

LIFEBLOOD

CHAPTER THREE

SCENE 1

HUGO: I stood outside waiting for Jackie, nervously checking my watch and looking around like a suburban mom trying to score OxyContin on the street for the first time. “Hey, you made it! I was worried you weren’t gonna show.”

JACKIE: “You still haven’t kicked that habit?”

HUGO: “It’s nice to see you, too.”

JACKIE: “It *is* nice to see you. Though I’m less fond of *smelling* you.”

HUGO: “Yeah, alright, alright. I’m putting it out.” I shoved my lighter in my pocket with one hand and with the other stubbed out my cancer stick against the brick exterior of the house. Jackie opened up her backseat and reached for her work bag. “Thank G-d.”

JACKIE: “What was that?”

HUGO: “Uhh, I said, err- like Smaug.”

JACKIE: “What?”

HUGO: “You know, the dragon?”

JACKIE: “You smoke because it makes you feel like the dragon from The Hobbit?”

HUGO: “Well, no,” I answered her, “Mostly I just do it because of the nicotine addiction.” She shook her head in bemused wonder, a look I was pretty familiar with people giving me. Luckily, I had for years now fostered a personality of pleasantly charming eccentricism to such an extent that most people who’d shared more than two and a half conversations with me were statistically at least thirty-three-and-a-third percent less likely to bother with follow up questions. Which served me well in moments like these. “I have cut back, you know.”

JACKIE: “Oh, great, so you die *slower* from the cancer.”

HUGO: “Exactly!” She slung her bag over her shoulder and closed her car door. She walked up and we shared a quick hug. I felt her thin fingers squeeze my shoulder as she pulled away.

JACKIE: “It *is* good to see you, Hughie.”

HUGO: “So you said. Now come on! Dinner’s getting cold.” We walked in and I cut a path for us, snaking through the taped up boxes, trash bags, and half used reels of bubble wrap.

JACKIE: “Wow.”

HUGO: “Yeah.”

JACKIE: “Must be weird. Seeing your life all packed up like this.”

HUGO: “It’s weirder seeing the parts of it he decided to throw away. Your folks still in Valley Glen?”

JACKIE: “Oh yeah, you’d have to drag them kicking and screaming out of that old house.”

HUGO: “I think I’d like to see that.”

JACKIE: “So might I, honestly.”

HUGO: When we kept walking through the dining room, Jackie paused and looked around, confused.

JACKIE: “I thought we were having dinner?”

HUGO: “We are, but my old man already sold the dining room set.” I walked to the door of the basement and opened it. “So we’ll be kickin’ it *old school*.”

JACKIE: “You’re kidding.”

HUGO: “Nope! I’m a man of my word. Like when we were kids, remember?” I watched a smile slowly spread across her face like a decade time lapse of deforestation in the Amazon. Though actually not at all like that because this sight was in fact pleasant and didn’t leave me with a sinking feeling of dread like the other one did.

JACKIE: “How could I forget?”

HUGO: I bowed deeply as she walked by and started down the stairs. I heard her snort a laugh as she shoved me in the arm. And while I didn’t *see* her eyes roll, I had also never seen a platypus lay eggs, but as was the case with both I knew that they must have. I followed behind her as she descended the stairs, and watched the back of her head as she found in the middle of the otherwise near empty basement a comforter draped across the floor with a bottle of wine set between two dishes that were covered in silver foil to try to help the meal hang onto its heat. Music played softly from Dad’s old portable Columbia turntable. The overhead was off, and the only light came from the couple of electric camping lanterns on the edges of the blanket. Jackie beamed back up at me.

JACKIE: “I can’t believe you did all this!”

HUGO: *Neither could I*, I thought to myself. I’d have liked to have told her that I wasn’t a man of half measures, but we each knew that was *exactly* the type of man I was, so I just smiled back at her. Jackie set her bag by the steps, kicked off her shoes, and sat on one corner of the blanket. I went to the other and picked up the bottle. I couldn’t pronounce the name so between that and the price I figured it must’ve been the good stuff. I certainly had never seen the label on the shelves at Maguire’s. “There—! Should we make a toast or something?”

JACKIE: “To what?”

HUGO: “I don’t know – something.”

JACKIE: “Hm... here’s *to something*.”

HUGO: “Heh. To something.”

SCENE 2

FREEMAN: “It doesn’t make any sense. Everything we know of the Source – which, granted, is about as much as Columbus knew about geography – suggests direct interaction with subjects will have a depressant-like effect. But with the ichor injected directly into the bloodstream, the effect was nearly the polar opposite ... *Polar*, hmm, could it be that the blood plasma is more hydrophilic than in humans? Attracting some kind of inverse interaction that wouldn’t be present in the gastrointestinal-...? Ah! No, no, don’t be *ridiculous*, Asenath...”

“Danielle – could you be a dear and bring up a vial of ichor from this afternoon’s Bleeding?”

DANIELLE: “I’m afraid we haven’t got anymore down here, ma’am.”

FREEMAN: “What? What do you mean? We just drained over a *gallon* of the damned stuff no more than a few hours ago!”

DANIELLE: “Yes, ma’am, but Mr. Elwood requested the samples be taken to his office. And Dr. Luthor saw to the general disposal of the rest.”

FREEMAN: “Oh, for the love of— Well, go fish some out of the biohazard waste disposal unit, then.”

DANIELLE: “Ugh... seriously?”

FREEMAN: “Oh, for goodness sake, Danielle, it’s only an industrial dumpster full of biological waste. Don’t be such a baby!”

“And that infernal backup generator still isn’t working properly...”

As I’d told Frank earlier in the day, there was nothing inherently wrong about an experiment yielding unexpected results. The trouble was now working out *why* those unexpected results had occurred. *It’s almost as if*, I thought to myself, *it had been a bad idea to inject a substance we knew almost nothing about from a thing we knew less than nothing about into a couple of deeply troubled human adolescents*. But then of course that was a stupid thought, so I stopped thinking it. Discretion may have been the better part of valor but it was the achilles heel of scientific research. And don’t even get me started on morality, the fat lot of good that’s ever done anybody. It had been an absolute nightmare originally convincing the partners at Lilith & Co. to do something a little more proactive with the discovery made by the Australian office. Elwood, for as much as I loved the man – or at least loved him in so much as one *could* love one’s boss within the cut-throat world of corporate America – was simply *not* a visionary, much as he liked to believe himself to be. And when it came to originality the man was about as unique as a drop of water in the ocean. Because of this, Frank and I had come to something of an arrangement some years back when it became apparent I was not destined for early retirement as were so many of my predecessors. That being that I would stay out of his way if he were to stay out of mine. Once that unsteady peace had been brokered, an unexpected civility had developed, surprising us both. More surprising still, was that it developed further into a genuine fondness, whereby he eventually grew to appreciate my creativity, a fact in my opinion helped only marginally by the brief series of one night stands. Though we don’t really talk about those anymore. I leaned back in my chair, took off my glasses, and scrubbed at my eyes for a moment. Oh, it had been *fascinating* touring the campus for the first time. Frank had insisted I see the Bleeding process before taking over. I’d, admittedly, been reluctant at first. Not because I thought I would develop some sort of empathetic attachment to the Source — no, merely that I thought my time would be better spent in the lab. I was somewhat affronted at the time by the notion that the lead science officer was unable to delegate such a- well, what I at the time had considered to be a very trivial and pedestrian task...

ELWOOD: “—And currently we have about eight beds in the main compound, but we’re hoping to expand that to nine or ten by the end of the quarter, as demand continues to increase, especially as we move into the holiday season.”

FREEMAN: “I’m surprised. Those numbers seem low.”

LUTHOR: “There are biological limitations to consider. The Source is only capable of so many conversions per feeding cycle.”

FREEMAN: “Ah, yes. Of course.”

LUTHOR: “Though, counterintuitively, this number seems to increase the more it is fed prior to the abstersion and ingurgitation process. A discovery that *I* made some years back.”

FREEMAN: “Brilliant, though I take it this method only proved effective to a point?”

ELWOOD: “Yes, and unfortunately production increase efforts have stalled out since then.”

LUTHOR: “I don’t think that’s—”

FREEMAN: “Interesting. I’m sure we can find some way to encourage a higher output rate. Electro-shock therapy, perhaps?”

ELWOOD: “I would love it if we could eventually compete with more traditional inpatient units with ten to twelve beds.”

FREEMAN: “That doesn’t seem unreasonable. I’m certain we could work something out, given some time and trial and error. If positive reinforcement and negative punishment have each failed as proper incentivization, perhaps it’s time we introduce an element of positive *punishment* into the equation.”

LUTHOR: “Would it really be wise to—?”

ELWOOD: “Excellent! This is exactly the type of new headway I was hoping we’d see with a new project head.”

FREEMAN: “Of course. And Luthor, dear, tell me: does it have two stomachs?”

LUTHOR: “I- I beg your pardon?”

FREEMAN: “Quite alright, I’m used to people around me apologizing for their inferior intellect.”

LUTHOR: “What? No, I—!”

FREEMAN: “-Think nothing of it. I asked if there were two stomachs. One for the feeding and one for the rumination process?” The boys shared a glance, looking owlishly at one another like a pair of dogs might glance around for a tennis ball you’ve just neglected to let go of on the downswing. “My, you really *do* need me, don’t you?” I said, with a wry little grin. We walked down the final series of hallways and arrived at a spartan little lab with a desk in the far corner. I could tell it was meant to be mine by the lack of anything else on it at the moment, save a nameplate that had seen better days around the edges where some poor janitor had repeatedly needed to pry out and replace the lettered slide. There was a large pair of doors on the opposite side, towards which Elwood had motioned before checking his watch.

ELWOOD: “Right on schedule.”

FREEMAN: He’d said, taking out a handkerchief and dabbling his brow and upper lip with it. *The squeamish type then*, I had concluded with mild amusement.

FREEMAN: We entered onto the observation deck above the operating theater. Frank hung back, busying himself by pretending he had an important email to respond to and wrestling with an old Blackberry smartphone that was terribly out of fashion even for the time. Dr. Luthor and I walked up to the glass. I peered down at the sight below us. A group of five or so Eos employees were milling about, checking the readings of the monitors around the room, adjusting knobs, and recording observations onto tiny clipboards. A guard stood in the far corner with a semi-automatic rifle pointed down at the ground, occasionally casting an eye about the room and generally looking about as bored as a step-father at an elementary school dance recital. In the center of a room was a compact, organic mass about seven foot tall by five foot across by three foot wide, that slowly expanded and deflated in regular intervals. You would almost think it was breathing. And you'd be almost right. 'Almost' because it was indeed breathing so the 'almost' was incorrect entirely. The dermis on the outermost layer was thin and nearly translucent, and dark, blackish veins pulsed visibly. Squinting from the not insubstantial distance between us and the main stage, I could just barely make out that the angular extrusions along the sides were collapsed arms that ended with wiry fingers curled around the rest of its fleshy frame. I had known from the reports I'd spent the prior fortnight refamiliarizing myself with that at the end of those spindly fingers were blunted ends, along the surface of which were tiny, sharp stickers, like the mouths of several dozen mosquitos had been stuck through the top of a bottle cap.

LUTHOR: "Remarkable, isn't it?"

FREEMAN: Dr. Luthor had asked me. "Interesting..." I had answered. Presently, I pushed around stacks of papers, data sheets, manila folders, and small black binders, until a scrap of office desk that hadn't seen the light of day in months was at last visible. Fumbling almost blindly I reached through the small hole I'd made in the paperwork piles until I felt something cold and solid against my hand. I pulled it out and turned the triangular little metal object over and stared at the inscription on the outermost side. 'Doctor Asenath Freeman' it read in large, boldface letters. I mused silently to myself for a time. "I wonder..."

"Danielle? When you're done over there, please ask Dr. Luthor to come meet me in my office."

SCENE 3

HUGO: "—So the first guy asks the second guy if they're gonna have a problem, and the second guy says 'yeah.' First guy says 'Alright, you want to take this outside?' Second guy says 'yeah' again. Then, right as me and Sean are about to jump in, the first guy – no joke – pulls a *mouth guard* out of his pocket and puts it in his mouth-!"

JACKIE: "What? You're kidding."

HUGO: “No, I swear! So the second guy takes a look at this dude with his mouth guard for a couple of seconds, then — says *nothing* — reaches for his wallet, pays for his drinks, and walks out. First guy finishes what he got and leaves a half hour later. Never seen either of them again.”

JACKIE: “Wow. That’s great.”

HUGO: “Yeah, I love retelling that one. How about you? Any wild stories from work?”

JACKIE: “Oh, tons.”

HUGO: “Any you’re allowed to share?”

JACKIE: “Mhh, slightly *less* than tons.”

HUGO: “Oh, come on! You don’t have to name names.”

JACKIE: “I don’t know if any of them are really funny out of context, you know? A lot are kind of morbid, really.”

HUGO: “Oh.”

JACKIE: “Yeah.”

HUGO: “It must be tough, going into work everyday and listening to all that.”

JACKIE: “Sometimes. But it’s not all doom and gloom. You also get to be there for the success stories and the epiphanies and the celebrations...”

HUGO: “How many places you working at now?”

JACKIE: “Let’s see— The high school, the college’s career & counseling centers, the police department, and then there’s my private practice.”

HUGO: “You have a private practice?”

JACKIE: “Barely.”

HUGO: She scoffed and took a long sip of her wine.

JACKIE: “It’s tough. This town’s dying, and nobody wants to admit it.”

HUGO: “I mean, I wouldn’t say that.”

JACKIE: “Of course you wouldn’t, that’s exactly my point. Think about it. The local coal industry’s been burnt out for over twenty years now—”

HUGO: “We’re at least four hours from any *coal mining* towns, Jackie.”

JACKIE: “Hush! Stop interrupting.”

HUGO: “Sorry, continue.”

JACKIE: “Thank you. As I was saying: coal’s gone the way of the the macarena, the university is losing professors right and left - your dad included, the high school is half empty, and a lot of the new tech jobs are getting outsourced overseas or into the major cities, leaving pretty much just the little dead-end stuff the teenagers get running registers and stocking shelves.”

HUGO: “Sounds like plenty of folks could use some therapy.”

JACKIE: “And that’s the other thing!”

HUGO: She was getting animated now, holding her wine glass and waving it around as she continued talking. I tried not to calculate the exact dollar amount soaking into the floorboards from the couple of tiny spills.

JACKIE: “Most of the kids who could use therapy? Their parents just ship them off to Eos, where they do G-d only knows what to them. But who can compete with a guaranteed behavioral improvement in under a month? I certainly can’t! Therapy - *real* therapy - takes time. It takes patience. It takes parental involvement and a lot of hard work. And these parents just-...”

HUGO: “Can’t be bothered.”

JACKIE: “Pretty much.”

HUGO: She sulked, bringing her glass to her lips and taking a large gulp.

JACKIE: “*Mh-!* Another record over. How long have we been down here?”

HUGO: “Hm, well twenty-two minutes on each side, four LPs, so that makes... a little under three hours?”

JACKIE: “Show off.”

HUGO: “I’ll go get another.”

JACKIE: “Not so fast. You picked the last- *all* of them.”

HUGO: “You want to pick one?”

JACKIE: “It’s only fair.”

HUGO: “Alright,” I motioned off towards the spot around the half wall where my dad’s vinyl collection was stacked up in a series of heavy, waterproof lock boxes. “Ladies choice.” She grinned and got up, before winding her way through the room like she’d seen me do a few times now. I waited til she was out of sight and I heard her begin rifling through the selection before I

turned my eyes to her work bag that was still sitting by the stairs. I could feel myself shaking from the adrenaline cocktail usurping the alcohol in my system for the title of ‘most obnoxious visitor’ in my bloodstream. As quietly as I could, I shuffled over and slipped my hands down either side of the bag. I hadn’t been able to place the recorder in with any real care, so it had undoubtedly fallen somewhere to the bottom of the main pouch.

JACKIE: “Ouch!”

HUGO: I heard Jackie cry out and felt my heart hit the ‘eject pilot’ button and launch itself straight up into my throat. “Uhh— everything okay in there?” I called out when I’d regained my composure and turned to see she had not just walked back in to catch me red handed.

JACKIE: “Yeah. Ugh, cardboard cut.”

HUGO: “Damn. I hate those.”

JACKIE: “Same.”

HUGO: I waited another beat longer before resuming my search, and a few seconds later felt my hand bump into something blocky and familiar and pulled it out. I turned the tiny digital recorder over in my hand. The screen was off, and when I tried the power button nothing happened. *Dead battery.* Dad had warned about that. I could only hope it had managed to get something useful before it gave out. The smart thing to have done then would have been to be patient and stuff the thing in my pocket to give it a listen once Jackie had left. But patience and me had never really gotten along. I got up and started for the stairs. “Hey, I’ll be right back; I gotta use the bathroom.”

JACKIE: “Don’t you guys have one down here?”

HUGO: “I, uh, don’t like that one.”

JACKIE: “What?!”

HUGO: I barrelled up the stairs and made a bee-line for the study. Remembering the drawer where my dad had dug out the triple-A battery, I rummaged around until I found another, pried off the recorder’s back panel and banged out the old battery before swapping in the new one. “Come on, come on, come on.” I flipped the little thing right way round again and held down the on switch. It asked me to confirm the date and time, which was automatically set to midnight, January 1st, 2001. I clicked yes, and continued to the home menu. Accuracy be damned. A message popped up on screen in all capital letters. ‘NO MEMORY CARD.’ I felt my shoulders drop so fast you’d think they were a shady cryptocurrency. My heart sank too, but that one felt more like it had been on the Tower of Terror ride in Disney World, minus the part where that was actually fun so maybe not like that at all. “What? But- ... *how?*” I ripped the battery panel back off and stared blankly at the empty card slot where a microUSB should have been.

JACKIE: “Looking for something?”

HUGO: My head snapped up to where Jackie’s silhouette hung in the doorframe. She brought up her hand, revealing that she held between her fingertips a small, thin piece of plastic.

JACKIE: “*This*, maybe?”

HUGO: ... Ah, shit.

SCENE 4

PETERSON: The night was growing about as bitter as three day old coffee grinds at the bottom of the office coffee maker. I sat at my desk, staring down the same report I’d been glaring at for over an hour. If there was one thing I’d learned in this line of work, it was that paperwork was a lot like a pissed off goose. Meaning it didn’t intimidate very easily. If there was another thing I’d learned in this line of work, it was that I wasn’t very good at making analogies.

DET. SANCHEZ: “Ay, Phil! Shouldn’t you be home by now? The hell you still doing here, man?”

PETERSON: “Huh?” I checked my watch. Nearly 10 o’clock. “Well, damn.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Mark’s gonna kill ya.”

PETERSON: “Hmph. Well, Homicide could use some action. They’ve been getting rusty.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Go home, wise-ass.”

PETERSON: “I will, I will. It’s just...”

DET. SANCHEZ: “The kids?”

PETERSON: “Yeah.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “They ain’t been signed out yet?”

PETERSON: “No. Anderson got a call from one of the parents a couple hours ago, but—” Two men in heavy winter coats and white scrubs came through the front doors. They headed to the front desk as the cold air they brought in with them sent a chill through the room and papers across near every desk went flying.

DET. SANCHEZ: “Christ, it must be getting bad out there.”

DESK SERGEANT: “Evening, gentlemen. How can I help you?”

EOS THUG 1: “Pickin’ up Kennedy.”

PETERSON: “What?!” I jumped out of my chair and rushed over to the front desk. “You’re here for Dax?”

EOS THUG 2: “Yeah. What of it?”

PETERSON: “You two are with Eos?”

EOS THUG 2: “No, we just dress in paper-thin hospital scrubs in the middle of winter to be fun and quirky.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Hey! Easy on the sarcasm, pal, you’re talking to an officer of the law.”

PETERSON:I looked over at the desk sergeant on duty.

DESK SERGEANT: “I’m sorry, Phil, when Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy called earlier they relinquished care back to Lilith & Co.”

PETERSON: “You’ve got to be kidding me! Those kids being at that place is what *started* this nonsense.”

EOS THUG 2: “Ay! The center *helps* J.D.s, man. And it does a damn better job of it than juvi.”

PETERSON: “You wanna say that to me again, boy?”

EOS THUG 2: “You know, for a cop, you sure don’t know how to stay in your lane.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Woah, woah, woah - gentleman. Let’s all take it easy.”

EOS THUG 2: “Hey, he started it!”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Oh, did he? What is this, the recess yard at an elementary school? Enough already! Peterson, come on, man, come with me.”

“It’s not worth it, man, come on.”

PETERSON: “There’s something weird going on at that place.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Yeah, no shit, but there’s nothing we can do about it. And they’ve got a point. Juvi would eat the Kennedy kid *alive*. You know that.”

PETERSON: “Yeah... yeah, you’re right... but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Nobody said you did. Why don’t you go get Dax? Think they’re still sittin’ in Interrogation room A.”

PETERSON: “We only have *one* interrogation room, Sanchez.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Which makes it by default Room A. Now go get Dax, then go home, capeesh? Your husband’s probably worried sick about you.”

PETERSON: “Alright, alright... I just got to make a call first.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Who you gonna call?”

PETERSON: “Damn it, Sanchez, now that song’s going to be in my head all night.”

DET. SANCHEZ: “Sorry — it was on Cable last night.”

SCENE 5

FREEMAN: “—It had simply never occurred to me before: try the ichor solution in a small, relatively uncomplicated mammal *before* moving on to human experimentation!”

ELWOOD: “Hm, yes, remarkable. So what does this tell us?”

FREEMAN: We watched as the rodent skitters about its cage. “Well, that’s the interesting part. On its own, it behaves relatively the same as it would prior to treatment, other than an increased appetite. But introduce it to others of its species...”

ELWOOD: “*Sonofa—!* You could’ve warned me, Doctor!”

FREEMAN: “What did you *think* I was going to show you, Frank? The pair sitting down and solving the Pierce–Birkhoff Conjecture together?”

ELWOOD: “Hmph. Point.”

LUTHOR: “How intriguing.”

FREEMAN: “Yes, it seems, unlike the usual calmativ effects of Ruminati, introduction of the ichor into the bloodstream at a level of 5 micrograms per millimeter or higher results in a completely different set of positive behavioral effects, including increased strength, speed, perception, sensitivity to light, and aggression.”

ELWOOD: “I’d hardly call increased aggression a *positive* trait.”

FREEMAN: “Not positive in the vernacular sense, Frank, but in the scientific one, meaning an *additive* quality.”

ELWOOD: “Ah, right, yes, of course.”

LUTHOR: “Any fatigue or reduced mental acuity?”

FREEMAN: “Nothing observable at this level, though possibly at higher doses.”

LUTHOR: “Have you tried pairing two of the specimens injected with the serum together?”

FREEMAN: “No, though I’d assume they’d fight to the death like a pair of betta fish.”

LUTHOR: “Hmm. I wouldn’t be so sure, given that the human subjects did *not* attack one another. On the contrary, all evidence we’ve managed to gather so far suggests they worked together.”

FREEMAN: “That’s true, yes, you’re right. Some sort of green beard altruism, perhaps.”

LUTHOR: “My thoughts exactly.”

ELWOOD: “They’re going to start sprouting beards?”

FREEMAN: “It’s just a turn of phrase, dear. Meaning they can somehow spot others like themselves to whom they treat with empathy, while responding with apathy, if not outright aggression, to those who are dissimilar.”

ELWOOD: “Oh, uh, right — of course, of course. Hm... Then that could prove quite useful to us, couldn’t it?”

LUTHOR: “Quite.”

FREEMAN: “What did you have in mind, Frank?”

ELWOOD: “What, uh, dosage were the children given?”

FREEMAN: “Accounting for the size differential, the equivalent of nearly five times as much as little Mickey, here.”

ELWOOD: “Mickey isn’t a rat. He’s a mouse. It’s right in the name.”

FREEMAN: “Frank...”

ELWOOD: “Sorry, sorry. It was just nice to correct *you* for a change.”

FREEMAN: “Yes, yes, very good. Now, as I was saying, the math works out to about 75% peak serum levels in the adolescent subjects, assuming they metabolized it similarly to Mick- uh, *Chuck E.*, here.”

ELWOOD: “Much more accurate, thank you.”

FREEMAN: “Anytime. Any update on the runaways, by chance?”

ELWOOD: “They’re being collected as we speak.”

FREEMAN: “Wonderful. I would like of course to examine them each thoroughly when they are returned to us. In all honesty, we were lucky the experiment didn’t kill them outright. In the rodentia, anything over about 20 micrograms per millimeter proved fatal. The therapeutic window is exceptionally narrow.”

ELWOOD: “Uh-huh, yes ... Dr. Luthor-?”

LUTHOR: “Yes, sir?”

ELWOOD: “How quickly could you concoct a batch of this new serum at the correct concentration for use in humans? Without them becoming uncontrollable, of course.”

LUTHOR: “With Dr. Freeman’s assistance?”

FREEMAN: “Naturally, darling.”

LUTHOR: “Then I’d estimate twenty-four hours or less.”

ELWOOD: “Excellent! Get to it!”

LUTHOR: “As you wish.”

SCENE 6

HUGO: “Ouch!” Jackie slugged me hard in the shoulder. “Ow - *ow!* Hey!”

JACKIE: “I can’t *believe you*, Hughie! Do you have *any idea* how much trouble I could have been in if somebody had found that stupid thing on me? This is a two-party state! Any unlawful recordings discovered could have ruled the entire interview inadmissible in court. Not to mention the utter breach of confidentiality *and* the fact it’s a Title 18 offense to bring contraband into a police interrogation room. I could have lost my job, lost my license, *and* been charged, fined, and imprisoned for up to *twenty years!*”

HUGO: “There’s no way you knew all that off the top of your head, you totally looked that u-*Ow!* Okay, okay, *stop hitting me!*” I circled around the room so my dad’s desk was between us. If looks could kill, I’d have been a smoldering pile of ashes right about now.

JACKIE: “This is *just* like you, Hughie! I can’t believe I let you trick me into thinking you actually wanted to see me—”

HUGO: “I *did* want to see you!”

JACKIE: “—No, you wanted to see *this.*”

HUGO: She held up the microSD card again.

JACKIE: “Because you just couldn’t *stand* the idea of something going on in this dumb, little town that you didn’t know about, and you didn’t stop for even a second to think about how your stupid, selfish interests–”

HUGO: “Selfish?!”

JACKIE: “-might’ve impacted the people around you! Because you *never* do that and you *never* have!”

HUGO: “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

JACKIE: “What do you *think* it means, Hughie? All your life you’ve had it *easy*! You don’t even know what it’s like to have to work for something. You did well in school without even trying, you made every Varsity team you wanted to be on, you even got you a free ride to *college* because your dad was a professor at the university, and then you didn’t even *finish* – just dropped out, no consequences, no debt – working one nothing little restaurant job after another and coasting by on your charm–”

HUGO: “Whoa, whoa, hey! Where is any of this coming from?”

JACKIE: “It’s the same old story, Hughie. The same old Hugo Matthews.”

HUGO: Jackie crossed her arms and turned away from me, back towards the doorway to the hall.

JACKIE: “And I can’t believe I fell for it. *Again.*”

HUGO: She walked out of the room and headed down the hall before I heard her descending the basement stairs. I stood motionless in the center of the room like a spider in the bathtub, before I eventually wrestled my self-preservation instincts away from my motor controls and followed after her. I found Jackie crouching by her work bag, shoving her shoes back on and pointedly refusing to look up at me as she occasionally had to wipe at her face. “If you knew about the recorder, why’d you come over?” I don’t know why I asked her that just then. It was a really, really stupid thing to say. Like shouting ‘Hey! You missed!’ at your own executioner.

JACKIE: “*That’s* what you want to ask me? ... Because - I don’t know! - I kept hoping it was just an honest mistake! And that when I came over you wouldn’t try to take it from my bag. That somehow it had just fallen in there. I mean, yeah, it was a long shot, it being *on* and all, but–”

HUGO: She shrugged and shook her head as her eyes turned glassy again.

JACKIE: “–But some part of me knew. Because it always does, with you.”

HUGO: “I don’t understand.”

JACKIE: “No, you don’t. And that’s exactly the problem ... I should have known better.”

HUGO: She got up, and I was honestly pretty impressed with her ability to keep up the death glare while shrugging past me on the stairs. “Jackie-!”

JACKIE: “Don’t even bother, Hughie.”

HUGO: “Please - wait - I just—”

JACKIE: “Oh, for fuck’s sake! When did *this* start?”

HUGO: I nearly tripped over her when she stopped short in the foyer with one hand on the doorknob. She was looking out through the narrow window by the front door. I glanced over her shoulder and was greeted by the sight of an angry snow squall raging outside.

JACKIE: “You’ve got to be kidding me ... Did you know about this?”

HUGO: “Me? What- no, of course not. I’ve been with you this whole time. The- the storm must’ve come in early. I - here—” I went into the family room and turned on the television.

WEATHER REPORT 4: “We’re getting record-low temperatures as a severe weather threat continues to loom. Blizzard warnings remain in effect, and probably will remain so throughout the night due to gusty winds and decreased visibility. Ice is also a concern as we move further into the night, and we’ve got some colder air on the Northern side of this storm system as it makes its way towards us and continues to move in throughout the weekend, likely changing any remaining wintry mix into ice, which could be up to a quarter of an inch, which could cause some significant damage to property. Local police and emergency services have issued several warnings on the township’s website, as well as Facebook and Instagram, pleading with the locals to *remain indoors*.”

JACKIE: “*Ugh!* Of course. Great. That’s just great.”

HUGO: “Hey, look, it’s fine. I’ll take the couch and—”

JACKIE: “You’re damn right you will.”

HUGO: “Okay, okay!”

JACKIE: “We’re sleeping on opposite ends of this entire goddamned house, and if you think for even a *second* about asking me to give you that damn chip, I swear to G-d, Hughie, I’ll—!”

HUGO: The power went out.

JACKIE: “Oh, fuck me.”

SCENE 7

DAX: The first thing I saw when I woke up was the snow. It fell in thin streaks against a deep, black expanse outside the car window, with not even the occasional interruption of a bright yellow halo from a passing streetlamp. The first thing I heard was the sound of the windshield wipers, which were old, crummy, and running on high. Two voices that I didn't recognize were speaking quietly. Their conversation drifted towards me into the backseat.

EOS THUG 2: "Christ, you think they could spare us a van that wasn't twenty years old?"

EOS THUG 1: "Yeah, and with chicken wire for windshield wipers? This is unbelievable! I can't see a damn thing."

EOS THUG 2: "Honestly. Don't see how one kid can be worth the trouble of driving through a freakin' *blizzard*."

EOS THUG 1: "Beats me. And Elwood's going to be pissed when we tell him the other kid got picked up by his folks."

EOS THUG 2: "So what else is new? That guy wouldn't know a smile if one walked in with a skirt on, invited him to dinner, stood him up, called to apologize, said it'd make it up to him, invited him on another date, had a great time, took him home, said it was going to go slip into something more comfortable, and then showed back up in its birthday suit and invited him to bed."

EOS THUG 1: "If it ended up in its birthday suit in the end isn't that just the same as if it showed up the regular way without all the anthropomorphizing?"

EOS THUG 2: "Yeah, s'pose so. You get my point, though."

DAX: My head was pounding, and there was a fierce aching in my shoulder that was tender to the touch. "Ouch..." *How had I gotten here?* I couldn't remember anything after the interview at the police station had ended. I sat up slowly and pressed my face against the window. The glass was cool to the touch and fogged around the spot where my cheek touched it. I got a glimpse at the night around us. Behind us, it was completely dark, an inky, black nothingness. But up ahead, something was glowing.

EOS THUG 1: "Looks like the town lost power."

EOS THUG 2: "Good thing they got those crazy fancy backup generators at the center."

EOS THUG 1: "Yeah, I guess."

EOS THUG 2: "What, you don't like them?"

EOS THUG 1: “I don’t know, man, having all those hydrogen fuel cells around the complex makes me kind of jumpy. You got any idea how flammable all that shit is?”

EOS THUG 2: “Not really. I didn’t pay much attention in chemistry class.”

DAX: *They’re taking me back*, I think, and feel a dread cold enough to rival the mounting storm outside grip my chest in icy terror. My heartbeat became the crashing of cymbals reverberating against my ribcage and up to my temples. I can’t go back there. I *can’t* go back there.

EOS THUG 2: “You ever get the feeling like your entire existence is only in place to cater to somebody else?”

EOS THUG 1: “What do you mean?”

EOS THUG 2: “Like the conversation we just had.”

EOS THUG 1: “What about it?”

EOS THUG 2: “Like, yeah, it was natural enough, but didn’t it also feel like it was meant to convey some sort of important, plot relevant information to an unseen audience?”

EOS THUG 1: “You keep talkin’ crazy like that and they’re going to stick you in one of those beds in the wards.”

EOS THUG 2: “They already have. I went through the program when I was in 11th grade.”

EOS THUG 1: “No shit? Me too.”

EOS THUG 2: “Really?”

EOS THUG 1: “Yeah, only I was in 8th. I think a lot of the center’s staff were patients as kids.”

EOS THUG 2: “Huh.”

DAX: The glow up ahead grew brighter. We were getting close to the compound, now. Maybe another two miles up the road, and I could just barely start to make out the dim grey, amorphous shapes of the buildings in the distance when suddenly—

EOS THUG 1: “Ah, shit!”

DAX: The storm picked up and we were instantly encased in white as a sudden snow squall appeared all around us. The driver, whose vision was already marred by the brutal conditions, could hardly see so much as the hood of the van anymore. We hit a patch of ice, and instinctively he hit the breaks and we began to swerve.

EOS THUG 1: “Damn it, damn it, damn it!”

EOS THUG 2 “Lay off the breaks you fucking idiot—!”

SCENE 8

HUGO: “There. That should last for a few hours, at least. Glad my Dad still had some Duraflames in the garage.”

JACKIE: “Hmph.”

HUGO: “Okay, okay. Look, I get it, alright? I’m sorry. I don’t know what else you want me to say or do. But we’re going to be stuck here for a while and not talking to each other is going to make it go by a heck of a lot slower. So... truce?”

JACKIE: “Hhff.”

HUGO: “You can go back to hating me tomorrow.”

JACKIE: “Fine.”

HUGO: “Hallelujah.”

JACKIE: “Shut up.”

HUGO: She pulled the old comforter tighter around her. It had gotten cold surprisingly quickly since the power had gone out, probably thanks to the old house being nearly empty, and also desperately in need of some new windows.

JACKIE: “You got anymore alcohol around here?”

HUGO: “Wow, seriously?”

JACKIE: “Don’t get any ideas. Just, you know, to keep warm. Like with those avalanche rescue dogs with the barrel of brandy strapped around their necks.”

HUGO: “You know that alcohol doesn’t actually help your body stay warm, right? It just makes you *feel* like it does. And rescue teams never actually strapped brandy casks to their Saint Bernards.”

JACKIE: “You *would* know that. And no, I didn’t. I also don’t care.”

HUGO: “Alright, alright, I’ll go look ... You’ve still got your phone on? What if the power stays out and it dies?”

JACKIE: “Mind your business, Matthews.”

HUGO: “*Okay*, I’m going...”

JACKIE: “Hello?”

PETERSON: “Adler?”

JACKIE: “Phil, hey, what’s up? Is this about Dax?”

PETERSON: “Yeah. Listen, you didn’t hear it from me, but we just got back the kids’ blood and urine samples. They all came back positive for bath salts.”

JACKIE: “What? There’s no way! Phil, I know this kid. They wouldn’t do that. Maybe the Martin boy, but not Dax. Not after what happened-”

PETERSON: “-With the brother, I know, but the labs don’t lie. And that’s not all.”

JACKIE: “Great. More bad news?”

PETERSON: “Is there any other kind?”

JACKIE: “Not today, apparently. What is it?”

PETERSON: “The Martin boy got picked up by his parents a little while ago, but a couple of flunkies from Eos just came through for Kennedy.”

JACKIE: “Oh, jeeze.”

PETERSON: “That’s an understatement. Man, you should have *seen* the scene that kid caused, Adler! I never seen a teenager that size throw three grown men off ‘em like that! Like it was *easy!*”

JACKIE: “Jesus.”

PETERSON: “It was like watching a rabid animal. Took restraints *and* sedation to end the brawl. If that’s not bath salts, I don’t know what is.”

JACKIE: “That doesn’t make any-... (*sighs*) Is the state going to press charges?”

PETERSON: “For Maguire’s or the scene at the station?”

JACKIE: “Either?”

PETERSON: “I doubt the state prosecutor is going to bother pressing charges so long as the Maguire’s don’t pursue it, and I was the arresting officer, so I’m sure not going to.”

JACKIE: “Thank you. That’s a relief, at least.”

PETERSON: “Yeah, but the state can’t just sit back while a minor is using.”

JACKIE: “Dax wouldn’t–”

PETERSON: “I know that’s what you *think*, Adler, but you should have been here tonight. It sure *looked* like she was on something. And you know what that means...”

JACKIE: “That scumbag lawyer from Lilith & Co. is going to try to argue the center can take the place of juvenile drug counseling.”

PETERSON: “Exactly.”

JACKIE: “Damn it! Is there anything we can do about it?”

PETERSON: “I doubt it. Definitely nothing on my end.”

JACKIE: “Alright, I’ll weigh my options. Thanks, Phil.”

PETERSON: “Night, Adler.”

JACKIE: “Good night.”

JACKIE: “I *know* you were listening.”

HUGO: “Sorry.”

JACKIE: “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

HUGO: “How can you *not*? You’re really just going to sit there and let all this happen?”

JACKIE: “You don’t even know what that phone call was about.”

HUGO: “I know enough from the look on your face and what I overheard that it isn’t *good* ... Jackie...”

JACKIE: “-Don’t say it.”

HUGO: “We need to-”

JACKIE: “-*Don’t* say it!”

HUGO: “-*We need* to listen to that tape.”

JACKIE: “... Okay.”

END CHAPTER THREE