hand dropped and she flew, head down from the room. The children giggled and Henry, as usual, tossed his hands up.

“Should tell you something.” Josephine sewed as she sat in a chair. “No one likes you.”

“But . . .”

“Prick.”

“Hey.” Henry walked to her. “You really should give me a chance.”

“Prick.”

“Come on now.”

“Prick.”

“Can you at least call me something else.”

Josephine looked up with a smile. “Fuckin prick.”

“Oh, now that’s better. Thanks.” Henry, in defeat, walked from the skills room.

^^^

Something had to be wrong. Something really had to be physically wrong, Frank kept thinking. There was no way possible for anyone’s eyes to feel the way his did. As if they lost all mobility and they hurt so bad Frank could barely see. He pushed on his right eyelid seeing if he could relief the pressure, hoping that maybe like a trick elbow he could pop his eyeball back into place. Finger on lid, Frank walked into his father’s office. No Joe. He knew Robbie had a semi-successful run, but had he returned yet? He heard over the radio he was on his way back. Frank walked to the examining room, Ellen’s supplies were there. But no Ellen. He released the eyelid he held closed and looked again to be sure. After the room came back into focus, Frank saw it was still empty. He turned, pressed on his eye lid, pushed on his eyeball and walked through Joe’s office to the waiting room.

“Frank.” George looked up from sitting on the sofa. Johnny on his right, Denny on his left and George had an open book.

“Hey.” Frank walked in. “What’s going on.”

“Little history lesson.”

Johnny looked up with a smile. “It’s fun when George teaches us history. He lets us know which people were real assholes.”

“Johnny.” George shook his head as if those descriptions were secret.

“Oh yeah.” Frank never paid attention to the language. “So isn’t that Jenny’s job?”

“Sort of.” George answered. “But she said she was menstrual.” George paused to snicker at Frank’s whine. “And I thought I would take over since Joe is back.”

“From where?”

“The run.”

“You didn’t go?” Frank asked.

“No.”

“Oh.” Frank scratched his head with his free hand and rubbed his eye.

“Something wrong with your eye Frank?” George questioned.

“Hurts. I think it’s stuck.”

George didn’t want to ask. “Just keep playing with it.”

“I will. So is my dad back or what?”

Joe answered that one from behind Frank. “I’m back.”

“Good.” Frank turned around, shut the door and still held his eye. “I need to talk to you.”

“About what?” Joe asked, sitting down with some tiredness at his desk.

“Dan. Can you let him out. I want to start having more coverage on perimeters. Especially since it’s summer.”

“What about Greg?” Joe asked.

“He’s tougher, so I want to keep him around containment.”

“What’s the matter with your eye.”

“Oh.” Frank pushed on it some more. “I think it’s stuck. So can you?”

“Can I what? And what do you mean it’s stuck.”

“From containment.” Frank cringed. “It fuckin hurts. I’m trying to pop it back into place.”

“Frank.”

“What.”

“Let go of your goddamn eye.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not popping back into place. Didn’t you think for one second you have a headache and it’s all because your hung over?”

“That too.”

Joe grumbled and stood up. “You have to stop this drinking shit.”

“What?”

“You were drunk again last night.”

“Fuckin Robbie was bored. He made me. That asshole.” Frank reached up for his eye. “Now I can’t see. Look.” Frank released his eye and open it. “See. Everything is blurry.”

“Frank.” Joe snapped. “How in the hell am I supposed to see if everything you see is blurry.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. And Christ Almighty Frank, you can’t see because you keep pushing on your eye.”

“It hurts.”

“Well knock it off anyhow.”

“Fine.” After pushing one more time, Frank quit. Then he kept blinking to get everything back in focus. “I think I need glasses.”

“You need smacked upside your head.”

“What?” Frank laughed. “For fixing my eye.”

“No for being the town drunk.”

“Dad.” Frank fluttered his lips. “I am not the town drunk.”

“Lately you have been.”

“Lately I’ve been bored. So I find myself drinking. I’ll slow down.”

“Good.” Joe returned to his desk. “Because when you get drunk, you act like an idiot, storming over to Ellen’s and snatching her from her home.”

“I hate that she’s with Dean.” Frank grumbled.

“Tough. Get over it. And quit bothering her on your inebriated whims.”

“They aren’t whims. I need her when I go for her.” Frank defended.

“You need her more when you’re drunk. Everything is exaggerated.”

“Yeah so.”

“Yeah so?” Joe shook his head. “Quit getting drunk and you won’t need her as bad.”

“You think?”

“Probably not. But at least you won’t be causing trouble. You’re just lucky you’re so goddamn big or Dean would kick your ass.”

Frank laughed. “Thanks.”

“For what.”

“The chuckle.” Still swaying his head, Frank started to leave.

“Frank.”

Frank stopped at the door. “Yeah.”

“I never answered your question.”

“I had a question?”

“Um yeah.” Joe walked back to his desk.

“What was it about.”

“About Dan.”

“What about him?”

Joe’s hand shook from trying to control it. He gave it his all but still he could not prevail over it. Uncontrollable, like it had done since Frank learned to speak, that right hand sprang up and he smacked himself in the forehead in frustration. “Frank. You ass. You asked if I would let Dan out of containment.”

“Oh yeah.” Frank nodded with a smile. “Thanks.” He started to leave.

“Frank!”

“What?”

“Don’t you want to know?”

“Oh.” Frank snapped his finger. “Yeah I do. Sorry. I’m in pain here.”

“Yes, I know. Your eyeball is stuck and you can’t see.”

“Yeah.”

Joe closed his eyes for a second. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Frank!”

“What!”

“Get the hell out of my office!”

“All right!” Frank opened the door. “God, fuckin yell at me for nothing.” He started pushing on his eyelid. “My head hurts again.” Frank closed the door.

Joe sat there. He waited. He actually counted and it happened before he reached his projected time of five seconds. And when it happened Joe gripped tightly to his Zippo.

“Dad.” Frank opened the door and popped his head in. “Are you letting him out?”

Joe didn’t answer. He knew at that second a stroke would be an inconvenience and so would a heart attack, so to relieve that tension that caused his blood pressure to rise, Joe with the Zippo in hand, leaned back and tossed it full force, beaming Frank in the forehead. “Yes.”

“Thanks.” Frank bent down, picked up the lighter, tossed it back. And as he walked out he never shut the door, because he was too busy, rubbing his forehead and pushing in on his eyeball again.

^^^

Rarely did Robbie ever get dark circles under his eyes, that was Frank’s department. But he had them and he felt the tiredness hit him more by the hour. Up late with Frank who made him drink. Field work in the morning. A survivor run. Preliminary processing. Returning two back to the wild and bringing the two into containment.

He yawned long and rubbed his eyes turning to Greg. “Just stay put here until El, get’s back. These new two should be fine. How’s Josephine been?”

“Flirtatious.”

“Figures.” Robbie snickered. “I’m gonna go see how things are with her then I’m taking off.” He watched Greg nod and then Robbie headed to the skills room where Josephine usually was. “Hey you.” Robbie nearly skipped into the skills room.

“Faker.” Josephine says.

“What?” Robbie laughed.

“You act all energetic. You aren’t. You are a tired little boy.”

“Thanks.” Robbie grinned. “I like being called a little boy. So how’s my afghan coming?”

“Good. I’m bored. You think you can talk to that father of yours about letting me out at least to do some baking.”

“What kind of baking?” Robbie asked.

“Anything you like.”

“Chocolate cake.”

“Get me the supplies and it will be the best chocolate cake you ever ate.”

“We got them.”

“Set it up and you’ll get that cake first.”

Robbie raised one eyebrow. “It’s not gonna cost me sexual favors now is it?”

“As much as I’d like to say . . .” The smile dropped from Josephine’s face.

“What is it?” Robbie asked.

The answer came in the form of Henry's voice. "Robbie."

Robbie rolled his eyes and turned around. "What?"

"I've been looking for you." Henry smiled at Josephine. "Hi Josephine."  
"Prick."

Quickly he looked at Robbie. "See, did you hear her?"

"Hear what?"

"Fine." Henry stepped back. "I'm going to Joe. Not about her vulgarity but you. I thought I could come to you first."

"Henry. What the fuck did I do now?"

"The question is Robbie, what didn't you do." Henry started walking out. "Maybe I'll make a list. Perhaps if you would have fixed that gate on the coop we wouldn't have sixty five chickens running around." Henry stormed out.

"Shit." Robbie's covered his eyes and looked up.

"Did you forget?" Josephine asked.

"Yeah." Robbie answered "I've been busy. I'd better go before my dad has a fit." He reached down and pinched Josephine's cheek. "And I promise I won't forget about asking about you."

Josephine knew he wouldn't forget her. And she vowed that her first order of business would be to make Robbie that cake for being so nice to her. And her second order of business would be to find out what kind of pastry or cake was that Henry person's favorite. And she'd make that for him, only after insuring that what ever she made Henry, would definitely make him sick..

^^^

"He's doing well." Andrea told William. "And it isn't like Ellen can't keep an eye on him. But . . ."

"You don't want to release him?" William asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"He needs to stay for . . ."

"Andrea." William interrupted. "Like our children, sometimes, we must let patients go. He has to go. He's better and he should be over at the clinic to start his containment process. I'm sure the gentleman would like to be out and about the community."

"I'm sure too."

William looked over Andrea's shoulder to Glen who sat on the edge of the bed. "Well you get him ready to go. I've left my daughter-in-law waiting long enough." He started to leave and noticed Andrea looking down. "Andrea. Cheer up."

"All right. I just enjoyed have the patient."

"Miguel hasn't been feeling well lately. That ulcer of his. Maybe we can admit him for testing."

Andrea's eyes lit up. "Oh could we?"

"Sure." William patted Andrea on the shoulder. "Just get him in for a check up and I'll do the rest."

“Thank you.” Much happier, Andrea went into the room to attend to Glen. William, glad he could at least brightened Andrea’s day some, moved toward the lab. Ellen paced about. “I take it my sleeping son hasn’t returned yet.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “And he’ll be here soon. Did you . . .”

“Hmm.” William peeked into the tray on the counter. “Fresh blood, Ms. Vampira, new survivors?”

“Yes. Did . . .”

“How many? Two?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded. “William, did . . .”

“You should have put these away. You know how Dean gets.”

“I know. William please.” Ellen stopped him as he put the tray in the fridge. “Did . . .”

“Glen comes to you today.”

“William.” Ellen spoke out in desperation. “Did you do it?”

“Ellen, my favorite daughter in law.” William laid his hands on her shoulder. “Yes I did. And yes, You are having a baby.”

“Oh my God.” Ellen looked speechless

“So. When do you tell Dean?”

“Tell me what?” Dean asked as he walked into the lab.

William saw it on Ellen’s face. The ‘not yet’ screaming at him. “That you’re short.”

“Thanks.” Dean shook his head and kissed Ellen. “Sorry, I took so long. I was so wore out I couldn’t stay up.”

William snickered. “We know that wasn’t a problem at least in one instance.”

So confused Dean swayed his head to his father. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.” William began to hum,. “Ellen did get some nice fresh blood in the fridge for you today.”

“Really?” Dean asked. “New survivors?”

“Two.” Ellen hurried and kissed him on the cheek. “And I have to run. I’ll see you tonight.”

“El.” Dean turned as she ran by him. “What is that you are going to tell me.”

“Well, William will agree. It deserves to be saved for just the right moment. See ya.” With a quick flash of a smile, Ellen darted out.

Lost, Dean faced William. “I wonder what’s up?”

“I can tell you if you’d like.”

“No.” Dean shook his head and headed to the fridge. “It wouldn’t be . . .” He paused by the fridge. “O.K., tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” William shrugged and moved to Dean. He laid a fatherly hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Son. The truth is, she’s leaving you. Gonna give a try to Henry now.”

“What?”

“Yep.” William moved to the door. “She thinks you’re too small, big headed, arrogant, selfish, sexually inadequate, and not to mention, you snore.” He walked out rambling. “You’re history my little son. Gosh, will I miss her.”

Dean shuddered his head then scratched it. “There’s something wrong with my father.”

^^^

“Frank.” Ellen tried not to laugh as she said his name. “There is nothing wrong with your eye.”

“I’m telling you El.” Frank followed her from the dining room to the hall. “When I push on it, it hurts.”

“Quit pushing on it.”

“But if I could just put it back in . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen spun around to face him. “Do you know how dumb you sound, there is . . .” The buzz of the containment door, brought in Robbie. “. . . nothing wrong.” She noticed Robbie stammering. “Robbie? What’s wrong.”

Robbie staggered two steps, tilted his head and dropped to his knees before Ellen with a whine. “El.” He faked cried. “I’m so tired.”

Ellen looked down to the eyes that looked up to him.

“Help me El.” Robbie grabbed her clothing. “Please. Help me. Hide me. Help me to sleep.”

“Robbie.” Frank snapped his name. “Get up.”

“Frank I don’t think I can.”

“Get up.” Frank ordered stronger. “Now.”

“Frank.” Ellen was aghast at Frank’s lack of compassion. “He’s tired.”

“I don’t care. I got a busted eye.”

Robbie’s head perked up and he stood up looking at Frank. “What’s wrong with your eye.”

“It’s stuck.” Frank pushed on it.

“Maybe you just need to pop it back into joint.” Robbie suggested.

“There. See El.” Frank pointed to Robbie. “My brother understands. Help him hide for a nap. And tell Dan he can leave, he won’t listen to me. I want to show him his housing and shove his ass on rounds tonight.”

Ellen rolled her eyes and took a step to the skills room. “I’ll get him, then I have to go. I have to be back tonight for class.”

“So do I.” Frank followed her.

“No you don’t.” Ellen told him.

“Are you going to be here?” Frank asked.

“Of course.”

“Then so do I.” Frank smiled. He saw the look Robbie gave him. “What? Special time.”

Robbie grumbled.

Ellen looked back at Frank. “Well just don’t interrupt tonight with your Frank theories on being civilized, It doesn’t . . .” Just as she stepped to the skills room, she stopped when she heard another buzzing. Turning around, she saw Dirk walk in. “What are you doing here.”

“Joe says saw-rye to stop bye see that new chick-a-de, you got here in this-con-tain-ment.”

“Melissa doesn’t speak to anyone.” Ellen told him.

“Not her.” Dirk said. “Joe-so-fine.”

“Oh.” Ellen nodded. “Follow me. She’s in here crocheting.”

Dirk looked to Frank and winked. “A woman who can use her hands. Day jus don’t make a woman anymore who skill foe-lee uses her hands.”

“Or her mouth.” Frank commented then grunted when Ellen stepped back and hit him. “What?”

Ellen shook her head. “Get your mind out of the gutter Frank. Maybe one day a survivor will show up who can skillfully use her mouth for you. And I’ll point her in your direction.”

“I’d appreciate it.” He saw the glare he got from Ellen. “El, I’m joking.” He looked at Robbie. “Man, she is so serious today.”

Ellen had a march to her as she stepped into the skills room. “Josephine this is Dirk. Watch out he’s a dirty old man.”

Josephine smiled.

Ellen tossed her hands up when the echoing sound of the buzzer was heard again. “What now? Grand central station.” She moved to the skills room door and looked out. Henry walked down the hall. “Robbie it’s for you.” Ellen walked over to Dan who was reading.

Robbie stepped to the door. The flinging back of his head let everyone know who approached. “Fuck.”

“Robbie.” Henry stormed in. “Can you possibly hide anymore?”

“Can you possible get in my shit anymore?” Robbie asked.

“Come on. What have you done today?” Henry quizzed.

“What have *you* done today?”

“I nearly compered my list of things to do. Have you?”

“I would if people wouldn’t keep adding to it.”

Ellen walked between them. “Excuse me. Can you two not fight here. Frank, can you tell them?”

“Tell them what?” Frank asked. “Ready Dan.?”

“Yeah.” Dan seemed so happy. “I’ll grab my gear.”

“Hurry.” Frank poked back with his thumb and stepped aside for Dan to pass him. “Tell them what El?”

“Tell them not to fight.”

“No.” Frank shook his head and walked away.

“What!.” Ellen threw out her hands. “What is with you?” Ellen cringed when she heard Henry bitching some more at Robbie. “Henry.”

“What?” Henry asked.

“Leave my containment center.”

“But I’m speaking to Robbie.”

“No, you’re bitching at him. Go.” Ellen pointed. “Go.”

Henry backed up and looked once more to Robbie. “Getting a girl now to stick up for you.”

Robbie scoffed. “That’s only because I wanted to put you on an even level with someone.”

Henry, after sticking out his tongue. Walked out.  
After rubbing her head, Ellen glared at Frank. "Thank you."  
"You're welcome. For what?"  
"For stopping that." Ellen said sarcastically marching out.  
"I really didn't do anything, but you're welcome."  
Ellen stopped in the doorway. "You would think you did."  
"Did what?"

"Forget it Frank. Go poke your eye or something." Ellen left.  
"I'm trying." Frank looked at Robbie. "What is with her mood. Can she possible be anymore premenstrual."

Robbie snickered. "Actually Frank. No. The question should be, can she be any less premenstrual."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

Robbie opened his mouth and closed it when Ellen popped her head in the skills room door and shook her head. "Um . . ."

"What?" Frank repeated.

"What?" Robbie asked.

"Huh?"

"Excuse me?" Robbie questioned.

"I was asking you what?"

"About?"

Frank stared for a second. "I don't know. I forgot. I have to go. You people." He moved to the door. "And now my eye hurts again." He quickly snuck a kiss to Ellen. "See you tonight." Then he walked down the hall yelling. "Dan! Hurry the fuck up!"

Ellen walked back into the skills room. "Shit. That was close."

"I'm taking it you don't want him to know."

"Robbie, he is the last person I want to find out. Not yet. Trust me. He won't handle it well."

"I guess you're right. Then I won't tell him. But it will cost you."

Ellen smirked. "What?"

Robbie's shoulders dropped and added a tired whine to his tone. "Help me sneak a nap."

Ellen looked upon the face that reminded her if a child begging. So innocent. So tired. She laid her hand on his cheek with a smile. How could she turn him down? He wasn't needed until that night. Greg was there to control things. And . . . it was Robbie.

^^^

"Wail." Dirk shook his head with a smile. "How old are ya now Joe-so-fine?"

"Eighty-three."

"My. My. You don't look a day over sixty-three."

Josephine blushed. "You flatter me."

"Someone ought to." Dirk smiled "bet those breasts of yours are still perky

as can be.”

“Like a military haircut.” Josephine said, “High and tight.”

Crash!

Dirk looked over at Melissa who nervously picked the pieces up off the floor to the game board she had dropped. “Now see that girly there.” Dirk pointed at Melissa. “She cain’t hold onto nothin. Was sat tell ya. Bad hands. Now look at chew. You got that thar crow-shetting goin. And dem hands is goin and goin. Good hands.”

Josephine winked. “They still maneuver well.”

Dirk smiled.

^^^

“Robert.” Joe called his name. “Robert,”

Robbie only grumbled.

“Robert get up.”

Quickly Robbie opened his eyes. It was dark in the men’s quarters, on that corner cot where he slept. “Shit.” he sat up.

“What the hell were you doing?” Joe asked with a scold.

“Um . . .” Robbie rubbed his eyes.

“Dad?” Frank interrupted. “I believe he was sleeping.”

“Thank you Frank for that keen observation.” Joe quipped. “Christ Robbie, I’ve been looking for you for two hours.”

“I’ve been here.” Robbie stood up.

“Obviously.”

“Why . . . why were you looking for me.”

“You fixed the gate, but you flew the coop like our chickens. We needed help out there.”

Robbie cringed. “Dad can you just hold off bitching at me until I wake up.”

“You shouldn’t have been sleeping.”

“I was tired.” Robbie defended as he walked from the skills room.

“Well, you have a bed for sleeping. And a home. You also have all night for doing that. But you know goddamn . . .”

“Dad.” Robbie spun around.

“Oh, no.” Joe shook his head. “Don’t tell me you are telling me to be quiet.”

“No.” Robbie shook his head. All he thought about was coffee. He moved toward the dining room.

“Good. Because daylight hours are viable hours. To be worked and not spent sleeping because you spent the night before up all night drinking.”

“Yeah.” Frank got his comment in.

“Frank.” Joe said irritated. “Why are you here.”

“Social skills class tonight. I’m helping.”

“Why?” Joe asked.

“Because I can.”

“Oh that’s right.” Joe spoke with sarcasm. “You’re the ultimate modernized and civilized man.”

“I am.”

“Your ass Frank.” Joe snapped. “You walked around all damn day poking yourself in the eye.”

“Pushing it back into place.” Frank corrected. “It hurt.”

Hearing Joe’s stock ‘Christ’ Robbie grinned as he made a cup of coffee. He felt the weight lifted off his shoulders and was ever so grateful Frank was there. Because no matter how angry Joe got with Robbie, when Frank stepped into the picture, Joe’s irritation always shifted Frank’s way.

^^^

“I can’t wait any longer.” Ellen hurried and handed William Billy as she proceeded to gather things for her social skills class. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“No not at all. You go.” William responded.

“Thank you. I was supposed to be there ten minutes ago. Joe will have a fit.” She rushed to the door. “Alex is sleeping, but she’ll probably wake up. Tell Dean . . .” Ellen smiled when the door opened. “Hi.”

“I’m sorry. I got wrapped up.” Dean stepped into the house. “You’re leaving, huh?”

William rolled his eyes. “I am so glad you’re the brilliant scientist.”

Ellen chuckled. “I’ll see you tonight.” Arms full she moved to the door and kissed Dean on the cheek. “Oh one more thing.”

“What’s that?” Dean asked.

“Remember the other day when you asked me to think about having a baby.”

Unexpected was that comment, and Dean immediately looked to his father then to Ellen. “Why are you ringing this up right now as you are walking out.”

“Because, I want you to know my answer and it adds dramatic effect. The answer is, I won’t think about it.”

“El.” Dean stepped to her. “Can we not discuss this in front of . . .” He twitched his head William’s way. “Him.”

“Him?” William stated. “Him?”

“Dad.”

“Dean.” Ellen laid her hand on his cheek. “I’m not thinking about it because there isn’t time. I’m pregnant. See ya.” She darted for the door.

“Whoa!” Dean quickly snatched her back. “What?”

“I have to go.”

“Repeat what you said.”

“She said . . .” William spoke slow. “She is Pregnant.”

“Oh my God.” Dean nearly shrieked. “You’re kidding. You are, aren’t you. This is a sick William and Ellen trick.”

Ellen shook her head. “Nope. Pregnant.”

“Oh shit. But you were on your period the . . .”

“Spotting. I told you I was spotting. And that’s why I’d like to keep it between us three for now. With the spotting I don’t want to jinx the pregnancy until I’m out of the danger zone.”

“You got it.” Dean smiled. “Wait, don’t go.”

“I have to.” Ellen told him.

“Wait.” Dean moved to her and even though her arms were loaded, he wrapped his arms around her and embraced her. “I am really, really happy about this. Just know that. O.K.?”

“O.K.” Quickly Ellen kissed him.

“And surprised.” Dean shook his head. “Boy am I shocked.”

William snickered. “Imagine my surprise as well. And here I thought you two had a celibate marriage.”

Dean glared up to his father. “Where do you get this shit from?”

William pointed to Ellen.

Ellen hunched. “Sorry. And I really have to go. We’ll talk all about it when I get home.”

“All right.. I’ll wait up. And El, thanks.”

Ellen smiled, opened the door again and hurriedly left.

With a near glowing look, Dean spun to his father. “Wow. I’m gonna be a Dad again.”

“Yep.” William exhaled and moved toward the kitchen holding Billy. “Those poor children.”

^^^

Melissa really want to help in the clean up process after the class. She didn’t say why, but Ellen knew. With the two new men, Melissa was losing her private bedroom with Mark. And maybe her diligence in sweeping a floor that didn’t need swept took away the nervousness she was starting to feel in advance over her first night separate from Mark. Ellen assured her that they could hag out in her office if they wanted to. Melissa didn’t say whether she liked that idea or not. Melissa didn’t say much at all.

“Melissa I can do this.” Ellen told her.

Melissa shook her head.

“O.K.” Ellen spoke softly. “I’m heading to my office.” She moved slowly from Melissa and past Frank who kept that stare of intimidation on all the survivors. “Knock it off Frank.”

“What?” Frank asked dumbfounded as she hit the hall.

Ellen stopped. She heard Joe’s voice in a subtle strong way coming from her office. It had that leaving tone to it, getting louder with each syllable.

“You got it? Good. Take care of it.” Joe emerged from Ellen’s office. “I’m heading home El. Goodnight.” Joe walked up to her and kissed her on the cheek. He saw Frank’s back as he stood in the skills room doorway. “Frank. Go home.”

“No.” Frank answered.

“And you go home too.” Joe pointed to Ellen. “That argument Frank gave

on why it's still civilized to eat with your fingers set us back.”

Ellen only nodded, feeling something in her gut pulling her. She moved to her office and saw Robbie leaning forward, staring down to her desk as he gripped the edges of it. “Hey.” She stepped to him laying her hand on his back. “What’s wrong.”

“El.” Robbie stood up straight. “Nothing.”

“Was Joe yelling at you again.”

Robbie exhaled and looked up to the ceiling. “What else is new. He rattled off some list. A list of things I said I would do, but blew off.”

“A list?” Ellen chuckled. “Robbie there can’t be list. You do a lot.”

“There’s a list all right.”

“Is it wrong?”

“Nope.” Robbie shook his head. “Promised to do each and everything. But what no one sees is, yeah, I promise then someone else comes along and I try to help them.”

“You try to please everyone and it just can’t be done.” Ellen stepped into him. “Don’t feel bad. You do the best you can.”

“I try. I just feel right now everyone is against me.”

“Not everyone.” Ellen smiled. “I’m never against you.”

Robbie leaned down to give an appreciation hug and kiss to Ellen, when Frank walked in.

“I’m telling Dean.” Frank said

Ellen, irritated faced Frank. “I thought you were going home.”

“No. My Dad said to.” Frank plopped in the chair.

“Go home.” Ellen shook her head.

“Nope. I want to steal some time with you.”

“You always steal time with me.”

“I’m greedy. I want more.”

Robbie released a soft snicker. “I’m gonna go finish up out there. I’ll stop back before I head home.”

Ellen nodded as she watched him leave.

“El.” Frank grabbed her hand. “Sit on my lap.”

“No.”

“Come on.” He tugged. “We can neck.”

“Frank.” Ellen puled away.

“Bet you’d sit on Dean’s lap.”

“What?” Ellen said with a snicker. “Where is that coming from?”

“From what I see.”

“And what do you see Frank?”

Frank hesitated then added a bit of anger to his voice. “You trying to make it work with him all of the sudden.”

“All of the sudden?”

“All of the sudden.” Frank reiterated. “And don’t say it’s always been that way.”

“It has.”

“Bullshit. Since when did you ever say you wanted another baby.”

Ellen had to stop. She knew if she said anything her words would stumble.

“What . . . what are you talking about?”

“I heard you two the other night talking about having another kid.”

Ellen let out her breath slowly. “We were talking about it and thinking about it.”

“You really should think about it.”

“Now that comment surprises me.” Ellen said.

“It shouldn’t. Because if you think about it you’ll see what kind of problems you’re gonna have. Really, El, think about. Whose baby is it more likely to be.”

Pummeled. Was Ellen that stupid? Did it not even cross her mind? So naive to nature that she immediately assumed, husband meant father. Her insides shook at the thought of what Frank said. Her lips moved in a quickened pace as she searched for a response and was saved when Dean walked in.

“Don’t you ever have anywhere else to be, Frank?” Dean asked. “Ready El.”

“Yeah.” Ellen moved to Dean. “Night Frank.”

“Whoa. Wait a second.” Frank stood up. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Excuse me?” Dean asked.

“Let’s just go.” Ellen whispered. “Good night Frank. If you need me . . . get me. O.K.?” Ellen made eye contact with him. “O.K.?”

“No.” Frank ignored her and stepped to Dean. “What was that comment about? The ‘Don’t I have anywhere else to be?’”

“What do you think it means Frank.” Dean snapped with irritation. “It means every time I see you, you’re always around my wife Frank. With no where else to go.”

“Maybe I’m always around your wife because I got used to always being around your wife. I’m not used to this Dean playing husband shit that’s happening.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dean released Ellen’s hand, never noticing the worry that spewed across her face. “Playing husband?”

“Playing husband Dean. That’s what you’re doing now. This shit being there for her. Walking her home.”

“She’s my wife.”

“Yeah and when did you realized that.”

Ellen’s eyes widened and she stepped between Frank and Dean. “Frank. Dean. Please. Please.” Her eyes closed. “Don’t. Drop it.”

“No El.” Frank argued. “I didn’t start this. Him and his coming in here and fuckin saying something snide. When I didn’t say jack to him.”

“What do you expect me to say Frank? Hello, nice to see you, how are you?” Dean asked with a scoffing edge. “How do you expect me to react. Always finding her with you. I walk in. There you are.”

“Here I am.” Frank held out his arms.

“Get a life Frank.”

“Oh no little man.” Frank moved to Dean. “I would have a life. You took my life.”

“As I recall Frank. You didn’t want that life.” Dean perked up his eyes

brows. “And what? Now you’ve changed your mind. Is that why you’re around her all the time?”

“How would you know Dean. Huh? How do you know how much time I spend with my friend?” Frank questioned. “Where are you most of the time. Buried in your lab. What did you do, cure something and now you wanna take a break and play husband. Try to make this marriage work?”

Dean’s mouth opened and he shook his reddened face. “Who the hell are you to pass judgement on my marriage. When you Frank, are the cause of any problems we have.”

“Oh that’s fuckin bullshit. If I’m the cause of the problem, it’s only because she has to come to me because you can’t give her what she needs.”

“Frank!” Ellen screamed his name, scolding, stepping further between the two men who rapidly approached each other with each heated word they spoke. She couldn’t take it. She felt their tension ten times worse. She just wanted to scream, especially when she felt her efforts fail. She was frightened of the silence between them. The cold hard stares. And Ellen could have fallen to the floor in relief when Melissa barged in.

“Ellen.” Melissa stopped cold, looking panicked. And then she froze.

“What’s wrong.” Ellen’s passing through Frank and Dean turned their attention Melissa’s way. “Is something wrong.”

Melissa’s eye shifted suddenly to Frank and Dean. Her mouth opened, stuttered, and no words come out.

“Melissa?” Ellen questioned again.

“I . . . I want to sleep.”

Frank’s mouth dropped open with slightly rolled eyes. “Then go to fuckin sleep then. We’re talking here.”

“Frank.” Ellen scolded then like a snap of a finger changed her tone. “Melissa?”

Melissa made mumbling nervous sounds.

“Melissa? Is something wrong.” Ellen questioned.

Melissa nodded

“Melissa is something wrong that you can’t sleep?” Ellen asked.

Another nod from Melissa.

“What is it?” Ellen waited. Only a stare did she get.

Dean gave it a shot. “Melissa.” He stepped to her. She stepped back.

From Ellen, to Dean, to a mouth stammering Melissa, Frank’s views went. And then he lost all patience. “Melissa! This isn’t fuckin survivor charades! Spit it out!”

“Frank.” Ellen blasted him.

“What!” He threw his hands up. “Fuck it. I’ll go see.” He spun and barged out of the office down the hall. Figuring she wanted to sleep, and she couldn’t, the trouble had to be in the sleeping quarters. Ready to find the bug that *she* probably brought in from the wild with her, Frank turned into the skills room.

Before Dean and Ellen could even catch up to Frank, they heard his echoing, blasting.

“Fuck, like I needed to see *this* before bedtime” He yelled then came from the woman’s sleeping quarters, stomped heavily out and slammed the door.

Ellen quickly looked to Dean, then to an approaching Frank. “What’s wrong.”

Frank held his hand up to Ellen, and moved past her to her office. “Melissa.” Frank popped his head in the door with a different tone. “I apologize.” He stepped from the room and faced Ellen and Dean.

All that Ellen kept thinking was something had to be wrong. Frank just apologized. “Frank. What is it?”

“Get the woman a sedative Dean. It’s no wonder she traumatized.” Frank indicated with a point to the women’s sleeping quarters. “Fuckin Dirk and Josephine are going at it like wild dogs in there.”

Robbie flew from the diningroom. “No shit?” He grinned. “Oh. Man.” He chuckled then noticed the shocked expressions on Dean, Ellen, and Frank’s faces. He quickly cleared his throat when he saw the news didn’t amuse them as much as it amused him. “Oh, I’m so offended.” With a snort that escaped from the snicker he held back, Robbie returned to the dining room to finish cleaning up and release that laughter he kept inside.

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

October 2 - Beginnings, Montana

“No!” Frank griped, his voice echoing in the trees.

Robbie tossed up his hands. “Sorry Frank. That’s the rules.”

“I know the rules but . . .”

“No.” Robbie shook his head.

“You called all-e all-e in free.”

“Hal called it, not me. So you’re it.”

Frank stomped and in his turned he looked to Dean. “You’re the judge. Am I it.”

Slowly Dean nodded his head. “Sorry. Hal called it not Robbie. Robbie is *it*. So he has to be the one to call. You should know the difference between your brothers voices.”

“Fuck.” Frank bit his bottom lip. “All right. Go ahead Robbie call Henry and Hal in.”

Robbie did. Like a kid, only with a deep voice he called his ‘in free’ for the two who remained hiding.

Hal came into the clearing just beyond the east tunnel entrance. “Got you Frank.”

“You’re an asshole.” Frank held up his finger, then pressed it to his earpiece. “Go ahead dad. I hear you.” Frank didn’t see the cringe on Dean’s face. “What was that.”

“I said . . .” Joe blasted in his ear. “Are you guys up at the east tunnel entrance.”

“Um no.” Frank said. “We aren’t. Why?”

“Tracking is getting activity.”

“We’ll check it out. We’re near there. Hopefully it’s none of those killer babies.”

“Thanks. Let me know. And if you see Dean, can you tell him I’m looking for his ass.”

“O.K.” Frank disconnected the radio call. “Dean. My Dad’s looking for you.”

Robbie stepped forward. “Is that what he wanted. Dean?”

“No.” Frank answered. “He wanted to know if we were here. I told him no. I didn’t want to get in trouble for being out here. So now we’re supposed to be here. Make sense?”

Robbie shook his head. “No. We gonna play one more game before we move on?”

Hal nodded. “Sure. Why not. Frank.”

“Yeah.” Frank looked at his watch. “We still have time. Dean, you gonna play?”

Dean snickered. “No Frank. I think I’ll be judge and just enjoy the redundancy of a bunch of grown men playing hide and go seek.”

After flipping Dean off, Frank turned to Henry. “Henry, be it for me.”

“No.” Henry told im.

“Come on Henry, be a pal.” Frank begged. “Please. Be it.”

“No Frank. You lost. You were found first. So you have to be it.”

“But Hal cheated.”

“Tough.”

Frank turned his back to Henry and winked at Hal. “Gees, and I thought you were my friend.”

“Aw.” Henry whined. “All right. I’ll be it.”

“Cool.” Frank clapped his hand. “Thanks.”

Henry walked over to the designated tree, covered his eyes and started to count.

Frank snickered, placed his finger over his lips and in a sneaky walk, waved his hand to his brothers and Dean.

Dean was a little lost at first, being given the quiet signal by Frank who moved back toward the tunnels. And then it hit Dean. And figuring, what the hell, he quietly stood up, and followed the three Slagel Brothers, who silently laughed, into the tunnels. And once inside the tunnel system, the four of them didn’t hide. They kept on moving.

“One hundred.” Henry stopped counting and turned from the tree. “Ready or not. Here I come.” He stepped forward and looked. No Dean. *What? Did he hide too?* Henry wondered and shook his head in disgust. “Time!” He called out. “Unfair. You should have let me know Dean was hiding. Guys.” Henry moved about the wooded area. “Guys! All-e, all-e, in free.” Henry waited. He wasn’t going to play if they weren’t going to play right and he was regretting ever agreeing to be the nice guy for Frank. Henry stopped walking. “Guys! I called all-e, all-e, in free.” He scratched his head and listened for sounds. Nothing. “Guys?”

## IN RETROSPECT . . . THE THIRD YEAR

When all hell breaks loose . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

October 2 - Beginnings, Montana

His name was Leroy. And he really liked living in Beginnings. He was so happy when the choppers came and picked him up three weeks earlier. He didn't even mind the containment process. Some of those in the crowded building were a bit rough. But not Leroy. He guessed that was why he was chosen to come. A mild manner man who most of the time lived in his own mind world. Delusional but harmless. Small, not bigger than five foot eight. He kept his hair long despite numerous attempts by the Slagels to shave it. He didn't talk to many people, by choice. Perhaps that was why he was bored on his first evening out of containment.

It was oddly warm for an October evening, and Leroy decided to take advantage of that. Walk around. See what was there. But even that became tedious. He didn't like the social hall. Didn't believe in alcohol and the social hall was also too crowded. So Leroy returned to the living section.

He wandered to the row of houses totally bored and wanting to find some entertainment. To that end house he walked, and up the four front steps. Leroy exhaled in relief as he walked inside. He knew he was hungry and knew there were plenty of snacks to be found. Making his way through the livingroom, he walked into the kitchen and grabbed a couple cookies from the counter.

They tasted good, and like he sensed from outside, the bedroom was the best place to not be bored. So holding his cookies, crumbs dribbling down his mouth, he walked up stairs and to the master bedroom. A floor chest, beautiful and oak was against the far wall opposite the bed. A perfect place to sit, and Leroy did. So quiet--and he wasn't even trying to be--he sat down, munched his cookies and watched. Unnoticed. It was like he viewed a children's novel.

"Sweet Jesus." Was the singing pleasure voice of Andrea.

Grunt was the noise made by Miguel

And squeak-squeak went the bed.

Leroy watched the entangled bodies move about up and down and all around..

"Sweet, Sweet Jesus."

Grunt.

Squeak

"Oh! Yes!"

Grunt.

Squeak.

"Sweet Jesus."

Grunt.

Squeak-squeak.

Crunch.

"Sweet . . ." Andrea stopped and tapped Miguel on the back. "Did you hear that."

"I hear your love." Miguel grunted again.

“No.” Andrea tapped.

“It is supposed to be yes.”

“I heard a . . .”

Crunch.

At the same time Miguel lifted up some, Andrea peeked over his burly shoulder.

Frank pulled the door closed at containment and watched the light above the door go out. “Do you hear me El?” He asked as they walked toward the living section with Jonas.

“I hear you.” She said.

“Never let that radio get far from you. Keep it on your belt at all times. Got it.” Frank ordered. “Tell her Jonas.”

“I’m getting bad vibes about those three new ones. They aren’t the same as when they first came in.”

“See.” Frank pointed to Jonas. “He knows. So, just incase there is trouble.”

“I know. I know. I . . .” Ellen’s words were cut short by the long shrill scream of Andrea. And before she knew it she was left behind by Frank and Jonas who had taken off running. “Hey!” Ellen called out then ran to catch up.

Frank bolted to the door of Andrea’s home making it there at the same time, Joe, not wearing a shirt came out of his house. “Dad. Did you hear that?”

“Yeah. Miguel’s there I wonder what’s wrong.”

Henry came flying up the street. “I heard a scream.”

“Me too.” Robbie raced on the scene, George right behind him.

“Should we go in?” Frank asked.

Joe listened. “I don’t hear anything. It may have been nothing.”

Another Andrea’s scream rang out. This time with inaudible words attached.

Frank didn’t hesitate anymore. Even if Andrea and Miguel were fighting, something just didn’t sound right about it. Into the house he flew, zooming in on the sounds of Andrea’s scream. “Andrea. You all right!” He cried out as he charged up the steps, the train of Joe, George, Henry, Robbie and Ellen behind him. “Andrea are you . . .” Frank stopped so suddenly in the doorway of the bedroom that he nearly caused a five person pile up when everyone rammed into him. “Oh shit.”

Frank didn’t know what to do. No one did. Frank stood just inside the door, while everyone else, fought to stick their heads in to take a peek. There was Miguel, wearing only his boxer shorts. He fought diligently to pull back a naked Andrea. Andrea’s arms swung , her breasts flopping about with every hard swinging motion she made as she beat upon a down and out Leroy hovering on the floor.

“Frank.” Miguel struggled with her. “Help.”

Not wanting to really touch a naked Andrea, Frank stepped forward. “Andrea!” He screamed out, then reached down to move Leroy. “Knock it the fuck off!”

Miguel took advantage of the separation Frank caused between Andrea and

Leroy and he pulled her back further. She swung out her leg once more, missing Leroy and nailing Frank.

Frank grunted in irritation, then standing before Leroy still hunched on the ground, he faced Miguel and a still verbally hysterical Andrea. "Calm down! What the hell happened!"

Andre let out a single, shivering bellow. Her head flung back against Miguel's chest, her arm pointed outward and she cried out so dramatically as if some sort of Joan Crawford wanna-be. "I want him out!"

Frank was confused. "Did he attack you guys?"

"No!" Andrea shook her head. "Worse!"

"Worse?" Frank questioned and quickly turned his head with a glare to silence the snickers coming from the door. "Worse?"

"Worse!" Andrea repeated in the same drawn out manner. "He visually violated me!"

It took a second, Frank's mouth opened in question and then after checking out the physical state Andrea and Miguel were in and assessing the scenario, Frank got it. He realized what had happened. He cleared his throat, drew up a serious look and walked to the door. "Dad. Council's decision." Then crinkling up his mouth to keep in the smile that wanted to come out, Frank walked out.

^^^

"I'm hungry." Jonas stated as he led the way into his home.

"Me too." Frank followed and closed the door. "Ousting people does that."

"He's not ousted yet."

"Will be."

"How many does that make?" Jonas asked.

"Now are we counting the ones that made it through the gate or the one who made it to Beginnings?"

"Both."

Frank reached into his back pocket and pulled out a little notepad. He flipped it open. "Including Leroy, we've ousted twenty-two from containment and beyond And. . . I can't read my writing. Oh, yeah, sixty-eight upon first screening."

Jonas whistled. "At least they aren't bringing them in everyday. Remember." He shook his head. "Josephine muffin?"

"Yeah." Frank sat on the couch while Jonas went into the kitchen.

"Here." Jonas came back out with a plate of mini muffins and set the plate on the table.

"Did she make these for you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She likes me." Jonas took a muffin.

"She like me." Frank stated.

"No, Frank. She doesn't. You're mean to her."

"Am I?"

“Yes.”

“Fuckin survivors.”

“See.” Jonas pointed and wiped the crumbs from his mouth. “You are so prejudice.”

“I am not.” Frank was offended.

“Are to. You called Leroy a Fucking Survivor.”

“No. I called him a fuckin survivor pervert.”

“I stand corrected.” Jonas moved to the steps. “At least he’ll be out by tomorrow when Robbie and George hit that town.”

“What is up with that. It’s October.”

“Last one for a while. You know Joe wants to get some people in for when we plow the fields. And you also know, you have men to train for when we make runs. We need men for those. Things are getting bad out there.”

“True.”

“Besides, we only have six left in containment and four at the clinic. There’s room for more . . . and do you mind if I go change into something more comfortable?” Jonas pointed to the steps.

“No.”

“Good. I hate this military garb. Be down in a jiff.”

“Take your time. I’m enjoying these muffins here.” Frank reached for one. “Fuckin starved.” He shoved the whole mini muffin in his mouth then realized he had nothing to wash it down with. He went into the kitchen and poured some milk, bringing it back out to the livingroom with him. “So!” Frank yelled out. “When do you think these three new guys will snap!”

“Soon.” Jonas yelled from above. “I don’t think much longer. A guard should be put in there.” His voice drew nearer as he came down the steps.

“I agree. I hate the fact that El is there alone sometimes. It’s different when Robbie’s with her.”

“True.” Jonas walked in the room. “Greg does well. Maybe we should just move him inside.”

“Or John Matoose.”

“Busy with Mechanics.” Jonas plopped on the couch with an exhausting exhale. “Ah better.”

Frank caught glimpse of it. At first he thought it was his imagination, then after quickly jolting his views he saw for sure he wasn’t mistaken. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

“Something more comfortable.” Jonas tightened the belt on the long bright pink satin robe he wore with fluffy slippers.

“You look gay.”

“I am.”

“But still Jonas.”

“What?” Jonas was confused. He crossed his legs and reached for a muffin. “I’m comfortable. Nothing constricting. I’m in my own home and . . . this material is divine.”

Frank brushed the crumbs from his hand and reached over and touched the sleeve. With a closed mouth, he nodded. “It is soft.”

“See, I told you. I have a blue one identical to it, would you like to borrow

it.”

“Can I have a pair of fuckin fluffy slippers too?”

“With out a doubt.”

Frank pushed the plate of muffins to Jonas. “Each your muffins.” He watched Jonas, with a smirk, pick up a muffin so dainty-like and nibble at it with a school-girl type giggle. Frank just swayed his head with snicker, then went back to their conversation about survivors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

October 3 - Beginnings, Montana

What started out as an attempt to break from containment, became a place for Frank to take out his frustrations. With a slam, his tightly closed fist nailed into the side of a survivors head, immediately sending the man back and unconscious to the hallway floor.

“Jonas. I need juice!” Frank blasted out, grabbing another by the shirt and tossing him hard into the wall, then hitting him in the face. The third then came after Frank and he flipped him over his shoulder and to the floor at the same time Jonas called out.

“Frank. Here!”

Just as Frank’s boot slammed down on the third man’s chest to secure him to the ground he spun his views to Jonas, lifted his hand, and caught the syringe Jonas tossed. “Get the other!” Frank called as he bent over gripping the man’s shirt. He jerked him up to his feet, slammed him against the wall, uncapped the syringe with his teeth and jammed the needle into the man’s throat, in three seconds, his head slumped and Frank dropped him. He turned to see Jonas injecting the second.

“What about him?” Jonas motioned his head to the first man.

“Nah.” Frank nudged his with his boot. “He’s out cold. If he wakes up we’ll hit him. Other than that. We have to save the tranquilizer. Is El All right?”

“Dean’s with her.”

“Fuckin Dean.” Frank shook his head in disgust. “I’ll be back.” He stepped over a downed man to head to Ellen’s office. So irritated at Dean Frank was. Dean was the distraction that the three survivors needed. The same three Frank and Jonas had worried about the day before. It was innocent enough that Dean stopped by to tell Ellen Robbie picked up quite a few survivors and was weeding them out. But the second, he stole her attention from the group was the second the three lunged on that. Grabbing hold of Ellen, threatening to break her neck if Dean didn’t open the door. He did, only to call for Greg as he was supposed to and hence starting the whole mess. The three turning violent when Greg stormed in. Massive disruption began with the throwing of Ellen, and Greg’s then valiant attempt to take all three on. In the midst of the chaos and helping Ellen, Dean got his call out to Frank. And it ended less than one minute later when Frank walked in.

In all fairness Frank did know it wasn’t Dean’s fault. But he still wanted to blame Dean for something.

Before Ellen Dean knelt, hands on her knees, face close to hers. “Are you sure you are all right.”

“Dean, I’m fine.”

“I’m worried. You took a tumble.”

“Really, I feel fine.”

“No cramping?” Dean asked.

“None.”

“I’d feel better if you would just let me take you over to the . . .”

“No.” She laid her hand on his face. “I’ll be fine. Go finish your work.” Just as she leaned down to Dean to kiss him, Frank cleared his throat signaling his entrance into her office.

“Sorry to interrupt.”

Dean stood up. “Yeah right.”

“Fuck you Dean.”

“No, fuck you Frank.”

“Please.” Ellen held up her hand with closed eyes. “No fighting.”

Frank glared at Dean then moved to Ellen. He squatted next to the chair. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“You aren’t hurt anywhere?”

“No. Thank you for handling things.”

“Always.” Frank kissed her on the cheek, looked at Dean then stood up. “All right those three are out cold and then they’ll be out for good. Jonas and me are taking them up.”

“You’d better call and see if Robbie left yet.” Ellen suggested. “Dean said they already picked six to come here.”

“Yeah, I’d better.” Frank ran his hand over her head. “I’ll check back.” He grabbed his walkie-talkie as he moved from her office. “Jonas. Greg.” Frank called to the two who handled the ‘out’ survivors. “Take them to the jeep.” Frank brought the radio to his mouth. “Dad. Dad. Come in.”

“Yeah Frank.” Joe responded.

“Had some trouble at containment.”

“What happened.”

“Those three Jonas and I were talking about, snapped. They have to go.”

“Anyone hurt?” Joe asked.

“No, El’s a little shaken. She got thrown, but otherwise is fine.” Frank buzzed himself through the door. “Is Robbie and George still hanging about up there or did they take the people back yet.” He stepped outside.

“Nope.” Joe answered. “They’re still weeding., Picked up a bunch, but between us and whoever is listening. Most will go back out. Do you need me to wait up here for you, I was on my way back into town with the ones Dean examined.”

“Nah.” Frank said as he jumped in his jeep. “Just tell Robbie, Jonas and me are dropping the three off at Holding and we’ll be up.”

“Got it.”

“On our way.” Frank hooked the radio back onto his belt and with a slight screech pulled the jeep from curbside causing the unconscious survivors to bounce around as he drove.

^^^

“Would you like to look at the bright side?” William asked a depressed Andrea at the clinic’s lab. “We have four patients and, Robbie radioed to say two more are arriving.”

Andrea let out a heavy sigh. “I know.”

“Cheer up.” William patted her on the back.

“William, I can’t. I feel so embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“Because I was . . .” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I was seen.”

“So.”

Andrea gasped. “So? I feel violated.”

“Andrea, we’ve established the man was not there for sexual pleasure but to watch you. That’s it. And . . . he’s gone.”

“Still.” She swayed her head. “I just don’t like the idea that he was there when we . . . when Miguel and I were together.”

“You’re very upset about this.” William took on a doctor’s tone.

“I am.”

Then curiosity took over William. “What uh . . . what exactly were you doing when he watched.”

“Making love.”

“Just making love.” William nodded.

“Yes.”

“Nothing kinky or perverted?”

“William.”

“I just wanted to know.” William held up his hands. “Because let’s face it Andrea, you’re way too upset over it. He snuck in your house. He saw you. So what. He’s gone. You never have to face him again.”

“So easy for you to say.” Andrea’s soft voice spoke. “You don’t know. You’ve never had anyone watch you.”

“True. But I had someone walk in on me and my wife.”

“Who?” Andrea asked.

“Dean. Who else. I think he was five or six. Stood there until we noticed him. If I recall, he never knew what was happening. My wife was upset about being seen.” William held up a finger with a snicker. “And if I recall again, I think she beat Dean like a mad woman as well. Perhaps that may explain what is wrong with my son.”

The squeak of Dean’s tennis shoes rang out in the room. “God, what now. What are you saying about me now Dad?”

Andrea answered. “Your father was just telling me about the time you walked in on your parents while they were being intimate.”

“I did?” Dean questioned. “Really. I don’t remember.”

“See.” William indicated to Dean. “She beat him so bad he lost his memory.”

“Dad. You’re joking.”

“No.” William shook his head. “You walked in on us.”

“And mom beat me?” Dean asked. “I would think that you two would have taken me from the room and explained what I just saw.”

“Maybe we should have.” William shrugged. “Our error. Perhaps if we

did. I wouldn't have to keep pulling you aside to explain things now." William looked at his watch. "Well, I must go check on my patients. See you in a bit."

Dean's head swayed as his father left then looked to Andrea. "He kills me every single time."

^^^

From outside the hanger as Frank approached, the emerging voices could be heard. He knew it was bad in there with the survivors just by the noise level that seeped out. And it was no longer just Robbie and George doing preliminary processing. They had Henry, Dan, and Miguel as well.

Frank had just seen Miguel up at Holding. Frank dropping off, Miguel bringing two in as well. The two Miguel had were agitated and were prime candidates to be knocked out to ensure a safe helicopter ride to drop them off.

The second Frank opened the door to the hanger and the noise level pelted him, he knew his concerns were confirmed. It was like a zoo in there. Sixteen maybe seventeen people were in there. Some talking, some complaining, all of them waiting. Seeing that many people told Frank that Robbie and George picked up a full load capacity. Looking around the small hanger for his brother, Frank heard the female calling of his name.

"Frank." She sounded excited. "Oh, my God. Frank."

Frank looked, shrugged then spotted Robbie sitting at a desk.

"Frank." The voice came from over that way.

Robbie looked strangely up from his paper work to the woman across the desk from him. "You know Frank?"

"Yes." She jumped up and so did Robbie, bodily stopping her.

"Frank!" She called out.

Frank stopped. He saw her. The hair was longer, frizzy, and wild, but he recognized the woman all the same. And thinking of her, seeing her, made his entire being cringe. Michelle. Frank, calmly turned back around but stopped when Robbie called his name.

"Frank. Come here."

"Fuck" Frank mumbled and turned back around toward Robbie. He walked in his direction.

Michelle breathed heavily and with a huge grin of excitement. "Frank."

Robbie looked to Frank. "Do you know her?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "Never seen her before in my life."

"No!" She cried. "Frank please."

"Frank." Robbie stopped Frank from leaving. "If you know her, let me know."

Frank looked at Michelle. "Yeah. I know her and I don't want her staying in Beginnings."

"What?" Michelle gasped. "You don't mean that."

Frank grinned. "The fuck I don't. Bye-bye."

Robbie chuckled. "Frank, she says she has an extensive background in . . ."

"I don't care." Frank interrupted. "I don't. Trust is the main thing. She can't be trusted. This is the woman Robbie that I let follow me across the country. This is the bitch that took the van."

Robbie quickly looked at Michelle. "You're 'the bitch took the van' Michelle."

Michelle tried to move to Frank, but Robbie stopped her. "I was frightened Frank. You didn't want to look for people. You were determined to find a dead family."

"Well guess what babe." Frank said with arrogance. "Meet my baby brother Robbie."

Michelle's mouth dropped open.

"That's right." Frank nodded. "Look at him. He looks pretty alive to me." Frank's head tilted. "And guess what? My son." Frank paused. "Alive. My Dad. He's alive too. Runs this place. And guess what again?"

Michelle was afraid to ask "What?"

"Bye" Frank waved "Get rid of her Robbie. Take her back out. I'll talk to you when I don't have to look at that face." Frank pointed at her, waved again and turned around. He started walking away.

Quickly, Michelle ran, breaking by Robbie's barricade and to Frank. She clenched his arm trying with all her might to halt the big man. "Frank. Please. Please I've been out there. It's horrible."

Frank did stop. With a smug look he peered down to her. "And I've been here. Gained twenty pounds. Been eating. Surviving. Living."

"But . . ."

"You should have never have took the van. Ha!"

"I'll do anything." Michelle pleaded. "Anything."

"Sorry."

"Please just let me stay. Tell your brother to let me stay."

"No."

"There are no women, I can be of use."

"To annoy the fuck out me. I don't need annoyed. I have a guy named Dean to do that."

"See. A man. All the more reason to have me stay." Michelle said.

"Huh?" Frank was confused. "What the hell do . . ." Suddenly Michelle was no longer in his view. Frank's head dropped to see her kneeling before him. She reached for his crotch. Dead silence hit the room. "Get up."

"Let me please you." Hurriedly she undid his zipper.

"Get up."

"You'll never have to worry about . . ."

Frank stepped back, zipped up, reached down, grabbed her shirt and lifted her up. "First." He glared down to her. "You think I need that? I don't. I have the best, why stoop down to you. And if you were the last broad on the face of the earth I still wouldn't want it from you. Secondly." Frank's finger waved. "A lay may be a form of bribe out there. But not in here. But you are on the right wave length." Frank grinned "You are fucked." He left her there and walked over to Robbie. "She doesn't stay. Make sure of it. She took the van. She stole. I don't care what kind of skills she has, that doesn't over shadow the fact she

can't be trusted."

Robbie peeked over to an upset Michelle. "You got it. You don't trust her big brother. I don't trust her. She's gone. However . . ." Robbie dropped his voice to a whisper. "Between you and me, I would have taken the blow job first." Robbie winked.

Frank shook his head. "I'm out of here."

"Frank. Why are you here anyhow?"

"Oh." Frank snapped and turned around. "I brought three up from containment."

"No shit. Larry, Moe and Curly."

"You got it. Started trouble. Grabbed Ellen."

"Is she O.K.?" Robbie asked.

"Yeah. She got tossed, but she's fine."

"Did Dean check her out."

"Yep."

"And the baby is fine?"

"What baby."

*Oh shit!* Raced through Robbie's mind. Quickly he stumbled for words.

"Robbie, what baby?"

"Um . . . you know. The one that we brought into containment."

"You didn't bring a baby into containment. What baby are you talking about and why would a baby not be . . ." Frank's eyes grew cold. "Fuck." Frank turned to walk away.

"Frank." Robbie chased.

"How long has she know she's been fuckin pregnant?" Frank asked as he marched from the hanger.

"Frank look . . ."

In a spin and still walking, Frank blasted out. "And why didn't she tell me! I'll tell you why! It's mine!" Frank jumped into the jeep.

"Frank!" Robbie cried out and watch Frank peel away. "Shit." He tossed his hand out and flew back into the hanger. Trouble was about to start and Robbie had to make sure things were fine in the hanger then he would head into town to try to divert the impending disaster.

^^^

"I'll be goddamned." Joe exclaimed as he sat in the skills room. "Whoops, sorry, Reverend. An ordained Minister."

"Was. Guess I still am." The man who would be forever known as plain and simply Rev. Bob, sat with Joe. His grey hair in dire need of a cut. His eyebrows, in need of being shaved off.

"We need a minister in Beginnings." Joe told him.

"Do you have many Christians?"

"If they aren't Andrea coverts them. Literally scares the hell out of them."

Rev. Bob paused. "Is that right?"

"She wants a full church. Ad wait until we she finds out we have you."

"I can't wait to meet the woman."

“You will.” Joe had so much enthusiasm to him. “Of course, today wouldn’t be a good day.”

“Why is that.”

“She’s traumatized.”

“Really. What a shame. What happened.”

“One of our recently released walked into her bedroom while she and her husband were screwing . . . whoops sorry reverend, being intimate.”

“You dealt with the man.”

“Oh yeah.” Joe nodded assuredly. “Kicked him out.”

“Kicked him . . .”

“Out. Yes.” Joe said. “I personally didn’t have a problem with letting him stay. But I had a problem with hearing Andrea’s bitching. Whoops . . . sorry Reverend, complaining. The mouths in this community just go and go and . . .”

“El!” Frank’s voice shattered in volume through containment.

“Point taken.” Joe motioned his head backwards. “My son.”

“El!” Frank stormed into the skills room. “Dad. Where’s Ellen.”

“Frank.” Joe stood up. “You don’t . . .”

“Dad.” Frank stayed serious, his breathing heavy and his face red. “Where is Ellen. I need to talk to her.”

“In her office”

“Then why didn’t she come out.” Frank turned in a rush to leave.

“Would you?” Joe tossed his hand up then cringed when he heard another loud ‘El!’

“El.” Frank didn’t knock, didn’t care to. He just barged right into her office.

Ellen calmly looked up from her desk. “I heard you.”

“We need to talk. Now.” Frank slammed her office door.

“What’s wrong?” Ellen saw the look on Frank’s face, she slowly rose from her seat.

“Oh.” Frank laughed almost in disbelief. “I would kill you right now. Kill you . . .”

“Frank”

“If you weren’t . . .” Frank lowered his voice and placed his face close to hers. “Pregnant.”

The air escaped Ellen and she bodily moved back.

“Then it’s true.” Frank saw her expression.

“Let me explain.”

“Explain what? Fuck.” Frank’s hand cut through the air. “You know, I wondered, I really wondered why you haven’t been with me lately. I did. I would have thought you lost interest, but you kissed me. You touched me but you wouldn’t make . . .”

“Frank.”

“El!” He blasted. “It’s a fact we do it. And I’m starting to think the reason you didn’t do it for the past couple of weeks is because . . .” Quickly he reached out and lifted up the end of her long shirt. “Fuck.”

Ellen was showing.

“Dean knows?” Frank questioned.

“Of course he knows.”

“How far along are you El?”

“Four months.”

Frank gasped loudly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know.”

“El. We don’t live on separate ends of the continent here, we live on separate ends of the street. You didn’t think I notice? Why . . . why didn’t you tell me?”

“I knew what your reaction would be.”

“Let’s see if you’re right.” Frank turned from her and opened the door.

“Frank.” Ellen dove for him. “Where are you going.”

“Dean and I are having a little talk. Right now.”

“No!” Ellen screamed. “No!” She gripped his arm.

Frank pulled from her. “No? Why? Ellen, you and I both know why you didn’t want to tell me. This baby, this baby is mine.”

“You can’t be sure if . . .”

“Bullshit!” Frank blasted. “Bullshit. What are the actual odds of it being Dean’s.”

Ellen’s head dropped. “It’s Dean’s baby.”

A gravel, raspiness took over Frank’s tone. “I don’t believe so. And if this baby is mine, I will raise my baby. Not Dean. It will be mine.” again Frank tried to leave.

“You promised me!” Ellen screamed.

Frank stopped walking.

“You have never broken a promise to me Frank. You promised me you wouldn’t tell Dean, I sleep with you.”

“And I’m not breaking that promise. Those words will never cross my lips.” With total seriousness and anger Frank walked from the office and down the hall.

“Frank.” Ellen raced after him. “Don’t do this. I am begging you. Don’t do this. Please. Not now.”

“And when do you propose he finds out? When the kid is born big and with black hair.”

“No, Frank. The baby will be blonde, it’s Dean’s. It’s Dean’s.”

“Keep telling yourself that El. Maybe you’ll start to believe it.” Frank reached for the buzzer.

“I do. No, Frank.” Ellen pulled him from it. “Listen to me . . .”

“No, listen to me. I have no plans to go over there and blast the man. I have every intention to sit and talk to him. Seriously. Because this is a very serious matter.”

“You’ll crush him.”

“Ask me if I care.”

“I care.” Ellen cried out with emotions.

“No shit.”

“Tact. No tact. No matter how you handle it, it will kill him. Think of him.”

“What?” Frank blasted. “Think of him? You ask me to think of him. El, think of me first for once,”

“I do!” Ellen screamed. “I always do or how else do you think I got like this?”

Frank dropped his voice to a whisper. “You make a comment like that and expect me to believe this kids is his?” There was a pause of silence then Frank, reached for the keypad punched in his code, and with the door’s buzzing he stormed out.

In the hallway of the clinic Frank checked once more to make sure that Ellen wasn’t following him. Maybe she decided it was for the best. He peeked into the lab, looking at Dean working about, alone, then Frank stood, back against the wall calming down. It was not a situation that needed shouting. Nor would it be fair if right then and there he and Dean began tearing each other apart. Different than he had ever been in any situation, Frank vowed to remain calm and handle it with maturity.

He went though his mind what he wanted to say. How he wanted to say it. He knew no matter how it was going to be put, Dean wouldn’t handle it well. But he would handle it better if Frank didn’t deliver the news like the post man from hell. And it wasn’t like Frank could let it go. He could but he didn’t want to. It involved Ellen and now a baby, both things Frank wouldn’t mind--whether he admitted it outwardly or not--having in his life all the time.

He lifted from his lean on that wall, open his eyes and slowly, through parted lips, blew out the breath he held. One step, one single step was all Frank took into the lab when he heard Ellen call for him.

“Frank.”

Frank looked back, knocked on the archway of the lab and stepped in.

Ellen stopped. Going in the lab was not something she wanted to do. Her gut instincts told her everything she needed to know, she would hear from where she stood in the hall.

Dean turned around from his work when he heard the single knock. He held folders in his hand and used them as a dramatic effect, slamming them on the counter. “What?”

“Dean.” Frank cleared his throat. “You and I have to talk.”

“What can we possibly have to discuss.” Dean moved about.

“Ellen.”

Dean stopped and spun. “Is there something wrong? Some sort of security problem or risk we need to discuss about her.”

“No.”

“Then you and I . . .” Dean waved his finger about. “Will not discuss my wife.”

“Why do you do that.”

“Do what?” Dean asked.

“Add ‘my wife’ to each statement.”

“I know you don’t like it Frank. But she is.”

“Look . . .”

"No, you look." Dean pointed "You are not someone I want to talk to. Not idly. Not about Ellen. Never."

"I am coming in here with all intentions of being adult."

Dean laughed.

"Dean!" Frank blasted. "Will you knock it off!"

"No, Frank. You knock it off. And I would appreciate if you would just get out of my lab."

"Not until you and I discuss what we have to discuss."

"There is nothing to discuss." Dean moved away.

"I don't want to talk about this with you in any other way than calm. It wouldn't do either of us any good."

Dean had to snicker. "Listen to the way you are talking. What are you up to."

"Why do you have to be like this?"

"Why do I . . . what the hell Frank? I have no other recourse than to be this way with you."

"Bullshit. You can shut up and listen."

"About what?" Dean said with anger.

"About the fact that I just found out Ellen is pregnant."

"Well good for you." Dean nodded. "What and you don't like it. You can't handle it?"

"Dean."

"My wife's pregnancy. Our child does not concern you."

"Oh I beg to differ. It concerns me very much."

"In what way."

"In what way do you think?" Frank stepped to the counter seeing that Dean ignored him. "You really piss me off. You do. I did nothing to you and . . ."

"What! How can you say that? You did nothing to me. Who's been the dick around Beginnings Frank. Who's the one that slept with Ellen the first day here? Who is the one that flaunted it in my face that not only did you sleep with her but you have long history as well. Who throws it in my face that you can snap your finger and make her jump."

"You stepped between us."

"No Frank. *You* stepped between the two of you. But you don't remember that do you? Do you? The only thing that you ever know is what Frank wants to know."

"You should have given her up."

"For what? For you? I love her Frank." Dean pointed. "I want to make a life with her. You can't handle it. You can't handle that we're happy. Any time we get happy or spend time together you do what you can to interrupt. To stop it. But not this time. This situation, her and I having a baby is something you can do nothing to get in the way of."

Frank bit his bottom lip. "Oh, you just think you know it all don't you. Well let me tell you something Dean. Get ready for a cold blast of fuckin reality here. Loving wife. Happy marriage. Fuck you and your fuckin happy marriage. You are nothing to her. If you meant anything she wouldn't come to me." Frank's hand fell heavy in a point to Dean. "And when this baby is born you

better use that so called scientific knowledge to perform a very basic paternity test. Because that baby that you think you created out of your happy little marriage is probably mine!” With the final screaming blast of his emotional voice, Frank spun around and stormed toward the door.

Dean’s heart raced, it pounded so hard he literally lost his breath in rage. And the site of Frank and the reverberating of Frank’s words in his head filled him with a wrath that made Dean want to strike out. And going on instincts he couldn’t control, he did. Without even realizing what he was about to entangle in, Dean raced across the lab, hurdled on to the island counter and lunged forth at Frank.

Frank heard the fast thumps and turned back around in the doorway only to be pummeled full force by Dean.

Crash! Dean’s body slammed into Frank’s and out the lab door both men careened past Ellen who shrieked.. Frank flew back hard, and with the stumbling spin of force, slammed into the wall and the back of his head hit it with a ‘crack’.

Two steps, holding onto Dean, Frank stammered. He could feel the blood pouring down the back of his neck and with his anger and strength, he tossed Dean from him only to lose his balance in the dizziness of his head injury.

Dean sailed to the floor, and he rolled himself out of the slide he was in. Seeing Frank stammer to a stand, Dean, quickly picked himself up and in a charging run, raced for Frank, closed fist and he nailed him with everything he had.

Frank’s head flung to the side and he jolted it up as he stood firmly to his feet. Grabbing hold of Dean, Frank delivered a powerful blow that spun Dean smashing face first into the wall, painting the spot he hit with the red of his blood.

Outrage consumed Frank and, fist ready, he only made it one step to Dean when he felt the heaviness on his back, and the weight of Robbie holding him back.

“Don’t Frank!” Robbie held on to his big brother with all his might. “You’ll kill him.” Robbie released him then with a rapidness threw his body in between both men. “Don’t.”

Heavy, deep and loud was the breath Frank drew through his nostrils. His jaw twitching, Face spewing with a deadly anger. In a swift motion, he wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth and brought his hand out to a point at Dean. “If that baby is mine. Say goodbye to your little happy life. Because I will kill you before I let you have my child and Ellen. I’ll see you dead.” Frank glared one more time, then in a huffing spin, he barged from the clinic hallway.

Dean caught his breath,. Hand against the wall, mind spinning.

“Dean.” Ellen rushed to him. “Are you all . . .”

“Don’t.” Dean swiped her arm away and backed up. “Don’t touch me.” He breathed in short heavy breaths as his eyes tossed daggers at her. “I swear to you if this baby is Frank’s he won’t have to kill me. He can have you, because I will never have anything to do with you again. I won’t even speak your name.”

Ellen let out a whimper of emotions as Dean stormed by her and down the hall of the clinic. She moved to follow but Robbie stopped her.

“Don’t El. Let him calm down. All right.”  
“Oh God.” Ellen spun into Robbie’s arms. “What have I done?”  
“It will be all right. Just give it time.”  
“Robbie you have to help me.” Ellen moved back some looking up to him.  
“This baby can’t be Frank’s. It can’t.”  
“There is nothing you can do if it is El.”  
“He doesn’t want this baby, I swear. It’s only the control. I know him. Please Robbie.”  
“El, listen to me. I just said, there is nothing you can do if it is Frank’s.”  
“No there isn’t.” Ellen softened her voice. “But there’s a lot we can do, we talked about it, to make sure it never looks like . . .”  
“No.” Robbie stepped away from her with a whispering voice. “Listen to you. Do you hear what you’re suggesting.”  
“Yes.”  
“You can’t do that.”  
“We can’t let this happen.” Ellen said with passion. “Not in a community this small. There is tension enough. This doesn’t need to happen. Help me.”  
“No. I can’t. He’s my brother El.”  
Ellen’s head lowered.  
“I’m sorry.” Robbie backed up. “I’m sorry. If this is his child, he deserves to have it. To raise it. I won’t stop that. I won’t. Don’t ask that of me. Anything else, but don’t ask me to betray my brother.” he left the clinic.

^^^

From the corner of Dean’s nose to the corner of his mouth, a circular bruise formed, mixing with abrasions and blood from the punch Dean had taken from Frank. He was surprised he still had his teeth. They weren’t loose, but they hurt all the same.

Dean came home that evening earlier than he was expected. He got that when he saw the look on his father’s face when he walked into the house. “Don’t say anything.” Dean said, closing the door.

“About?” William asked. Then Dean turned around and William saw the effects of the past few hours. “Oh. Ouch.” He cringed.

“Thanks.”

“Did you put ice on that?”

“Yes. Or else I’d look like Quasimodo right now.”

“You certainly can take a punch.” William whistled. “And from Frank too. He’s a big . . .”

“I know.” Dean quieted his father. “I asked you not to say anything. The last thing I need right now is to hear how stupid I was.”

“Stupid? For what?”

“Going after Frank.” Dean answered.

“That’s not stupid Dean. You did what you had to do. And you did well. Andrea had to put ten stitches in the back of his head.”

“Really?” Dean turned to smile but cringed. “Thanks for not making fun of me.”

“Not right now. I wouldn’t do that. Well, yeah, I would. But I’m too impressed with you at this moment and that’s a rarity, So I figure, I won’t ruin it.”

“Thanks. I’m jumping in the shower.” Dean moved to the stairs. “By the way. What are you doing here?”

“Watching the babies. They’re asleep.”

“Is El at containment?”

“No. She’s upstairs.”

Dean nodded and started walking up the steps.

“Packing.” William stated.

Dean stopped. “Packing?” He watched William nod and Dean flew up the stairs. He stopped in the bedroom door way watching Ellen place things into a bag. “El.”

“Dean?” She said with surprised. “You’re home.”

“I live here.” He moved closer to the bed. “What are you doing?”

“I think it’s obvious.” Ellen said.

“So uh . . . are you leaving me for Frank?”

“No.” Ellen placed another article of clothing in the bag. “I’m just leaving.”

“Why?”

“It’s for the best Dean. You don’t deserve this. And I would think, right now, all you would want is to get me out of your sight.”

“You’re wrong.” Dean moved to her. “All I want is for this baby . . . for this baby to be mine El. I want my family. You, the twins.” Dean swallowed. “This baby.”

“This baby is yours Dean. It is. It won’t be Frank’s. And it will never be Frank’s baby.”

“How can you be so sure.”

“I am.” Ellen reached to close the bag and Dean’s hand laid over hers.

“Don’t go. All right? Don’t.” he stepped to her. “I’m not asking you to leave. I’m asking you to work this out with me. If you’re sure. So am I.”

Ellen closed her eyes and stepped to Dean, softly and carefully kissing him.

Dean did his best to kiss Ellen, moving his lips slowly and with caution. He embraced her after the kiss, holding her. Just holding her.

From the sidewalk, through the raised blind, the embracing Ellen and Dean could be seen, and Frank watched. Eyes glaring up to the window.

“You know. Leroy got ousted for that.” Robbie approached him from behind.

“Hey.” Frank looked at Robbie quickly.

“You doing OK?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded.

“So, uh, why the peeping Tom act?” Robbie asked.

“I didn’t mean to. Really. I came to see El and didn’t realize he’d be here.”

“He lives there.”

“Yeah, but after today.” Frank shrugged. “I didn’t think he would anymore. I didn’t expect . . .” He raised his hand in a point at the window. “I didn’t expect that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not over. I don’t think for as long as he and I live in Beginnings together, . . . no wait . . . are alive, things will never be over.”

Robbie let out a breath. “Frank, about the baby. Things will work out. You know that?”

“Yeah I do.” Frank said with certainty. “If it’s my kid I can’t let it not work out. And I will have Ellen in the process. She won’t be with him if I find out she’s having my child. I won’t walk away from that chance.”

“I wouldn’t expect you too. I’m on your side through this whole thing. Know that.”

“I know you are.” Frank laid his hand on Robbie’s back, gave a pat and slid it off. “I know you are.” He looked once more up to the window and started walking. “Have a drink with me?”

“You bet.” Robbie walked with Frank. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“You can’t get mad.”

“I won’t.”

“Um . . . Frank.” Robbie walked. “You have so much hostility toward Dean . . .”

“I hate him. I don’t think I ever hated another human being as much as I hate him. He burns at me Robbie.”

“That’s why I want to ask you this.” Robbie was apprehensive. “I just want to hear it from you what your drive is? Is it Ellen and the baby, or is the fact that you just don’t want Dean to have her. What makes you move at this with so much anger and hostility?”

Frank had a snicker to him. “Listen to you. You’ve been reading too many of those fuckin psychology books. I move with hostility and Anger?”

“Yeah.” Robbie said. “You do. I want to know what the reason is.”

“I can’t believe you have to ask me that. You should know the answer.”

“I’m sorry.” Robbie lifted his hand. “I guess I should.”

Frank looked behind him at Dean’s house which faded from view. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll get Ellen from him, because I don’t want *him* to have her.”

Robbie stopped cold. The smile that had crept on his face when he heard Frank talk about getting Ellen, fell when Frank finished his statement. So cold. So hard Frank’s words were and they said more than his feelings and intentions to Robbie. They said his reasons. Reasons that Robbie didn’t want to hear. Reasons that were wrong. If Frank’s motivation for getting Ellen was purely to spite Dean, then in Robbie’s mind and heart, Frank didn’t deserve to get Ellen. Not for that. For love, yes. Out of resentment, no. Robbie knew right then and there as he walked with his brother, where on the Frank-Dean-Allen-baby issue,

his priorities had to lay. And for as wrong as it was, those priorities could not be with his brother.

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

October 2 - Beginnings, Montana

“All of you are it!” Henry blasted as he walked into Frank’s office. “I hate you.” He slammed the door and pouted his way through the laughter and plopped in a chair.

“Sorry Henry.” Frank stopped laughing. “But you have to admit. We hid good.”

“I had to use my radio Frank. I had to call tracking, they said no one was outside the gates.”

Frank snickered. “Sorry. But you’re just in time to hear Hal’s story.”

“Yes.” Hal said. “I’m finally allowed to talk. Two and a half hours with these three and it’s finally my turn to tell a story.”

“Hal.” Frank interrupted. “Then tell it.”

“No stopping me?” Hal asked.

“No.” Frank shook his head.

“You aren’t gonna play redundant word games.” Hal looked at the four as they shook their heads. “You aren’t going to . . .”

“Hal!” Frank yelled. “Tell the fuckin story.”

“Well I’ve been thinking about how I could get a huge chunk of this story into a nutshell. Tell it with impact, yet tell it without taking too long.”

Frank leaned into his desk widening his eyes at his brother. “How about just telling it and getting it over with.”

“I’m a writer Frank. Please.” Hal got a twinkle in his eyes and looked around at Robbie, Henry and Dean who patiently waited, then at Frank who looked annoyed. Hal began to tell his story. “Our town was raided. We had farmed there, lived there and set up a community. Farming and such. A huge raid by these soldiers you now call SUTs. The women were taken and the men, if they fought they were killed. I found myself shot and pretending to be dead until it was quiet and I passed out from the loss of blood. I don’t know how I made it. I had lost a lot of blood. So in a town burning, I found myself wandering around. Who were these people. Why did they attack. Why did they take our eight women. I got the medical supplies I needed and took what I could and moved on. But what was there to move on to? The wilderness. I got an infection and nearly died. I used the herbs of the earth and prayer to get through it. I did. But I still had to survive. Knowing these soldiers were around, I stayed deep in the woods. I had to hunt my food. Eat it raw . . .” He paused when he heard the cringing. “Yes, raw. I couldn’t light a fire for fear I would signal. And I knew winter was coming soon. Then one day I heard voices, smelled fire, food and I perked up. From the trees I emerged to find a group of people. Not soldiers. I asked if I could join them. They humbly accepted me. My error.” Hal’s voice dropped. “That night, while I was sleeping they beat me. They attacked and beat me so bad I couldn’t move. I found myself drifting in and out of consciousness while they took their turns. But was it a saving grace?” Hal shrugged. “I don’t know. Because just when I thought I was dead. Just when my

body couldn't take any more. The soldiers came and raided that camp. Once again, motionless I laid there. Over looked in the attack as some sort victim. When I awoke the next time, I awoke to voices and the smell of gasoline. I opened my eyes to find myself in a pile of bodies. My skinned burned from being doused with fuel. My clothes covered, by injuries infected. Through the corner of my eye I spotted the fire of the torch. I got one, just one whimper out and heard the call of the word 'stop'. That was the last I remember. Bill, that was his name, said I was out for four days. He was one of those soldiers. He saved me. We became friends and I joined their society. We were close." Hal crossed his legs. "We became lovers." Hal's eyebrow raised when he watched Frank's mouth drop open. "He was my being. My soul, And we planned on having a private marriage. Until the society found out about us. And he was taken from our bed, hung out in the center of camp and skinned. That was when I fled. I ran into . . ."

"Hold it." Robbie stopped him. "Where does Sgt. Ryder come into this. Elliott."

"What do you mean?" Hal asked.

"Elliott. You're buddy." Robbie quizzed. "I was told that you saw a raid on a camp and you met back up with him during the time you were in the society. You took off and left the society with him."

"Yes." Hal said.

"But you just said you fled because they killed your homosexual lover."

"Um . . . yes. With Elliott." Hal nodded.

"Why didn't you mention Elliott earlier." Robbie kept asking.

"Because it wasn't important."

Robbie laughed. "Wasn't important. This man helps you start a very powerful movement and he doesn't rank as high as your homosexual soul mate."

"Robbie." Henry spoke up. "Love is always important. You know. You and Jessie have that bond."

"Shut up Henry."

"No you."

"You."

"Robbie." Hal stopped him. "Why are you badgering me about this."

"Because you're lying." Robbie said. "You're making up the story to fuck with us because we fucked with you this entire day. Aren't you."

"Well."

"See." Robbie tossed out his hand. "You had me going for a second."

Henry gasped. "It was a lie? Oh that wasn't nice Hal. I was feeling bad for you."

"Sorry. The truth was too boring. After the raid on my town, I moved on until the society found me and offered my what I thought I needed. Then when I found out what it was all about. I left them." Hal shrugged. "I didn't tell it to pay you back. I told it for that." He pointed to a still staring Frank. "To see the look on my big brothers face. And I got it."

Dean, who had been in a thinking mode, barely listening because he was concerned with how much longer he'd be able to hide, looked up. "Frank? You still have that look."

Frank slowly blinked and sat back in his chair. "Wow."

Hal smiled. "Had you going didn't I Frank?"

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "You did."

Looking a little confused, Hal swayed his head. "I told you I was lying. So why do you still have that look on your face?"

Henry knew the answer to that. "You made it get stuck. You shocked him so much, he'll never look the same. Huh Frank?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I look like this because I'm baffled."

With question in his shifting eyes, Robbie turned to Frank. "About what? Where are you baffled?"

"It has to be genetics. Can it be Dean?"

Dean scratched his head. "I feel like you Frank. Clueless. What has to be genetics?"

"The fact that I am now the only Slagel brother not gay." Frank rocked in his chair. "It could be something in the air though."

Hal could have explained one more time to Frank that none of what he said was true. But like Frank always did, he heard what he wanted and blocked out what he didn't want to hear. And in order to save himself any frustration in convincing Frank at that moment he lied to him, Hal tossed his hands in the air in defeat. He figured, like usual, the fact that he told a fib and really wasn't gay would hit Frank, out of the blue, in about a day.

IN RETROSPECT . . . THE THIRD YEAR

The end of an era . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

February 12 - Glendive, Montana

Joe and George were really enjoying their run. Good conversation. Very little stopping. They had made three stops that didn't find anyone that fit the criteria that they searched for and moved on. Actually, they weren't supposed to be out at all. Robbie warned them not too many people. Containment was getting to its peak and runs would have to wait until they released some of the survivors. It wouldn't have been so bad in containment, but they were many more men than women and the male space was limited.

So a nice leisurely survivor run was what Joe and George took. They had the list of requirements they were looking for. And field workers were not it. They needed industry workers. People to work the little areas they soon planned to put in full motion. Clothing, library, paper and history.

They probably wouldn't have stopped in Glendive had they not spotted the oddness of it from the air. The entire town was grown over, all but one tiny spot right smack dab center the of small town. A building, the only one clean and not covered with weeds. The sidewalk before it, maybe a small eight foot section didn't have grass peeking through. Someone maintained that section and George and Joe wanted to see who.

It was weird to them that no one came out upon hearing the loud growing noise of the chopper. Usually that was what happened. So they left it, loaded up with guns and moved to the section of town they saw from the air.

The building was bright white and cheerful. The big picture window out front had a spit shine. And even the sign that read 'Koenig's Klassic Bridal Boutique' wasn't missing a smidgen of paint.

Ring-a-ling-a-ling, went the bell when they opened the door and they were immediately pelted with the fresh scent of scented candles.

Joe peered around, no dust, clean, perfect.

"Hi!" The perky female voice called out.

Joe turned at the same time to see the woman, blonde, dressed for a work day and all made up, came from the back.

"Can I help you with something?" She asked.

"Um . . . Joe stammered in his words, trying not to laugh. "We saw your shop."

She smiled and moved closer. "Patricia." She extended her hand. "Nice to meet you. Are you looking for something for your wife."

"Uh . . . no." Joe answered.

"Someone special?" She asked with a wide smile. "Girlfriend? Daughter."

Joe snapped his finger. "I have a daughter."

"Is it for a prom or a formal event?"

With a closed mouth Joe looked to George then back to Patricia. "Formal event. Yeah."

"This way." She extended her hands. "What size is she?"

Joe's hand went out. "Little."

“Young girl?”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Little woman.”

“Oh.” She giggled. “We have some lovely after dinner wear. Cocktail dresses and gowns. What type of garment are you looking to purchase for her?”

“I don’t know.” Joe waved his hand. “You pick it out.”

She looked embarrassed. “Oh I couldn’t. How about you sir.” She looked at George. “You obviously came to help.”

“Oh yeah.” George said. “Actually we aren’t shopping.”

“Oh.” Her head fell.

“We’re uh . . .” George looked for the words. “Were looking for someone to come to our town and open their own bridal and formal boutique. Isn’t that right Joe?”

“Absolutely.” Joe agreed. “I bet business has been slow here for you.”

“Well yes.” She said. “But it’s that time of year you know. It will pick up.”

“Mam.” George spoke up. “Have you been here since the plague.”

“What plague?” She asked.

“The plague that wiped out the world.” George explained.

“You must be mistaken.” she said, still staying upbeat. “There has been no plague. You would think I would have noticed.”

“Lady.” Joe tried. “Yeah, there was. Haven’t you noticed there’s not a goddamn soul around here?”

“Well sure. But . . . they went on vacation.” She said.

“The whole goddamn town?” Joe raised his eyebrow. “Where the hell were you when they all up and left? Obviously not around when they died.”

“They didn’t die. They went away. Unfortunately, I was at my cabin. I came back.” She shrugged. “They took their holiday. But they’ll be back.” She sighed. “The business will perk right up.” She snapped her finger. “It’s already starting to. You’re here right?”

Joe nodded. “Right. We’re here. And we’d like you to bring you to a town where no one is on vacation.”

“Up and leave my business.” She waved her hand at them. “Oh no. I’m quite successful here. But, while I have you.” She winked at Joe. “Let’s see if I can use some of my savvy sales sense and get you to make a purchases. I have some wonderful smaller sizes in the back.” She pointed. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go away.”

“Oh we won’t.” Joe bounced from heel to toe waiting for her to disappear into the back. “Perfect. You know she falls right in the lines of what we want to bring back with us. She’ll run a stupid division fine when she is better.”

“True. But, she’ll never go.” George said.

“Of her own accord.” Joe reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a syringe. At the same time, he and George both looked at each other with a grin.

In the started chopper George loaded the last of the three bags he had thrown together from Patricia’s home. He hunched down in a run to Joe who stayed by a passed out Patricia. Sound asleep, peacefully and covered with a blanket on a busboy cart they took from a neighboring restaurant. Helping Joe,

they pushed her to the chopper and loaded her in.

There were two men in there waiting. They both looked curiously at the woman who laid on the floor. The one, Ben, looked up to George when he and Joe got in. He spoke with a twinge of female to him. "Did you steal this woman?"

"No." George said and worked the controls. "She was so happy she passed out."

"Oh." Ben brought his thin finger to his lip and stared down. "Shall we keep her covered?"

Joe looked back. "Please."

Ben reached down to her then looked at Todd, the other survivor in there. He whispered. "Look at her hair."

"It needs some conditioning." Todd said. "Can you believe she let that style grow out?"

"What would it have taken to trim it yourself?"

"People." Todd crossed his legs and tsked. "Just because it's a nomad world, does not mean you have to look unpresentable. You never know when strangers will show up."

"Never." Ben shook his head.

Joe looked at George as they lifted up. They listened to the pair in the back ramble on about the woman and company. And Joe smiled, their scavenger hunt for harmless oddball survivors that would irk Robbie and Ellen was going so nicely, they only wished they had time to find more.

^^^

Ellen smelled the scent of it first. Chicken soup. In her office, gathering papers for the new survivors the aroma carried in and she turned around. "Frank?"

"I know you didn't eat." He walked in. "I brought you lunch."

"You didn't have to do that." Ellen told him.

"Yeah I do." He set the mug on her desk. "You don't eat right and you need it."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "I'm as big as a house." she rubbed her large stomach.

Frank winked. "You're cute." His hand reached to her and she stepped back. "What's wrong?"

"Dean's going to be here in a second. You shouldn't be."

"Tough."

"No, Frank." Ellen spun to him. "Not tough, all right. If you weren't bad with me before, you're worse now."

"You're carrying my baby."

"We don't know that."

"I know it." Frank stepped to Ellen as she faced her desk. He walked up behind her. "I know this baby is mine."

“Frank.” Ellen closed her eyes feeling the heat from his words hit against her ear as he spoke so close to her.

Frank pulled her hair away from her ear. “I wish you would realize how much I want this baby. How much I want to be with you.”

“Frank, it’s Dean’s baby.” Ellen told him.

“You don’t believe that. And even if it ends up being his baby. I still want you El, with me. He could never want you . . .” Frank brushed his lips against her ear. “As much as I do.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Dean’s voice carried in. “And get your hands off of my wife.”

Frank didn’t budge.

“I said.” Dean’s tone picked up. “Get you hands off . . .”

“What are you gonna do about it Dean!” Frank blasted. “Physically make me?”

Ellen moved away from Frank. “Stop it. Don’t fight. Please.”

“Ellen.” Dean stepped more into the office. “This shit has to stop. You have to stop letting him . . .”

“Dean.” Frank yelled at him. “Don’t take that tone with her.”

“Where do you get off Frank?” Dean spun his views to him. “Tone? I’m not taking a tone. I’m taking a stand. She’s just as much to blame when you two . . .”

“No!” Frank stopped him. “No she’s not. I start it all. You want to start shit. Start it with me little man.” Frank moved closer to him. “Come on.” Frank taunted. “Because I’d love to have some reason to take you out of the picture all together.”

“Then take me out all together Frank. Now’s your chance. Go for it.”

Frank grabbed for Dean. Dean grabbed for Frank and Ellen moved back.

“Robbie!” She cried out, spinning to her desk to grab her balance. “Rob . . .” She stopped to catch her breath.

“Hey!” Robbie raced in, separating Dean and Frank with a shove to each of them. “Take it somewhere Else.” He kept moving to Ellen. “El, you all right.”

Ellen, holding her stomach, nodded. “Get them out of here.”

Robbie turned and Dean and Frank both moved toward Ellen, Robbie in a protective stand, stood before her. “You heard her. Out. Dean, survivor examines. Frank, do something. Just leave.”

“Let me see if she’s OK.” Dean said.

“I’m fine.” Ellen looked up at the ceiling. “Go.”

Robbie moved to Frank and Dean bodily shoving them out and into the hall. “Since this thing between the two of you stopped being about Ellen a long time ago. Do her a favor and leave her out of it when you start this fighting shit.” Without saying anymore, Robbie walked into the office and closed the door. “El.”

“I’m fine now.” She faced Robbie. “Just stress. I can’t wait until this is over.”

“Will it ever be over?”

“When this baby is born. It will be.” Ellen stared at the closed door. “I’ll make sure of it.”

^^^

Henry was little surprised when he walked into the mechanics building. It was battery making time, and thought late, due to a repair at the chapel, he showed up. Scott, the new quiet guy worked on them. John Matoose as well, but the surprise fourth was not one he expected. Jenny.

“Where’s Robbie?” Henry asked as he walked in. “He’s supposed to be here. Everyone in Mechanics makes batteries.”

John snickered. “Everyone but Robbie. Or haven’t you noticed.”

“I’ll get him.” Henry turned to the door.

“Henry.” Jenny called out. “Seems to me if everyone in mechanics is supposed to be making batteries, you should be too. If you go looking for Robbie. Aren’t you as guilty as he is?”

“Yes but . . .”

“But, I’m filling in for Robbie.” Jenny’s dirty hands worked. “He asked. I accepted.” She grinned at John. “My quality time with the man I love.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “Jenny. It’s Robbie’s responsibility. If you knew of half the things I have to chase hm down to complete you wouldn’t say anything.”

“But if you stopped chasing him down and did them yourself, you would have everything done.”

“Why are you defending him?” Henry asked her.

“Because even though I’m not a big Robbie fan, I hate bullies more. And you’re a big bully who picks on Robbie.”

“HA!” Henry shouted. “I am not.”

“Are too.” Jenny said.

“Am I a bully John?” Henry asked.

“Very much so.” John answered.

“Scott.” Henry tapped him on the shoulder. “Am I a bully to Robbie?”

“From what I saw. Yes.”

“What do you know.” Henry scoffed then switched tones. “O.K.” Henry grabbed his radio. “I won’t chase him. I’ll call for him. I’ll be nice and ask where he is. Watch.” He depressed the button. “Robbie.” He said in a chipper soft way. “Robbie, come in.”

“What?” Robbie responded.

“We’re making batteries.”

“Good for you.”

Henry took a deep breath. “Where are you?”

“Containment. Working.”

“You’re supposed to be here Robbie. Now do I have to come and get you.” Henry nodded impressed at his calm tone.

“Henry? Fuck you.” Static.

The noise of the disconnected radio call angered Henry so much he

slammed the radio down on the counter and bolted to the door, stopped and looked back at the counter where the radio was in pieces. "John!" Henry blasted. "Fill out a work order for that radio., It's another thing Robbie Slagel now has to fix around here." With his anger, Henry stormed out.

Jenny looked at John. "Bully."

John nodded. "Bully."

"Prick." Scott added his own comment and continued on the batteries.

^^^

Ellen could see it happening again. She recognized the signs of what she and Robbie called 'Survivor Syndrome' an obscure, keen attachment to someone in Beginnings. Idolization is what the survivors did. Following of a Beginnings' original around. When they had it with Ellen, it ended when they left containment, but for some reason, with Joe, it lingered a little longer. And Ellen spotted the early signs with Patricia, or Trish as she requested to be called. When it started, she didn't know. How Trish went from being hysterical and screaming about being kidnaped to praising the awesomeness of Joe. It had to happen somewhere between when Trish decided she was just walking out and Joe convincing her to stay. Or it could have been Frank telling Trish how 'crazy' Joe was about her. Whatever it was, something caused Trish to have asked Ellen thirty times by six in the evening, when Joe was returning. And if she, Trish, looked all right.

"Correct Ellen."

Ellen heard the male voice and she snapped out of her thoughts while watching Trish check her reflection in a compact. "I'm sorry Ben what did you say?"

Ben, who sat next to Todd in the formed circle of chairs, crossed his legs. "I said you probably have inspections in here for cleanliness."

"Yes." Ellen answered. "We work hard to keep it clean." She moved on to another survivor.

"And it shows." Ben commented. "We had a lovely little place in the country. Didn't we Todd."

"Lovely." Todd nodded.

Ben nudged another survivor who looked in his own world. "I hope our housing here is as nice. What do you think."

"Oh . . . my . . . God." Todd exclaimed in a whisper.

"What?" Ben turned to him then looked up to see what he was looking at.

"We haven't seen him." Todd pointed.

"No we haven't. And . . . he struts." Ben smiled as Robbie walked into the room.

"A god." Todd said.

"Gorgeous."

"Look at that body."

"Breath taking."

"I wonder if . . ."

"Hung." Ben nodded. "Absolutely."

‘You think?’

‘Positive.’

Ellen poked her head in between the two men. ‘Actually, he’s average.’

A little disappointed Ben looked to Todd then shrugged. ‘Workable. Though.’

Todd peered up at Robbie and sighed.

^^^

‘Trish please.’ Joe removed her hand as he walked by her and she grazed it against his arm. ‘As I was saying. You eight are still in the social skills phase of the class. Those people over there.’ Joe indicated to a group who worked with fabrics. ‘Are in more of an occupational therapy.’

‘Oh Joe.’ Trish said in a dreamy state. ‘You’ve really put things together here. You’re amazing.’

‘Thanks.’ Joe grumbled. ‘Anyhow, back to where I was at. I’m going to pass these papers out to you.’ Joe moved about the group passing them out. ‘Fill them out as best as you can. They are questionnaires and they’ll help us place you in the community. Trish, please.’

Trish giggled and slid her hand over Joe’s as she took the paper. She winked then looked to Todd. ‘He saved me you know.’

‘Kidnaped you.’ Todd corrected.

‘Same difference.’

Joe handed out the final pencil when he noticed Ellen walking in the room. ‘Excuse me.’ He moved toward the skills room door. ‘How is he?’

‘Sick.’ Ellen stated.

‘Clinic sick?’ Joe asked.

‘Well, not yet. We’ll see.’ Ellen peered around the room. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Robbie’s got the hands on. I’ve got the idiots.’

‘Joe.’ Ellen shook her head with a smile. ‘That’s not nice. And Trish has survivor syndrom with you.’

Joe rolled his eyes. ‘I know. Trust me I know. She shouldn’t be in here long so it shouldn’t get that bad’ He looked at Trish who smiled and wiggled her fingers in a wave a him. Joe half-assed, waved back.

Robbie, like a teacher paced around the seven quiet survivors that worked with material for clothing. A woman named Gemma, picked up a few months earlier, turned out to be the seamstress that Beginnings needed. But in order to save her a lot of work, Containment helped out shaping and cutting fabric. ‘Good.’ Robbie commented. Sometimes he felt really bad, treating the survivors

like they were patients in a mental ward. Rehabilitating them all to go into society again. But as history in containment proved, not everyone was far from a mental patient.

“Excellent Sara.” Robbie walked up to the woman who took Melissa’s place as the quiet one. She shook a lot and in cutting her fabric, she stayed in the lines. “Gemma will be pleased.” Just as Robbie leaned over her, laying his hand on his shoulder, Sara growled, gripped her scissors, spun around in the chair and rammed them into Robbie’s gut.

Robbie’s grunt of pain, caught the attention of Ellen with Joe across the room.

“No!” Ellen raced over seeing Sara reach for the scissors that protruded from a hunching Robbie. Ellen, using her body, dove for Sara knocking her away. “Joe get help!” Ellen moved her body into Robbie, holding her hand over his bleeding wound. “Don’t touch the scissors. They have to stay in.”

From the ground Sara jumped up.

“El” Robbie said weakly. “Watch out.”

Ellen turned her head and as soon as she did, she was grabbed and shoved back by Sara. Hard, Ellen slammed back first into a wall. Her eyes rolled and she slid down. Robbie, stumbled to her, but still was not faster than Joe who ran across the room. Greg and another survivor came in shortly, grabbing Sara.

“Kiddo.” Joe bent down to Ellen.

“I’m O.K., Robbie.”

Robbie closed his eyes and dropped to the floor holding his stomach.

“Joe.” Ellen raised her eyes up.

“Helps on the way.” Joe said. “Let me get her out of here.”

“Better hurry,.” Ellen spoke breathy.

“Why?” Joe asked.

Crack! A chair came down and hit Joe on the back from Sara who bit and kicked her way free from her apprehension..

“Hey!” Trish screamed out running to Sara. She grabbed the wild woman by the arm and spun her. “That is not a way to get along.”

With a hard heavy hand, Sara reamed back and smacked Trish on the side of the face.

Trish gasped, and smacked her right back. Then Trish screamed when Sara lunged at her grabbing her by the head. “Ow. Hey. Ow. Hey. Ow, hey Joe. Help Joe, ow. She got my hair. Stop.” Trish spun in a circle.

“Enough!” From the little holster next to his gun, Joe grabbed a prepared syringe. Uncapping it, he grabbed hold of Sara and injected her into the neck. Sara held on to a struggling Trish for a few seconds more before passing out.

^^^

“My brother’s been stabbed.” Frank screamed at Joe. “And you can sit there and tell me I am not taking this woman out?” His voice lost its deep edge, it was filled with the high tone of his anger. “Explain why?”

“Frank.” Joe rubbed his eyes as he sat behind his desk. Henry and George

were present, along with Dean. “Council listened to Robbie’s arguments and decided to give her a chance.”

“He’s fuckin drugged up.” Frank argued. “Oust her.”

“No.” Joe said.

“Oust her now!” Frank stated. “You want me to run security. How can I do that if you don’t let me take out the people who cause disruption.”

Dean shook his head. “Therefore making your job easier,.”

With a glare, Frank turned his head Dean’s way. “What the fuck are you implying.”

“I’m saying Frank.” Dean stepped to him. “Sorry. We all can’t be angels. That is why we have security. That is your job. They get out of line. You put them in. Not kick them out. Robbie trains them to be better. That is his job. And he says she’ll get better.”

“Where do you get off even being in this meeting?” Frank blasted.

“Where do you get off?” Dean questioned. “I’m here to argue Robbie’s points. Obviously Robbie has valid points. The woman had a hard time out there. He believes she will get better. So do I.”

“Even with Ellen in there?”

“It’s your job to make sure she’s safe.” Dean told him. “If you don’t trust these people. Put someone in there with her.”

“Who Dean?” Frank tossed his hands up. “Who do I have. No.” He shook his head. “Fine. I’ll take your suggestion.” Frank neared him. “Watch me not leave her side from now on.”

“Asshole.”

“Well then I’m the asshole who’s gonna protect your wife at your suggestion then, aren’t I?”

“Boys.” Joe lifted his hand. “Enough. Frank. The woman stays. But I promise, if it happens again, you can personally oust her.”

“There won’t be a chance to oust her.” Frank moved to the door. “Let her go after Ellen again and I’ll shoot her in the fuckin head right there.”

Amongst the moans Joe threw up his arms. “Can you be anymore melodramatic Frank? Shoot her in the head. What did I tell you about that shit the last time you shot a survivor? You just can’t kill everyone.”

“Still.” Frank defended.

“Still my ass.” Joe shook his head. “And this argument is over. You got a problem with it. You want to bitch. Bitch at your brother not us.”

Frank huffed silently a few times and opened the door. He saw the smirk Dean had on his face, like a little kid who just watched his worst enemy get scolded. Frank pointed at him. “Wipe the shitty grin off before I do it for you.”

Swiping away Frank’s finger, and feeling secure that Frank wouldn’t kill him right there, Dean smiled wider and him flipped off.

^^^

“Hey.” Ellen called softly as she walked into the dark clinic room Robbie

was in. "You up?"

"Yeah." Robbie cleared his throat and with a grunt, sat up some.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good. Sore." Robbie grabbed his gut. "No damage."

"I heard." Ellen told him. "That's good. Up and about tomorrow."

"Yeah. But I think I would be much better though if they didn't let Melissa put on the bandages. She kept screwing up and the tape ripped out, I couldn't tell you how many hairs from my stomach."

Ellen snickered as she sat on the edge of the bed. "She's learning. Hey, at least we got her to pull a four hour shift tonight."

"True." Robbie laid his hand on hers. "How are you?"

"Fine. I thought it was it. I thought I went into labor." Ellen let out a breath. "But no. I'm glad I didn't. Not with you immobile tonight."

"You still want to do it?" Robbie asked.

"I have to."

"It will kill Frank."

Ellen lowered her head a little. "I know. But it would kill Dean more. We have to."

"El." Robbie spoke her name, squeezing her hand.

"I mean. I love him. I love Dean very much and . . ."

"El."

". . . all I want is for our marriage to work. I know I screw up. But I don't want to hurt him"

"El, listen . . ."

"I don't want to hurt Dean. And if switching the baby's blood is the way to stop it then that what we'll . . ."

"El." Strongly Robbie spoke her name. "No more."

"What?" Curiously Ellen looked at Robbie then saw he didn't look at her. With a racing heart, Ellen turned to where Robbie looked. William was standing in the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

February 13 - Beginnings, Montana

At a table in the skills room, Joe sat holding the sheet of paper. "Now, Trish it says on this . . ."

"You saved me again last night." Trish leaned her face on her hand.

"No, not really. Now it says . . ."

"I saved you. I defended you."

"Yes, you did." Joe looked up and smiled. "Thank you. Now on this questionnaire."

"Do you like breasts?"

"Yes. Now it says you have the following skills that . . ."

"Would you like to see mine?" Trish asked.

"As enticing as that is. No. Can we discuss this?" Joe held up the paper.

"Sure go on. My skills."

"Your skills."

Trish giggled.

"What?" Joe asked.

"I was thinking of other skills I have." She winked.

"Let's stick with discussing these."

"I should have put them down. Huh?"

"No." Joe shook his head. "Now. Organizational skills are very important. We're organized here."

"And you do a wonderful job Joe."

"Thanks. What I was thinking for you . . ."

"That you'd like to touch my breasts?"

"No."

"How long has it been?"

"Since?" Joe asked.

"Since you touched a breast?"

"A long time. You put down that you worked in an electronic library for the state for . . ."

"Then you should."

"Should what?"

"Take advantage of me."

"No." Joe tried to continue on. He kept his eyes on the paper.

"I'm crazy about you Joe."

"I'm sure. What exactly is it that you did for this electronic library. Was it a record keeping thing or what?" Joe looked up. "Trish."

Trish smiled, shirtless in front of Joe. "Go on." She winked again. "I won't mind."

Joe set down the paper and stood up. "George." He called out as he left the skills room. "She did it again."

^^^

“You look tired El.” Frank told her as they walked from the living section toward the school.

“I am.” Ellen put her head down. “Really beat.”

“You know what that means with you.”

“I know. It’s time.”

Frank nodded then smiled when he saw Johnny walking their way. “El, you sure you don’t mind.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not even going to containment. I’m going to the clinic.”

“Dad.” Johnny raced over. “Hey El.”

“Hi Johnny. How’s school?”

“Sucks. Hey, Dad says you, the twins and the baby might move in with us.”

Ellen quickly looked at Frank. “Why did you tell . . .”

“Don’t you like Dr. Dean?” Johnny asked.

“I like Dean.” Ellen told him. “Your dad is just thinking about stealing us from him.”

Johnny snickered. “That’s funny.”

Frank held up his finger. “And it might work.” He smiled and leaned to her ear. “A matter of time.” He placed a quick kiss on her cheek. “Well, I’m off to teach him how to drive.”

“Isn’t that great El?” Johnny asked. “I’m not even sixteen.”

“Well, it’s a safe bet that all you’ll hit driving the field truck is Dirk and God knows no one would mind.”

Frank laid his hand on her cheek. “Steal a nap. I’ll check on you later.”

Ellen nodded, watching father and son walk off, then she turned and moved toward the clinic.

^^^

“Everything looks fine.” Dean reviewed a chart in front of the new comer Ben. “I see nothing wrong.”

“I still feel bad.” Ben said rubbing his stomach.

“Sometimes . . .”

“Knock-knock.” Ellen called out and stepped in. “How’s it going?”

“Fine.” Dean said. “He’s better. I think it was the dietary change.”

Ben bobbed his head in agreement. “I did eat that chocolate cake.”

“See.” Dean pointed the pen. “Did anyone tell you not to eat food like that the first day.” He peered up to Ben with a smile.

“Did anyone ever tell you, you have the most amazing eyes.”

Ellen laughed loudly.

Dean dropped his pen.

Splash! Ellen dropped her water. “Shit.” she looked down.

“Shit is right.” Dean’s eyes widened to the puddle that formed on the floor.

He tossed the chart next to Ben and rushed to Ellen's side, "Oh my God." He grabbed her stomach with a grin.

"Oh my God." Ben covered his mouth and flew from the room. "Help! Help!"

^^^

"Sweet Jesus, we are moving fast." Andrea flew about the operating room, and in her movement, she grabbed one of Ellen's legs and put it in the stirrup. Then she grabbed the other. "How you holding up?"

"Good." Ellen panted. "Shit." She squinted.

"Don't push." Andrea wheeled her things to the end of the delivery table. "Not yet. Hold tight and breath. Dean, get her to breath."

Dean's mouth puffed out the same as Ellen's as he stood beside her.

"God, Andrea, I'm telling you it's twins again." Ellen spoke through grunted words. "Shit."

"Ellen." Andrea took her position. "Hold on." She lifted the sheet. "Almost." And while one hand examined Ellen, the other pressed upon Ellen's stomach. "Baby's crowned. And if this isn't a set of twins, it's one big kid." Andrea smiled. "We'll find out in a few minutes." Kicking out her foot, Andrea maneuvered a stool over to where she could easily get to it and she prepared to deliver Ellen and Dean's baby.

^^^

"Quit biting your nails." Joe smacked Frank's hand from his mouth.

"I can't help it." Frank paced the waiting room. "I should be in there."

"No, Frank you shouldn't. Dean's her husband."

"It's my baby."

"Christ." Joe rolled his eyes.

William paced slowly as well about the room, needing to be right there instead of in the delivery room. And when he heard what Frank had said, William slowly raised his eyes, making eye contact with Robbie.

^^^

The struggling grunt came from Ellen as Dean held up her back, giving her leverage.

"Almost." Andrea called from the end of the table. "Take a breath and

again.”

Ellen inhaled and the tremendous pressure took over, grabbing on to the edge of the table she leaned forward, face red.

“That’s it.” Andrea reached for the suction. “We have lots of . . . um . . . one more will do it.”

Dean shifted his eyes to Andrea. “What’s wrong?”

Andrea shook her head. “Nothing. We’re ready to get this child all the way out. Let’s do it.”

Ellen nodded and looked to Dean. Using his help she gave the final push and a few seconds later the baby’s wail was heard. She plopped back exhausted and smiling.

“It’s a boy.” Andrea called out. “Big too.” Laying the baby in the blanket, she took him from where she was to across the room.

“Andrea.” Dean called out. “Let us see.”

“Sure Dean one second.” She laid the baby on the scale and whistled.

Dean laughed. “What? Eight pounds.”

“Sweet Jesus girl.” Andrea swayed her head. “I’m surprised you didn’t explode. Ten pounds eleven ounces.”

The smile dropped from Dean’s face.

“Dean?” Ellen felt this hand slip from hers. “Dean.”

Dean moved quickly over to the scale where Andrea stood.

Andrea saw the reflection of Dean fast approaching. Hurriedly she turned around. “Listen it doesn’t always . . .”

Dean’s jaws twitched. Eyes wide he looked to the baby, then to Ellen. Breathing heavily, almost near hyperventilation he backed up. “Do that test. Do it now.” Spinning fast, before anything could be said, Dean barged with anger from that delivery room.

Andrea was speechless as she carried the huge baby to Ellen. “It’ll work out.” She laid the baby in Ellen’s arms. “I’ll finish up.”

Ellen slowly lowered her eyes to the baby in the blanket. And she closed her eyes immediately when she saw the abundance of black hair, and the darker complexion the child had.

^^^

Joe feared the worst when he saw Dean barge past the waiting room and out of the clinic. Praying that nothing had gone wrong, he flew out of the waiting room and down the hall towards the delivery room. Frank kept up behind him.

Andrea walked out holding the blanket.

“Andrea.” Joe hurried to her. “Is everything all right. Is Ellen fine.”

“Mother and child are fine.” Andrea held the baby. “But right now Joe. We have to put an end to all this tension. I’m going to get a blood sample and run that test.”

“Wait.” Joe stepped closer and held out his hand to the blanket. Slowly he

uncovered the baby's face. "Christ." He closed his eyes and then grunted when he heard the excited 'yes' come from Frank who had peered over his shoulder.

^^^

William watched Andrea. She looked nervous as she moved about the lab, taking a second to look at the tiny tube of blood. Just as she held it up, William knocked on the door. "Andrea can I speak to you for a second."

"Sure." She set down the tube and walked from the lab. "What's up?"

"This way." William waved her to her office.

"William is something wrong?" Andrea asked as she followed him.

"No. Just something private." He closed her office door as they stepped in. "I want to make sure you're all right with doing this."

"What do you mean. William, I am perfectly capable of pulling this test. Dean has prepped me. Everything is ready. Besides, Frank has 'B' Blood. Ellen, 'AB' Dean 'O' we may not have to go any further if we get an 'O' response now will we."

"No." William shook his head. "And I'm not doubting your ability to run this test. I'm just saying the pressure of delivering the results may be a lot."

"Ah," Andrea smiled and laid her hand on William's. "Thank you for your concern. You sweet man. But I've prayed about it. It has to be done. And now." Andrea took a breath. "I'll see you in a few minutes." She opened the office door and William walked out behind her. He nodded once at Robbie who walked from the direction of the lab.

^^^

"I don't want to hear it." Dean fought with William outside of the clinic. "I don't need to hear it. Put it that way."

"You will get your ass in there Dean. Andrea will be ready momentarily."

"You saw him. I saw him. He's not mine."

"What if he is?" William asked him. "Huh? Then you are going to feel really bad when you realize you walked away from your wife the second she gave birth."

"I won't feel bad."

"Why."

"Because the kid isn't mine. I don't have it in me to create a child that looks like that."

"The hell you don't." William snapped. "Uncle Larry."

"What?" Dean asked.

"Uncle Larry. My brother. Six foot four. Coal black hair. Big and brawny. And look at me. Six-two. What color was my hair when it wasn't gray and I had some."

Dean slowly looked up. "Black."

"Exactly. Now let's go."

Reluctantly and slowly, Dean walked behind William to the clinic.

"Will you quit gloating." Joe snapped at Frank.

"Dad." Frank grinned. "You saw him. He looks exactly like me."

"I know." Joe grumbled.

"I'm a father. Congratulate me. I have a kid."

"Frank." Joe hushed him when Dean walked slowly in the waiting room with William.

Frank looked up at Dean. Their eyes met.

Joe could feel the tension in the room. Dean's anger mixed with Frank's exuberance. And Robbie, nervously in the corner, biting his nails like a Frank replica. Joe had to wonder if Robbie was anticipating and getting ready for a major outburst.

And if the tension wasn't bad enough, when Andrea walked in the room, everything tensed up a notched. "I completed the test."

Everyone rushed to her.

Andrea looked at Dean and Frank. "And I want you to know. There is no mistake about it. I ran the tests three times to triple check. So nothing will ever be said about it again. You boys hear?" She waited for them both to nod. She looked at the smile on Frank's face and then at Dean who really stared off to the side. "All right. I'm sorry . . ." Andrea swayed her head. "Frank. But the baby is Dean's."

Dean's head sprang up. "Mine?"

"Yes." Andrea answered.

"Shit." Like a kid and at top speed, Dean flew from the waiting room.

More than seeing it, Joe felt it. And it pained him to even see it on Frank's face. The hurt.

Frank looked as if he had been run over. His eyes closed tightly and his head swayed slowly.

"Frank." Joe reached for him.

"No." Frank backed up. "I thought he was mine. I would have bet my life he was." Frank ran his hand down his own face. "I really . . . I really wanted him to be mine." With a long released breath, Frank walked from the waiting room.

Robbie swallowed so predominantly as he watched Frank leave, he would have sworn his gulp was heard. Heart sinking, full of regrets over a situation that there was no taking back, and ready to just die, Robbie turned and faced the wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“William.” Robbie softly spoke the name as he slumped into his drink at the social hall. “What have we done.”

William swayed his head. “I thought I would feel all right over this. I did it for my son.”

“I killed my brother.” Robbie downed the moonshine and poured another.

William took the bottle. “I deceived my son.”

“But Dean isn’t hurting.”

“He will if the truth comes out.” William gulped a shot’s worth.

“What happens if it does.”

“Frank will hate you. Dean will hate me. They both will hate Ellen. A mess.”

“Then it’s settled.” Robbie took the bottle again. He took a deep drunken breath. “The truth will never come out.”

^^^

“I’m so sorry.” Dean held Ellen’s hand, kissing it. “I can’t tell you enough. And the twins. They are so excited about their brother.”

“Dean.” Ellen held his hand. “It’s all right you know. I understand.”

“I’ll never forgive myself for the way I acted.”

“Why?” Ellen asked. “I already have. Just tell me you, me, our marriage is fine.”

“Our marriage is great.” Dean leaned into Ellen and kissed her.

The dark corridors of the clinic added to the hurt that Frank felt as he walked down them. He wanted to see Ellen, but the quiet of the place at night allowed for her’s and Dean’s happy conversation to flow to him. And he just didn’t want to go in. Not at that moment.

There was another place he didn’t want to go, but felt drawn to. The nursery. He felt bad for the baby, all alone in there, Melissa attending to him. Frank, hand and forehead pressed against the glass watched the baby who looked so much like him. The baby with the name, Joseph Hayes.

“Frank.” Andrea called his name softly.

“Hey.” He turned around.

“I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault.” Frank rubbed his eyes. “I thought he was mine.”

“I did too.”

“Something is not right about this.”

“Frank, I ran the test on that tube three times, Then I went back and ran it again. The baby is Dean’s.”

“No.” Frank shook his head.

“I didn’t make an error.”

“I’m not saying you did.” Frank spoke with sadness. “But something is not right. You know it and I know it. And no one will ever convince me of the fact, that baby isn’t mine.” Frank turned back into the glass.

“Frank, the test . . .”

“Screw the test. Look at him Andrea. Look at him.” Against the glass Frank leaned. “He’s mine.”

Slowly Andre ran her hand down Frank’s back. And in her heart, no matter what science told her, she knew Frank was right. But what could she say. What arguments did they have. They had only their instincts and that was it. And unfortunately instincts weren’t proof enough. They never would be. Andrea didn’t know what to say, or how to give comfort to Frank. The situation wasn’t going to be good no matter what the results, And all Andrea could do, was say her goodnight, look one more time at Frank who stared with desperation at the baby, then go home and pray for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

March 4 - Beginnings, Montana

“Shut the fuck up!” Frank blasted in the cabin of the helicopter. The screams were loud, annoying. And Henry was the worst of the bunch. “Henry!”

“I can’t help it Frank.” Henry fought off the survivors, eight of them, all children who pounced about on him. “Ow, one but me.”

“Fuck.” Frank looked at his bleeding hand. “Fuckin savages.”

Robbie laughed as he flew. “They’re kids.”

Frank looked back in the helicopter. “They’re kids.” He picked up the radio. “Dad, we grabbed eight.”

“Eight?” Joe came back. “Good job. Any of use.”

“Not a fuckin lot of them”: Frank took a second to catch his breath. “But we have to keep them. Tell William to meet us up at hanger three. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Got it.”

Frank hung up the radio with a cringe. Glaring, he looked back at the six boys and two girls and of course, Henry. “And to think we killed people to get them.”

“To think.” Robbie smiled and kept on flying.

^^^

Old or young. If they were of no use but they had to keep them, Joe figured they were one of the two. Old or young. He notified William that it had to be bad if he was needed at hanger three, and then Joe, wanting a little break, walked to his office. He opened his door, walked in and slid to a stop. “Trish.”

“Hi Joe!” She smiled as she spoke laying on her side on Joe’s desk top. “Guess what? I’m out of containment. I’m no longer a survivor.” She giggled. “I’m a resident. I’m free.”

“I know.” Joe didn’t let it phase him, it had happened so frequently with Trish lately, how could it. “Trish.”

“Surprised?”

“Actually.” Joe walked to his desk. “You showing up naked so much for me is losing it’s effect.”

“Oh.”

“Can I have my desk.”

“But Joe.” She slid from the desk and walked to him. “I thought maybe now that I’m out of containment, we could get together.”

“Trish.” Joe spoke calm. “What did I tell you about that. I’m the leader here. I have a certain responsibility. I can’t fool around with people. It’s like the boss at work fooling around with his employees. It’s not ethical.”

“But why? You’re a man.”

“I know.”

"I'm a woman."

Joe quickly cased her nude body. "I know."

"You don't find me attractive."

"Trish." Joe cleared his throat. "Finding you attractive has nothing to do with it. I can't. And I'm sure had I met you in a non plague ravished world, you could easily be wife number seven. But . . ." He held up his finger. "If you met me, you wouldn't want anything to do with me."

"That's not true Joe. I find you exciting and attractive."

"You have what we call Survivor syndrome. It happened before, you'll get over it,"

"Did you get involved with one of those women?" Trish asked. "Is that why your sour on relationships?"

"No. And could you get dressed?"

"I'm exciting you aren't I?" Trish smiled.

"Trish. You will feel really stupid about throwing yourself at me when get over this."

"I won't. I love you Joe."

"Trish."

Trish grabbed his hand. "Feel my breast." She placed it on her.

Hand on her breast, Joe tilted his head impressed. "Not bad. But . . ." He pulled his hand away. "Even if I didn't have the ethical thing. I can't get involved. I'm a busy man. Like a priest. No women."

"Joe." Trish softened her voice, re-grabbed his hand and placed it on her. "I want to prove I don't have this survivor syndrom. I really fell for you. And if I promise . . ." Since Joe wasn't doing any fondling, Trish decided to help, she moved his hand around her breast and stepped against him. "If I promise to be good and not get involved will you let me show you how much I like you."

"Trish."

"You know you can use the comfort."

Joe took a breath and stepped back. "I have to apologize."

Trish's head dropped in defeat.

Joe walked to the door. "Apologize." He shut the door and locked it. "Because it's been a hell of a long time." With a shitty grin that matched Trish's, Joe took off his shoulder harness, dropping it to the floor in his walk to a very naked Trish.

^^^

If his head didn't pound enough, the noise level in that hanger made by the eight children worsened it for William. He shook his head as he moved to Frank, Robbie and Henry. "Just like you said Robbie. Bad too." William looked behind at the rambunctious children.

"Should we do it?" Robbie asked.

"Yeah." William nodded. "You two boys are safe, use the special shampoo anyhow. But hose these little ones down and cut their hair off."

“Got it.” Robbie led Frank over to the kids.

Henry looked confused, especially when William waved a finger to him.  
“What?”

“Need to check you.”

“Why.”

“Because those eight children are infested with lice. You may have to lose the hair.”

“No.” Henry, horrified scratched his head. “I’ll us the shampoo like Frank and Robbie.”

“Can’t.” William walked to Henry. “They have hardly any hair. You have the mane.”

“But, but . . . I’ll trim it. What about that fruit-fly stuff that works on them.”

“Henry, it will burn your scalp.” William explained.

“Burn my scalp. I don’t care. But I can not lose my hair.” Henry whimpered in a fake cry the nearer William, with gloves on, came to him.

^^^

So thrilled Ellen was as she walked down the streets of Beginnings with Joe. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to get back to containment. Thanks.”

“You won’t be thanking me when you meet them.”

“Oh, I met them. They’re fine.” Ellen waved her hand at Joe. “We’ll just need a little more help with them besides us. Maybe some of the survivors could help.”

“Not a bad idea. Gemma already volunteered to take one of the children.”

“Then she probably wouldn’t mind putting in hours. And Trish, she wouldn’t . . .” Ellen stopped walking.

“What’s wrong?” Joe asked.

“Speaking of Trish Joe. I just saw her. Why would she ask me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding to you?”

“Haven’t a clue.” Joe shrugged. “Still has that survivor syndrom I guess.”

“I guess. Bad too.” Ellen shook her head, then she froze as they neared containment. “Oh my God.”

“Holy mother of God.” Joe exclaimed. “That isn’t.”

“It is. Henry?” Ellen neared him. “Henry you shaved your head.”

Henry, nearly bald rubbed his stubbles. “I had to El.”

“But why?” Ellen asked.

“I had lice. Bad too.”

“Oh wow.” Ellen stepped back from him. “Where uh, did you get them from.”

“Those new kids. They were infested.”

Joe drew up an odd look. “The new kids?”

“Yes.”

“Henry.” Joe stated. “They didn’t have lice.”

"Yes, sir, Joe. William assured me that . . ." Henry's eyes widened then he shrieked. "Uh!" he took off running down the street, screaming William's name the whole entire time.

^^^

William looked down at his watch one more time that evening. He must have paced around Dean's livingroom so much, he could have worn a hole in the carpet. "Well, I guess it's safe to go home now."

"You think?" Dean looked up with a snicker. He sat on the couch, changing Joey's diaper.

"Probably not. But Henry has got to have worn down some."

"Dad, what in the world would make you tell him he had lice. That breaches all medical ethics."

"Oh it does not." William tossed his hand Dean's way. "He deserved it. Beside the fact that I owed it to Robbie, he annoys the hell out of me with that hair."

"Not anymore." Dean said.

"Certainly not for a while. He looks very ethnic with a shaved head."

"Dad." Dean swayed his head and leaned down to kiss Joey.

William heard a gasp from the baby. "Was that a laugh?"

"He's smiling." Dean let his hair fall down and brush against Joey's face. "Isn't he just the cutest baby?"

"Big too." William looked over the back of the couch. "Huge."

Dean grinned wide. "But I love him." He picked up Joey and held him. "Very much." He kissed the baby.

There was a peaceful look that crossed William's face at that moment looking down to his son. "Dean."

"Yeah."

"You have done very well with your family. I want you to know, I'm proud of you." William laid his hand on Dean's shoulder then moved to the door.

"Dad?" Dean brought Joey close to his chest. He gave William a quirky look. "Where did that come from?"

William shrugged. "I guess I never tell you enough." William smiled at Dean. "But just know that I am very proud of you."

"Thank you." Dean nodded in gratefulness. "That means a lot to hear you say that."

"Good." William opened the door. "But don't get too used to it. I have a reputation to uphold with you. Night Dean."

"Night Dad." Dean kept his stares on the door until William had left. He lifted Joey to his eye level. "See. I knew your pap liked me." He looked back at the door. "And he didn't even come back to insult me." With another kiss, Dean returned to holding Joey.

CHAPTER THIRTY

March 5 - Beginnings, Montana

He had Robbie by the balls . . . literally.

“Frank.” Robbie grunted. “Help.”

“Knock it off!” Frank blasted at the boy who was about seven. “Let him go little man.” Frank bent over placing his face close to the boy’s. “Or you’ll deal with me.”

Robbie exhaled in relief when the boy backed up and ran away. “Thank you.”

“Man, you must be tired.” Frank comment. “Can’t handle a kid.”

“What time is it Frank?”

“Ten in the morning.”

“I’ve been handling these terrors of tomorrow for twelve hours. I’m dying.”

“Aw.”

Robbie nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. Go on, make fun but . . .” Robbie held up a finger. “You volunteered to watch them for a couple hours.”

“Robbie.” Frank scoffed. “I can handle animals.” Frank looked at the skills room, totally torn apart. “But I can’t handle the mess.”

“They’re bad Frank. I’m a big guy and I’ve been beaten.” Robbie commented. “None of the other survivors will even come out. They said they protest. They want them out.”

“Really. Well today . . .” Frank checked out the kids. “They break. I’m here.”

“Good. And I’m out of *here*.” Robbie gave Frank a swift pat to the back. “I’m going to grab a drink . . .”

“A drink.” Frank turned to him. “It’s ten in the morning.”

“Yeah, but it’s the end of my day right now. So I’m sneaking in the hall, grabbing a drink then I’m hitting my couch for a couple hours before Mechanics. See ya.”

“See ya.” Frank lifted his hand in a wave then spun quickly around. He opened his mouth to call out and stop Robbie, but he didn’t. He shrugged it off, figuring Robbie would find out soon enough that he forgot to tell Henry for him that he wasn’t showing up at Mechanics until late.

^^^

“Tonsillitis.” Dean used his index finger to close the young boys mouth, then wrote in the chart and faced Ellen. “Definitely.”

“Bad?”

Dean shrugged.

Ellen snickered. “What was this?” she mocked his shrug.

"I don't know."

"You don't know if they're bad? Dean you're a doctor."

"Yeah, but how many cases of tonsillitis have we seen here, and . . . I didn't see many in the old world."

"I have." Ellen moved to the boy, took the pen light from Dean's lab coat pocket and held it to the boy. "Open up and don't bite me." Ellen told him peering in the boys mouth. "Say 'ah'."

The boy made some sort of sound.

"Bad." Ellen shut off the light and handed it back to Dean.

"Thanks. We should give this case to my father and speaking of which . . ." Dean looked at his watch. "Where is he?"

"Maybe taking the morning off. He did have to stop by containment last night and help Robbie."

"Well, we'll let him make the decision to take them out or not."

"Dean?" Ellen questioned. "I thought they said tonsils don't need to come out."

"El, please, that was an insurance thing."

"I forgot. You know what? I want to see how Glen is doing with Joey." Ellen backed up. "Anyhow, I'll run to the house and get William, tell him about this boy."

"Can you?"

"Yeah. Oh." Ellen hurried back to Dean and kissed him on the cheek. "Love you." She brushed her thumb where she kissed. "Be back." Ellen quickly darted from the room

The weather was warm, little remnants of snow on the ground, but Ellen could tell spring was on the way. One her favorite seasons. Actually any season where she didn't have to hear everyone tell her she should have a coat on was one of her favorites. She had to snicker on her way to the living section, seeing Robbie stagger into the social hall. She only waved and wasn't going to question why he was going in there. Knowing he put in an all nighter with the children from hell, was reason enough.

She was going to stop by Glen's first, the newest of babysitters in Beginnings, but Ellen decided, William's house was right there. And knowing how lost Dean seemed to get with patients who didn't suffer from incurable viruses, Ellen knew she had to get William, tired or not, to save him.

"William." Ellen opened the door after giving the signature warning knock. "Hello? You sleeping." She closed the door. So quiet in the house, the light in the livingroom on. "William, it's ten . . ." Ellen stopped and swayed her head with a near laughter smile. She didn't realize how tall William was until that moment. White socks on William's feet that extended over the arm of the couch. Legs crossed at the ankle were the vision Ellen received first. She knew right then and there how rough of a night William must have had helping Robbie with those kids in containment. He never made it to bed. She walked around the sofa. "William." She whispered reaching out. "I hate to wake you but . . ." Ellen retracted her reach when William came into her view. "But . . ." Ellen's eyes

closed, a lump formed in her throat. “Oh my God.” She gasped softly, then dropped to her knees. So softly and whimpering she spoke his name. “William.” A tear rolled in the crease of her eyes and then slid down her cheek. So blurry her focus was when she opened her tear filled eyes to see him again. Laying there, looking as if he were sleeping. An open book rested on his chest, head slanted, glasses down on his nose some. In fact Ellen would have sworn he was sleeping had her fingers not touch the coolness of him and her eyes saw the white that had cast over him. As heartbreaking as it was, William had passed on, quietly and peacefully some time during the night.

^^^

One half a drink was all Robbie wanted, and that was all he took. To calm his nerves, relax him even though he was exhausted, and to feel as if he didn't lose a night like he did. He tucked the empty glass in the sink behind the bar, put the bottle away and placed himself in the frame of mind to sleep. Walking around the bar after saying goodbye to Sam, he knew that wasn't going to happen. At least not without difficulty.

“Robbie.” Henry stated his name as he walked into the social hall.

“God.” Robbie swayed his head. “Do you not know how to say my name any other way but with annoyance.”

“Do you not know how to go one day without annoying me.”

“Henry.” Robbie approached him. “I'm not in the mood.”

“And neither am I.”

“Tough.”

“Look.” Henry reached out grabbing Robbie's arm. “You were supposed to be at mechanics four hours ago. You didn't show.”

Robbie glared to the fingers that had him. He ripped his arm away. “I was supposed to be in bed ten hours ago, I didn't show up there either. So since I sleep before Mechanics. That's what I'm going to do now. Sleep, then I'll see you later.”

“Things have to be done.”

“They can wait.”

“So can sleep.” Henry told him.

“I worked in containment all night.”

“Big deal.” Henry said. “You think you're the first person to pull an all night shift and not sleep. We have another perimeter to be put up before dark. You know the way wanderers have been. If you weren't so lazy you . . .”

“Hold it.” Robbie lifted his hand in a halt. “I have had just about all I'm going to take from you and your fuckin whining mouth. What is it Henry, a power trip with me? Why am I the only one you give shit too?”

“You're the only one who doesn't pull their weight.”

“Oh that is such bullshit and you know it. Try my day. Do what I do for once and maybe your skinny ass will shut the fuck up.”

"Maybe you should try my day and you'll see why I bitch at you so much."

"You bitch because your genetics gave you too many female hormones." Robbie snapped. "So get off my back for once. This is a personal issue and you know it. You just find a reason to get on me because you don't like me."

"I don't hide that fact."

"And neither do I hide the fact that I don't like you. And if I wasn't such a nice guy, I would have ended this a long time ago." Robbie leaned into Henry.

"You mean if you weren't so lazy you would have ended it."

"That's it!" Robbie threw his hands up and backed away, he started moving tables.

"What are you doing?"

"Ending this."

"What?"

"You and I Henry." Robbie cleared the floor. "We're going at it once and for all. No one is around to say who was fair." Robbie moved another table. "No one is around to say who was right or wrong." He walked back to Henry. "And no one is round to stop us."

"What? You wanna fight me?"

"No." Robbie shook his head with a snicker. "There will be no fight. A fight is when two people exchange blows. You won't get that much of a chance."

Henry scoffed. "Don't think I'm that easy."

"Don't think I'm not. In fact." Robbie lifted his chin. "Go ahead." He bit his bottom lip with arrogance. "You can have the first shot. Go on."

"No." Henry barked. "The first shot like I'm the underdog. Fuck you. You aren't that bad Robbie."

"Fine." Robbie shrugged, clenched his fist tight, took a half a step into Henry and nailed him so hard, Henry spun like a top and dropped to the floor. Robbie stood waiting. "You gonna get up?"

Henry saw red, and it wasn't just his blood that laced the finger tips he looked at. He jumped up and dove for Robbie. Robbie saw him coming and was ready. Henry shouldn't have charged for Robbie. Because when the momentum of his run met with the tossing of Robbie's fist, Henry flew up and back hitting against a table before rolling to the floor.

Again, Robbie stood there. Just waiting.

"Robbie!" Ellen cried out, running into the social hall. "Robbie." She caught her breath, shifted her eyes to Henry then grabbed Robbie shirt. "I need your help. I have to find Frank."

"What's wrong?" Robbie turned. "El?" He saw her face, red, damp. "What happened?"

Ellen could barely speak.

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^^^

“Let’s move it people.” Frank ordered out as he kept an upbeat steady pace. “I thought you were tough. I thought you were young. Huh? I’m an old man compared to you. Jimmy.” Frank pointed. “Weren’t you all mouth a little while ago. Let’s go.”

Joe looked up from his paper work with a snicker when he heard the thump of another kid dropping in exhaustion. Frank had cleared out lot of the skills room, And like the pied piper, jogged around the skills room with the children behind him. Only after twenty minutes, instead of seven Frank had three left.

When Joe heard the buzz of the containment door, he didn’t think anything of it, until he heard multiple footsteps. He looked to the skills room entrance. Ellen and Robbie flew in. Joe stood up.

“Frank.” Ellen raced to him. “I have to talk to you.”

“El. Look I’m wearing them out.”

“Please.” Ellen grabbed on to him

The seriousness was written all over Ellen’s face, Frank stopped running. “What’s wrong.”

“I don’t know what to do.” She started crying. “I don’t know what to . . .”

“El?” Frank took her in his arms. “What happened?”

“I have to tell Dean . . .” Ellen pulled back and looked up to Frank. She could see through the corner of her eyes, Joe and Robbie near by. “I have to tell Dean. I don’t know how. How Frank? How do I tell him his father has died.”

The feel of her words and their impact were felt in that room. Joe’s eyes immediately shut as he reached out and laid his hand firmly on Ellen’s shoulder.

Frank stammered in words. Ellen came to him for help. And he just didn’t know what to tell her. He could only pull her into him to give her the support that she was going to need. Support that she would have to give to Dean.

^^^

Like the music changing in a movie, the sight of Joe walking in the clinic with Ellen, and Robbie and Frank lingering outside the double doors was hint to Andrea something was amiss. She felt it in her heart, and the closer she moved, she saw their faces. Joe walked toward her and Ellen turned into the lab. “Joe?”

Joe shook his head and grabbed hold of Andrea’s arm taking her to her office.

Ellen swore his name wouldn’t come out. She tried twice before it squeaked its way passed her vocal chords. “Dean.”

“Hey El.” He turned around. “You’re back early did . . . are you all right.” Dean moved quickly to her.

Ellen shivered. “We have to talk.”

“What’s wrong?”

She swallowed and tried to peak. “Dean, your father . . . William, I went

out see William.”

“Is he not coming? Is he making me handle this one alone. Shit.”

“Dean.” Ellen took another breath and reached back closing the door. “Dean, I went over. William . . . William has passed away.”

The hands that rested on Ellen’s arms slid off. Dean stumbled back. Breathless, pale.

“I’m sorry.”

Dean heart beat so strong, his stomach felt it. He swayed his head. “El, tell me this didn’t happen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No.” Softly the word crept from him and Dean, saying no more raced out of the lab.

Was he sleeping? Dean closed the door when he walked into his father’s home. He felt that William had to be sleeping. There had to be a mistake on Ellen’s part. On the couch he saw his father, the novel, *Of mice and Men* one off William’s favorites, still in his hand. He looked asleep, the way Dean always remembered him when he’d pass out on the couch. And that’s what William had done. Passed out while reading a book, but this morning, William wasn’t waking.

Around the couch Dean walked dropping to the floor. He looked upon the closed eyes of William and rested his arm on his. Dean felt as if he should say something, but there was nothing he could say. No words he wanted to speak. A goodbye would be too late. And the silence of the room that rang around was so quiet it was loud. A vigil for what was Dean’s saddest moment in his entire life.

Ellen stood before the steps by the front door, Joe to one side of her, Frank and Robbie on the other. “I should go in now.”

“It’s been a while.” Joe told her. “We have to move him to the clinic.”

“I don’t want to go in there Joe.”

“Kiddo.” Joe laid his hand on her cheek. “You have to. You’re the only one who should. That’s your husband. Go and . . .”

The front door opened and Dean, surprised, looked up. Immediately when he spotted Ellen, he stepped down and grabbed on to her.

“Son.” Joe laid his hand on Dean’s back. “I’m very sorry.”

Dean nodded, gripping Ellen.

“Dean.” Frank spoke very soft. “I’m sorry too.”

Dean raised his head, jaw twitching. His sad eyes, glared at Frank, then Dean, grabbed onto Ellen’s hand and walked away quickly with her.

Robbie backhanded Frank in the gut.

“What?” Frank questioned the hit.

“I told you not to say anything to him.”

“It wasn’t me. Dad, was it me.”

Joe sneered at his sons as if they were morons. “Let’s just go get William.” With a shake of his head, Joe walked into the house.

^^^

It had taken over the entire town that night. The sadness of William’s death. There wasn’t a person who didn’t feel it, nor a person who acted normal. Solemn was everyone’s mood and no one said much the entire day. Anyone that met William, liked William, and they all grieved him.

“Not good.” Ellen spoke the explanation in Joe’s livingroom, setting the children’s belongings on the couch.

“It was his father.” Joe said. “He’s not going to do good.”

“No.” Ellen swayed her head and handed Joey to Frank. She looked at Andrea and Robbie who were there as well. “But what no one understands is. This is a loss for Dean. You, me, all of us, we suffered horrible losses during the plague. Dean, suffered none. His mother died a while ago and he’s just not going to handle it well.”

Joe leaned into Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. “Let me know if I can do anything. If we need Rev. Bob to talk to him maybe.”

Ellen nodded.

Robbie walked to her. “El, I’m leaving, I’ll walk with you.”

“Thanks.” Ellen moved to the door, then looked back at everyone before leaving.

Dean heard her coming, and the second Ellen walked into the house, he had to ask. “Did Robbie walk you?”

“Yeah, why?” Before Ellen could shut the door, Dean had flown out.

“Robbie.” Dean called as Robbie moved to his own house. “Can you come in?”

Robbie didn’t know what Dean wanted, but he walked back to Dean’s house. “What’s up?”

“I . . . I need to talk to you.” Dean closed the door and walked over to the couch. Such a mess he looked, face red, hair tossed. “You were the last person to see my father alive.”

“Yeah.” Robbie’s head dropped.

“How much time did you spend with him?” Dean asked.

“He hung out at containment for a couple hours.”

Dean nodded. “Did you talk or just work?”

“We talked.” Robbie answered.

“Can you tell me what the last little bit of his life was like. Can you? What did you guys talk about. What were his last words. I need . . . I need to know this.” Dean’s head dropped. “I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye.”

Robbie took deep breath. He knew what he and William had ended up discussing. It was the same conversation that came up all the time in the past few weeks. “Dean. We talked about many things.”

“Like what?”

“Aside from the unattractiveness of some of the survivors.” Robbie saw he brought a snicker to Dean’s face. “We talked about you.”

“You did?” Dean’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t just tell me that would you.”

“No.”

“Did he bitch about me?”

“Well . . .”

Dean smiled. “He did. Did he insult me?”

“That too. But only in a William fun way.” Robbie explained. “That was just him.”

“I know. I guess I wanted to hear that his mood was up. He wasn’t feeling bad or down.”

Like a lightbulb in his head, Robbie’s face lit up.

Dean saw it. “What? Did you remember something?”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “Yeah I do.” Quickly Robbie’s mind raced back to the conversation he and William had, and he heard William’s voice in his head.

*‘You know Robbie, I looked at Dean tonight with that baby. And I swear it was the first time since we did what we did, that I didn’t feel bad. I really didn’t feel bad. And I really could care less with this on my soul, because what I did, I saw tonight, I did out of my love for my son, his happiness, and that’s all that matters to me. My son.’*

“Robbie?” Ellen called his name. “What?”

“Dean.” Robbie looked at Dean. “William . . . William got serious about you last night. He said . . . he said that you were all that mattered to him. And he loved you and he just wanted you to be happy.”

“He said that?” Dean asked shocked. “My Dad.”

“Yeah, and it surprised me too. We were talking about you and the kids. Especially . . .” Robbie swallowed and looked at Ellen. “Joey. And that’s what made him say it.”

“Thanks Robbie.” Dean sat down on the couch. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” Robbie moved to the door. “Oh Dean. Just know, I’m gonna really miss your dad. He was a hell of a guy.”

Dean’s head nodded slowly. “Me too.”

A long breath Ellen took as she closed the door behind Robbie when he left. She walked over to the couch and to Dean who’s head was down. “How you doing?” She asked, sliding her hand over his.

“I’m not doing good El. It was my father.” Dean dropped his head down onto Ellen’s lap and gripped his arms around her legs. “My father.”

A hesitation hit Ellen’s hand as she lifted it then left it fall to Dean’s head. Her fingers ran though his hair, she felt him clinging to her. Then Ellen leaned over to him, laying her head against his back, and she held on to Dean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

March 14 - Beginnings, Montana

The unconscious humming Andrea did while she read made Dean rock faster and faster as he sat in his chair in his livingroom. She found comfort in the bible, humming a soft tune as she babysat Dean like some sort of child. But her humming increasingly brought back the memories of his father's funeral service over a week earlier. Rev. Bob's word, 'how sadly he'll be missed' kept repeating over and over in Dean's head. How right Rev. Bob was.

"I can't take it." Dean sprang up.

"Sit down." Andrea told him.

"Where is she?"

"She'll be home shortly." Andrea stayed calm.

"I would like her home now." Dean began to frantically pace.

"Dean." What Andrea wanted to do was strike out. Maybe shock him back to normal. Dean had been so fanatic, so insecure, especially around the times of the day he spent with his father. But she knew she couldn't do that, she had to draw upon her compassion and patience at that moment. "She needs time too."

"She's had enough." Dean looked at his watch. "I need her."

"Dean." Andrea stood from the couch and followed him. "I know you are going through a rough time. But if you don't allow Ellen some time from you, she'll be of no use when you really need her."

"I really need her now."

"I know."

"Can you stay with the kids. I'm going to containment to find her."

"Dean."

"Please."

Andrea looked at the time. "Sure. I'll stay."

"Thank you." Dean hurried to the door and raced out. The streets were pretty empty and even though it was dark, it wasn't late. But he knew as soon as he rounded the bend into center town, Ellen wasn't at containment. The overhead light was out, the signal that classes were done. The next place he would look angered him to think that she would be there. How could Ellen go and socialize when he needed her home. To talk. To be there. But popping his head into the hall proved within a few seconds, she wasn't there as well.

Dean didn't worry, worry wasn't what crossed his mind. He turned and headed home, figuring she may have been off walking with Robbie since he didn't see him at the social hall either.

What made him look, Dean would never know. Why he went to the left instead of the right would haunt him for the rest of his life. But he did see it, an image that would forever sketch itself in his mind.

A silhouette behind a blind. Two figures, up in Frank's bedroom window. Kissing, moving. He could see the man was definitely Frank, tall, overshadowing the person he was with. Hands moving, heads turning. "No." Dean watched. He tried at that moment to pass it off as a survivor Frank was

with, but as he watched the figures move from the window's view, Dean knew he had to find out for sure.

Without knocking he walked into Frank's home. He would deal with Frank and interrupting him with someone else later. But at that second Dean had to know if that was where Ellen was. With a pounding heart and barely able to breath, Dean moved up stairs and to Frank's closed bedroom door. He knocked.

"John, we're busy." Frank called out. "Ow." He snickered.

Dean turned the knob quietly and pushed on the door. Frank laid on the bed, only a sheet covered him. He was smiling and looking down to the figure under the sheet. Dean's heart dropped to his stomach.

Frank had a joking tone to his voice. "Ha. You think?." Frank then looked up. "Fuck."

"What?." Her voice came from under the sheet. "I didn't even touch . . ." Ellen emerged from the sheet and saw Frank's face. Hair in eyes she turned around. "Oh my God." She watched Dean walk out.

*Slam!*

Andrea jolted on the couch when the front door shut harshly. "Dean? Did you find . . ."

"I need to be alone." Dean told her. "Please."

"What happened. What's wrong?"

"I just need . . ."

"Dean!" Ellen flew in the house. "Dean."

Dean looked to Andrea. "Could you leave us?"

Andrea peered to Ellen then to Dean, she felt the tension, the trouble and didn't need to be asked a second time. Grabbing her jacket and her bible she hurried and left the home.

Ellen was out of breath, scared, she moved to a pacing Dean. "I'm . . ."

"Sorry. I know." Dean scolded and spun to her. "So. Did you finish blowing Frank or did you just run right over?"

"Oh my God." Ellen closed her eyes.

"God!" Dean grabbed his own head. "Am I stupid! I trusted you wouldn't have anything to do with him again!" He screamed at her. "I really, really thought it was us. Just us. I was wrong."

"Dean, let me explain."

"Explain what Ellen? Huh? How can you possible explain what I saw?"

"I guess I can't."

"You can't." Dean pointed "You can't explain that I see you two from the street kissing. You can't explain that I walked in his room and both of you naked are in his bed. Not too mention where you were at." Dean's voice raised higher. "And you can't explain why at this point in my life you had to do that to me!"

"I am so sorry." Ellen rambled. "Dean, I am so . . ."

"I don't want to hear it!" He blasted. "I don't. I am sick of this shit! Sick of it. You and Frank! And what about me El! Huh? When I need you the most. When I can't handle this, you do this! I just buried my father. I just buried a

giant part of my life. All I ask is that you help me through this and where were you. With Frank!”

“I didn’t want you to find out, not this way.”

“Then you shouldn’t have been advertising through a goddamn blind that you were about to fuck him.” He watched Ellen’s head dropped and he raged to her. “Did you ever have any feeling for me at all?”

“I still do.”

“Oh bull.”

“No, Dean, I do.”

“Ellen, you were with Frank. When I need you, you were with him, how can you say you have feelings for me. How?”

“Dean.” Ellen moved to him. Looking at his face so angry. “I love you.”

Dean laughed. “You think you love me! You Ellen, are cold, selfish and have been doing this for years! You manipulate! You use! And you say you love me? If you knew the first thing about love, you wouldn’t be going to him!”

“If you knew the first thing about being a husband, I wouldn’t have to!”

*Crack!*

Total shock took over Dean, as if in slow motion, when he found himself staring at the hand that had just smacked across Ellen’s cheek with the force of his anger. “Oh my God.” He looked up to her, Ellen’s head was still to the side, her hair flung over her face. “El, Oh God, El . . .”

Ellen lifted her head, felt his reach and slammed her fist hard into his chest then shoved him back.

“El.”

Ellen flew from the house.

^^^

How long had Dean waited for it? Hours. Maybe it just seemed like it. But he knew it was coming and he waited. In his chair. Elbows on his knees, rocking as his cupped hands rested under his chin. He stared at the door, waiting for the moment that either Frank, Robbie or Joe would barge through the door and literally kill him for touching Ellen.

When the door knob clicked, Dean stood up. He would at least be ready.

Ellen, only Ellen walked in.

“El.” Dean moved to her. “Ellen I swear to God I’m sorry. I swear I don’t know what made me do that. El . . .” He spoke his heavy emotional words as he grabbed for her arms. “I should never of touched you. I . . .”

“Dean.” Ellen spoke calm. “Stop.”

“But . . .”

“We won’t turn this situation around.” She moved to the couch.

“What?” He followed her.

“You were wrong. I was wrong. But because of what you did, I won’t let it take away from what I did.” She sat down.

“Listen to me.” Dean sat next to her. “Nothing. Nothing you did, deserved

that. Nothing should have made me do that.”

“You’re right.”

“I would never do that again. Why didn’t you tell Frank. You should have.”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“He didn’t show up.” Dean said.

“You’re right. I didn’t tell him. What happened here tonight is between you and me. And what happened here tonight will never happen again.”

“It won’t.” Dean’s head dropped.

“I think, I think you know why Dean.”

Dean nodded.

“It is everything. And everything tonight became the final straw. It’s for the best.” Ellen took a deep breath and stood up running her fingers through her hair. “You know what I’m saying.”

“It’s over.”

“Before you lose anymore respect for me, and before I lose any more respect for you. Let’s just end this.”

Dean stood slowly from the couch. “I never thought we’d get to this point. I never though the odds would be this stacked against us.”

“I screwed up more than you should have forgiven.”

“I love you. I just kept hoping it would get better.” So much sadness laced Dean’s voice. “Please know, I wanted us to work. I really wanted us to work.”

“And know I did too. But fate . . .” Ellen shrugged sadly. “Fate and bad choices got in the way. We struggled from the beginning.” Solemnly she looked at Dean. “Let’s not struggle anymore.”

Dean closed his eyes. Even though they would never be physically far from each other, the were at their widest distance apart. And in a world so big, with so very few people, Dean and Ellen had their goodbye.

*A Pause . . .*

PRESENT DAY

October 2 - Beginnings, Montana

“Shit.” Robbie looked at his watch as they sat in Frank’s office. “We’d better be getting you back Hal.”

“Yeah.” Hal agreed. “Frank, even though you annoyed the hell out of me today . . .”

“It was fun.” Frank held up his hands.

“I’ll see you in a couple days.” Hal stood up. “Thanks for the catching up.” He winked at his brother.

“Robbie.” Frank called out. “Be safe.”

Robbie gave a thumbs up. “See you in a few. Henry? Drive us to the hanger?”

“Aw.” Henry whined. “All right. But Hal never finished his story about how he found Gergerace.”

“I’ll finish it in the jeep.” Hal said as he opened the door. “See you Frank. Dean.”

Robbie walked through the door. “Dean? You coming.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “I’m gonna hang out with Frank.”

Frank looked oddly at Dean after his brothers and Henry walked out. “Now why are you hanging out with me?”

“I like you.”

“Right.” Frank said smug.

“I do. Hang out with me Frank.”

“Why? I know. You’ve developed a need for being around greatness.”

“You’re an ass.”

“You want to hang.?” Frank rocked some in his chair and snapped forward when his phone rang. “Hold that thought.” He held his finger up to Dean and answered it. “Hello?”

“Frank.” Joe sounded irritated. “I’m getting pissed off here. I can’t find Dean. Can you help.?”

“Yeah.” Frank said. “He’s right here. Been with me for hours.”

“Frank! An hour ago I told you I was looking for him.”

“Yeah and I told him.”

“Why in Christ’s name didn’t you tell me he was with you!” Joe yelled.

“Dad.” Frank stayed calm. “You didn’t ask.

“Put him on the goddamn phone.”

“O.K.” Frank shrugged and handed the phone to Dean.

Dean cringed and slowly brought the phone to his ear. “Hey Joe what . . .” Dean slid in the seat. “I’m really . . . yes. Yes. Yes.” Dean jolted and handed the phone back to Frank. “See ya Frank.”

“What the hell did you do?”

“If it’s what I think . . .” Dean moved to the door. “You don’t wanna know.” He opened the door and let out a sigh. “God, I’m a dead man.”

Frank laughed, alone in his office. He sat there for a moment. He was done

working and he thought about who he could possibly annoy in his free time. Coming up with the idea of maybe just going home and enjoying his new house, Frank, grabbed his shoulder harness from his desk and stood up.

“Frank.” A male voice called out.

Frank stopped in his walk to the door.

“Frank.” He called out again.

Frank spun around. Where was the voice coming from?

“Frank.”

Scratching his head, Frank bent over and looked under his desk. He walked to the file cabinet, opened a drawer. Nothing.

“Frank.”

“What!” Frank screamed and marched to the door. He opened it, peered out. Empty. “What the hell.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“I need to see you.” Frank walked to his closet and opened that as well. “Hello?” He called in side.

“Hello.” The male voice replied.

“Now what the . . .” Frank shut the closet, turned around and was so startled he jumped backed, banged into the closet and shrieked as if he were Henry.

A ghostly figure appeared his room. Hardly seen, but there. See transparent, white. An apparition of Frank’s brother Jimmy. “Now I have a complaint.” Jimmy held up his finger. “Why, only once was I mentioned during the entire brothers meeting. Once Frank. Once. Was I forgotten about?”

Frank’s eyes grew even more wide as he stared leaning against that closet. “Oh fuck.”

^^^

**NEXT: WARS**