

Minnesota Cold Excerpt

Justin broke my self-pity with an offer to accompany him on clinic business. He stood in the door, wearing medical royal-blue reqs. "I have a clinic transport for a professional consult not far from here. It might do you good to get out of the house and into the fresh air. We'll have lunch before I head back to clinic." He tucked a note in my hand. "I'll wait for you to change."

I realized I still wore lounging pajamas. As he left, I read the note.

Dr. Dodge:

I look forward to our clinical review session today. Please bring Patient 551389's data for discussion.

Benjamin Van, M.D.

Of course, I thought of Doug's note and wondered if this Dr. Van was somehow connected. I trusted my instincts. Justin waited with my coat. I gave Chevy a treat and followed Justin through the energy lock. We did not speak until the doors closed behind us and we were outside the residence.

"Justin, you must be careful. You've got a family to think of."

"Benjamin Van has been my clinical reviewer for the last six years. I've told him nothing about your condition. I read through your data off line on Dad's old secured processing unit. Took me forever. We'll talk about it later."

"I got a note from your father earlier this week. It was written before he died and left with someone I don't know. He told me there were people watching out for my safety." In the winter sunlight, I studied the small details of my son's face; the tiny fingernail scar above his left eye from a fight with his sisters decades before, the remnant of a dimple in his athletic chin, a small red spot outside his right eyebrow where he rubbed his fingers when thinking. In his eyes I saw Doug's integrity along with a strain of Dodge empathy.

"Just now I thought about how wonderful it is to have lived long enough to remember life before the crisis. Justin, do you think the government might be afraid people my age remember too much?"

We stood on a concrete pad in what had once been a large front yard where Justin and a swarm of kids played tag or baseball or built snow forts.

"I'm thinking something along that line." He opened the transport's door. "I miss Dad's guidance." I stood waiting for him to continue his thought, but he said nothing as he helped me into the transport then closed the door.

At first, neither of us spoke as our transport moved out of the neighborhood. Justin communicated with the clinic through the first part of our travel. I half listened to his instructions while looking at residences, schools, info boards as we moved. As a child of the fast-moving twentieth century, I hated the snail pace of personal-transport travel in

the metro transport area. Only government vehicles move faster than twenty or twenty-five miles per hour.

I know our greedy love for the speed and the freedom of cars didn't contribute to the world's good, but it was the way of American life. We drove ten miles for sushi, forty miles to work, two hundred miles for a weekend at our cabins. One neighbor drove a mile to the gym to walk three miles on a treadmill three times a week. The government built roads, and we drove. With a driver's license and money for gas, there was always some place to go.

Justin broke up my reverie. "I reviewed all your tests, Mom, and couldn't find one thing wrong. You're a very healthy woman."

My reaction was somewhere between hallelujah and alarm. "Could Elizabeth have misunderstood?"

"I don't think she heard wrong. She heard what they wanted her to know. She didn't ask any questions, a loyal resident." There was a pause, and Justin fussed with the transport controls. "Someone wants you dead, and with technology it's possible to make that happen. The technician could have altered your implant or even inserted a new wafer to interfere with who knows what."

I had difficulty breathing. It dawned on me that the transport could be monitored for audio and Justin would be in trouble. "Maybe we should talk about this at home."

"Just breathe, Mom. We're secure. Let me tell you about Dr. Van."

He put two fingers on my pulse. "He uses a motorized chair because of a spinal injury and crushed leg suffered during the 2020 California earthquakes. He's originally from Minnesota and lives and works here with his daughter, Cara. She runs his labs and back office. You might meet her."

"So why does he work for the government?"

"Mom, there's little medical practice that isn't government. He has an international reputation in practice ethics that lets him travel. I'm fortunate to have a person of his caliber as my medical reviewer."

We turned off the main transport line onto a side street. The Van residence stood surrounded by a great number of trees. Some person of influence lived in this place during the crisis years to protect such beauties from becoming firewood. I gawked at the beauty of bare branches against a winter sky.

"Ready?" There wasn't really an answer to Justin's single-word question. Ready for what? Continuation of the death sentence? Meet a stranger who might unravel the mystery? Engage in a meeting that might threaten Justin's future?

"Promise me you won't do anything that places you and Mary in jeopardy? I'm afraid this is all part of something rather sinister."

His eyes were steady, the Douglas Dodge look. We walked toward the red-brick colonial. "Mary and I have our suspicions as well. We're together in taking care of you. Life in Minnesota feels like the façade of this

old house. Everything looks comforting on the outside but quite different under the surface. We're worried about raising the kids here."

In a pure Justin gesture, he put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a little hug. "Don't worry about us, Mom." Our heads came close together as he mumbled what I thought was a cautionary comment about the coming meeting. Before I could ask him to repeat what he said, he steered me toward the front of the house. "Now, look to your right and smile for security."

Inside, the original living room was somewhat intact and now used as a gathering space. The old central hall and dining room were office spaces where three staff worked at the latest technology stations. We took off our coats and boots. Doug withdrew a small packet from his white tunic and handed it to one of the staff. "Mendota Sector Clinic 687. Physician 0229C."

While we waited, I created an image of the family who must have built this house a hundred years ago, perhaps two professional adults with children and a nanny. A grand piano might have stood where I sat. The children would have played somewhere in the back of the house. A phone would ring over and over with messages from other kids.

Typical Minnesota residences are furnished with an awkward collection of pre-2015 furniture and territory manufactured junk. The men in our residence built bed frames and simple benches and tables back in the 2020s instead of buying the cheap fake-wood stuff sold in territory stores. "Buy Minnesota" never promised quality or beauty particularly in the early

years. Most local furniture stank.

A woman about Justin's age broke my daydream. "You must be Sallie. My name is Cara, and Dr. Van would like me to repeat a few of the clinic tests performed earlier this week." Without Justin's background, I wouldn't have guessed at Cara's relationship to Benjamin Van. She was professional to the core.

"I'd like to meet Dr. Van and speak with him before allowing more tests." Cara looked to Justin. I could see her surprise, perhaps annoyance.

I remained sitting. "I'm afraid." I hated the admission. They were quiet. Justin moved first, putting a hand on my arm.

"That's okay, Mom. You have to ask for what you need. If that's meeting Dr. Van, fine. Or I can stay with you during the tests if that will make you comfortable."

Cara left. I looked at the floor, then Justin's face, unsure what to do. I thought I heard a grandfather clock mark the hour somewhere in the residence. My heart seemed to continue its steady beat in spite of my fear.

"Dr. Van will see you." Cara stayed a distance from us. Her voice and face were neutral. "Do you want Dr. Dodge with you?" As I stood, I nodded and extended a hand to Justin.