

## Chapter 2.

Setting on the bed, Ellese wondered at her sister-in-law's reaction to her. Marge was the same age as Alfred, and they'd all gone to school together, but for the life of her, Ellese couldn't remember anything she could have done to cause such anger. The thing she most remembered about the younger Marge was the way she always seemed to be beside Alfred. Like all siblings, they'd had their share of disagreements, even open fights, but she couldn't imagine Marge would see that as anything out of the ordinary. She turned the problem over in her mind, trying to find a solution to it, but she couldn't. Ellese finally shook her head and opened her suitcase, muttering "Gotta quit getting into this reflective mood shit, or I'll never get anything done."

She'd unpacked and put her clothes away. As she was hanging the last item hung up, her sister-in-law called up.

"Supper's ready, Ellese!".

The boys had been in the living room watching TV, but when Ellese came down the stairs, they were already seated at the big table in the dining room. Supper itself was simple: meatloaf, mashed potatoes with gravy, and cooked green beans. Marge put her hands together and lead everyone in saying grace, then Alfred and the boys began trying to see who could make the food disappear the fastest.

Ellese helped herself to a serving of everything. One thing she'd freely admit, Marge could cook.

A huge supper didn't stop both boys from asking their mother if they could have some ice cream for dessert. She'd looked at them for a few seconds, then said "Yes, but *only* if you clear the table off first." That set the boys literally scampering around the table gathering dishes. William nearly took Ellese's away before she had finished her supper.

"Hey, you might be looking for dessert, but can I finish my supper first young man?"

" 'M sorry, Aunt Ellese."

She smiled as she replied “Why don't you go on and collect your reward, I can take care of my own plate. Would that be all right with you, Marge?”

Marge, who'd started to smile at the whole exchange, put a mock scowl on her face and addressed her youngest. “Well, I don't know. I don't like to see them shirking their chores...” As William started to look downhearted, his mother started to chuckle. “Of course. Go on, get out there before Conrad takes it all for himself.”

William sprinted towards the door, yelling “Connie, Mom says you better not take all the ice cream or you'll be in trouble!”

Marge watched him go. “They're good boys, they deserve a little bit of something extra now and then. Let me know when you're done so I can start doing the dishes, Ellese.”

“Marge, I can do the dishes, if you and Alfred want to set down and relax. I might never have become a good cook, but washing dishes is something you never forget how to do.”

“Thank you. The boys should have the plates stacked on the counter next to the sink, and the pots and other cooking utensils are by the stove. If you aren't sure where to put something, let me know and I'll give you a hand.”

By the time Ellese finished eating, everyone else was watching the evening news. She gathered up her dishes and headed for the kitchen. She got the stoppers sealed just right, adjusted the faucets to get the water temperature she wanted, added soap and waited for the sink to fill. She was nearly done washing the first dish in when her brother entered the room. He took a towel from the rack on the wall, walked over, and came to stand by the drying rack.

“So, what do you think you're going to do?” she'd asked.

“Oh, I thought I'd do something I've done quite a few times before - dry the dishes after my sister had washed them.” he replied.

She glanced at him. “Are you sure you want to do that? I get the impression your wife wants me to prove that I'm worth having around.”

Alfred looked at her. “Sis, it's almost been harder on Marge than me this last year. Losing the farm, being forced to pack up and move into town, it's all been a lot for all of us to absorb. I think if she hadn't already agreed to let you come, Marge might have asked you to just stay away. I know you and her have never been anything like bosom buddies, but can you cut her some slack?”

Ellese finished the first dish and put it in the drain rack. “Oh, I can cut her some slack, little brother. I just hope she'll do the same for me.”

Alfred held up his hand. “I'll do what I can. I just don't want you two fighting. Can you try to avoid that, for my sake?”

“I'll do my part. Provoked...I'm not sure I could answer for what would happen next.”

Once everything was washed and put away, Ellese followed Alfred into the living room. The boys seemed, like most of their age, to have a thing for racing, and the TV had some NASCAR event on that Ellese could care less about. She continued walking out to the porch.

Outside, the air was cooling but the sky was still a bright blue. Getting used to the longer days that came with spring and summer this far north, after so long away, wasn't easy. Ellese didn't mind the change. Williamson was a place where they rolled up the sidewalks after a certain hour. The peace and quiet, the lack of noise, even the lack of a neighbors blaring TV, was something she never realized she missed until she was back at home. On the porch was a worn wooden rocker she remembered from her childhood, and she walked over to it now with a smile on her face. “Hello, old friend.” she said before setting down in it. It was one of a pair that had once stood guard on the front porch of her childhood home. The feel of the worn wood brought back memories of rocking on another porch on similar nights. She also remembered how other one had been destroyed...

*The year before she'd graduated from high school, a line of thunderstorms had swept across the countryside outside of Williamson. Like many a storm before it, this storm that had generated strong winds. One freak gust had caught the pair of old rockers and flung them off the front porch like some malicious school boy. This was the lucky one. A rose bush her mother had planted (and her father had*

*tended as if it were sacred after her death) had snagged it. The wind had tossed the other one across the yard, smashing against the side of the milk barn.*

The sound of the screen door open roused Ellese from her memories. It was Marge, who walked towards Ellese and sat on a bench next to the rocker she occupied.

Marge looked out off the porch, watching a solitary car drive past, then she turned towards Ellese. “What is it with men and car racing?” she asked.

The question brought a smile to Ellese's face. “If you figure the answer to that one out, write it down, then send every woman in America a copy. ”

Marge laughed. “Yeah, I think if I accomplish that miracle, I can promise you I'll let every woman know.” Both women shared a laugh, then Marge turned towards her sister-in-law. “Ellese, Alfred told me you don't want any arguments with me. He's never figured it out, I think, why I have trouble liking you.”

Now Marge had Ellese's complete attention. “So, why *do* you have trouble liking me?”

Marge looked away for a bit, as if having trouble saying what she felt. When she finally spoke, the words poured out in a torrent. “It started when we were in high school. You never could see how much Alfred looked up to you, how a single bad word from you could hurt him. He'd try to shrug it off, to never really let it show, but I could see it in how he acted. Then you left and went off to school...”

Marge stopped for a moment. Ellese saw tears in Marge's eyes, and her hands were shaking like she wished she could grab that younger Ellese and shake a sense of what she was doing to Alfred into her. Drawing a deep breath, Marge continued.

“You know your brother wanted to go to college too, don't you? He talked about it to me...how he wanted to write, even just to teach...he wanted to get away from this town, too. Then you decided to go out East, and your dad would have been left with no one. There was no way he was giving up on that farm, he told both of us that, no matter what. It was his farm, his family's farm, land his great-

great-grandfather had homesteaded.”

Marge stopped for a moment, and Ellese thought she might be finished. She wasn't. In a cold, flat voice that did more to convey her anger than any scream, she carried on, only raising it once.

“Alfred found him, did you know that? He found your dad lying in the barn, trying to set up and not able to control his movement, not even able to speak. Do you *know* what it was like, watching your husband see his father being taken away, knowing he was wondering if he could have done anything to keep it from happening, wondering if that could be him in twenty or thirty years?”

Ellese remembered the call, hearing her brother's voice choke as he told her their father was dead...how their father had suffered a stroke and died...the feeling of unreality...she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't heard that grief in her brother's voice. She had just entered the final month of a difficult pregnancy, unsure whether she should fly and knowing a multi-day drive was pointless. So she had been forced to let her brother carry all the burden of arranging the funeral and settling the estate, such as it was. He had never said anything to her about it, he was his father's son after all, and even now farmers tended to think the 'man of the house' took care of things like that. Her father had been dead for nearly a year before she had been able to get back to Williamson to mourn. She still remembered the guilt she had felt when her brother had picked her up and taken her home without saying a word about the delay in paying her respects.

“Marge, I had no idea Alfred wanted to go to college. He never said a word to me about it, never. If I'd known...”

“You'd have what? Talked to your dad? Told him to let both his children leave, to just let the land go? Maybe lease it to someone else and move into town? Do you honestly think your father would have done that?”

“No, Marge, I know he wouldn't have. He'd bitch every winter about how hard it was to make a go of it farming, then be pacing every minute he couldn't get into the field every spring. But if Alfred, or if Alfred and I had *both* talked to him about letting Alfred go to college...I think he might have

listened. He wouldn't have liked it. He was always sure that with a little more hard work the farm would be like it was when he was growing up...but I think he'd have finally seen the light.” Ellese looked at Marge. Her face was still hard, but she no longer had the look of open hatred Ellese had seen in her eyes earlier.

“When Alfred called me, when he told me dad had passed...I wanted to come, I didn't want to leave him to handle all that by himself. But I couldn't fly, and driving from California... Then I found out my son-of-a-bitch husband had been screwing our office 'assistant' while I was pregnant...”

Marge was now staring at Ellese with her mouth hanging open. “Wait, you never said you divorced your husband because he was cheating on you *while* you were pregnant! How did you...”

“He got so confident he'd never get caught that he started screwing her in our offices! Another woman, one who worked just with me, literally walked in on them. That's how I found out. I almost wish I'd let Gale go kick his ass...”

“Who's Gale, some man you know? How did...”

“No, Gale is the woman who caught the two of them having sex on *my* desk. Before she worked for me, she worked for Uncle Sam, two tours in Afghanistan in the Marines. Later, she confessed to me that Edward had hit on her too, along with half the other women in the office. She didn't want to bother me, she knew I was having problems, but she told me when she told me what she'd seen. The things she said about Edward....well, all I can say is she wasn't kidding me when she told me that a Marine know more ways to cuss than any three civilians.”

“He was after *all* the women in your office?” Marge asked, now looking completely shocked.

“As far as I can tell, pretty much. After I kicked that bastard out, there was no way in hell I going to let him keep living off my hard work at the firm! I filed for divorce as soon as I could. Edward started throwing motions out right away, even though I had witnesses to prove what he'd done to me. It was like he was determined to fight for everything he could get out of me, but most of all, he wanted to keep what he saw as his just share of the profits from the law firm.”

Ellese had to stop. She could feel the angry memories of that long, ugly fight welling up inside her, and she knew she could never make her sister-in-law understand what it had been like. The constant, unrelenting pressure Edward had kept on Ellese. The fight to keep clients, people who had always interacted with Edward and thought he was the person responsible for winning their cases. Wondering if she could trust her office staff, people she worked with and who'd suspected, or worse yet known, of her husband's infidelities and said nothing.

Ellese looked down at her hands and realized she had them clenched so tight her knuckles were white. She slowly drew a breath, then another, and willed herself to relax. When she was sure she could speak without her voice rising to the scream she'd wanted to let out, she continued. "Marge, I won't offer you an excuse because I can't. If I could have been here, I would have. Please believe me when I tell you is I did *not* want to leave Alfred to take care of all that shit by himself!"

Marge stared at Ellese for a moment more, but instead of anger, her face expressed shock. Finally, she shook her head, leaned back, and muttered "Damn, I had no idea your husband was such scum."

Ellese was still having trouble holding her anger in check, but seeing her sister-in-law beginning to understand what she'd gone through helped her move away from the ragged edge and back towards a calmer state of mind. Then Marge asked her the one question she didn't want to answer.

"Ellese, I can understand now why you didn't say anything. But with everything he did to you, the way he treated you, how did your husband end up with your daughter?"

Of all the ugly memories of the divorce, what had caused her to give up Christina was the one she wished she never admit to anyone. *In for a penny, in for a pound they say.* she thought. "Edward got custody of Christina because...because I wasn't a good mother."

"Ellese! I can't believe that, you..."

"Marge, you weren't there. You don't know what it was like. One day I'm a new mother, looking ahead to a new chapter in my married life...and the next day, I'm a humiliated fool trying to figure out

how I could have been so wrong about the man I thought loved me. If that wasn't enough, I had to fight that same man for control of virtually everything I had come to care about in the world.”

Ellese had to stop, knowing if she didn't, she'd completely lose control. Just admitting she'd given her daughter up had hit her like a physical blow. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest, the almost-terror of admitting what had happened that night... Ellese took a deep breath, knowing she'd gone too far to stop now, and continued. “I got the best divorce lawyer in LA to represent me, but Edward went out of his way to make things hard. He knew if I could prove what he'd done, there was no way he'd get to keep any portion of the firm. Every day I was taking Christina to a nanny, working ten, twelve hours trying to keep clients from deserting, responding to Edward's latest charges, then picking up my daughter before going home to collapse. You raise two children, what were they like the first few months?”

“They were waking up in the middle of the night, demanding to be fed or to be changed. Then they wouldn't go back to sleep for what seemed like forever...” Marge stopped for a moment, remembering those times. The joy of bringing a new child home overlain with the run-ragged pace of taking care of them, the first few months of both boy's lives had been a trial for her. For Ellese, with everything she'd been forced to face... “God, Ellese! It must have been hell for you!”

“I didn't realize it was getting to me, not at first. I would pick Christina up after work and hold her...and it was like everything was right in the world. Then I'd be standing by her crib at home, trying to get her to go to sleep so I could lie down and get a little rest, and she'd keep squirming and crying... Marge, one night she woke me up at around three in the morning. I'd been asleep for maybe an hour, I was that keyed up, and I stormed over to her crib and started screaming at her, telling her to shut up.” Ellese stopped, the memory of that moment flooding back to her, buried her face in her hands, and began to cry.

She heard the porch creak then felt Marge put her arm around Ellese's shoulder, trying to give her what comfort she could. “It's alright. It's alright. Your fatigue got the better of you and you yelled at

her. It happens. Don't beat yourself so much over it.”

“But Marge, it wasn't just fatigue! I walked over there...and, and I hated her! In my mind, she was linked to my husband, just another punishment he was heaping on me. I remember screaming at her, and being so angry...then I looked down at her...Marge, she was lying there with her eyes fixed on me and a look...she was afraid of me, I could see it. No infant should feel like that!” Ellese stopped, closed her eyes and drew a deep breath before looking at her sister in law. “Marge, you don't know the types of cases my firm took, do you?” Marge shook her head slowly, a slightly blank look on her face. “We took cases I never thought I'd take back when I was in law school. Rich idiots wanting a divorce from people they never should have married. Vain couples so set on proving themselves the 'victor' that don't care what happens to their kids.” Another pause. “The tabloids, the 'entertainment news' programs, they'd 'report' the gaudy details, all the 'juicy' stuff...but none of them heard half of what the lawyers would hear while prepping for a case. I heard parents admit things that made me want to vomit, about how they hated their kids, but they wouldn't give them up to 'prove a point'. I didn't want to become like that.” Ellese stopped for a moment, the memory of that morning fresh in her mind as if it had been yesterday. It took an effort for her to continue, but she did. “Edward was an asshole who couldn't keep his dick in his pants...but even I knew he loved our daughter. So I called Edward and made him an offer. He'd been insisting he wanted at least joint custody of Christina, so I told him I'd give him full, undisputed custody of her if he'd let me buy out his share of our law firm. He wrangled a bit more, but I knew I'd offered him something he wanted, so after that, it boiled down to working out the details and getting it all on paper so we could both sign.” Ellese stopped, seeing that final meeting with her husband, remembering the feel of her daughter in her arms, watching Edward walk away with her. She felt her throat close with the grief of that moment, remembered how she'd wondered if she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life. She shook herself, wishing she could put aside all those memories, and knowing she never could.

Marge hugged her before speaking to her. “ Ellese, you were under more stress than most

people face in a lifetime, but you never hurt your little girl. You're not a monster, you were just a woman facing more than she could handle. Through all the anger, all the fatigue and frustration, you never hurt your child. Remember that. You were a good mother, you did your best and you loved your little girl. I can tell, the way you're acting now, letting her go wasn't easy, was it?"

Ellese she simply shook her head.

"Have you gone to see her since your husband took custody of her? You didn't agree to stay away from her, did you"?

"No, my lawyer insisted that there be language in the divorce decree giving me the right to visit Christina with proper notification, but her father and his new love interest moved to Seattle and got married. Even now, I'm not sure I could look at either of them without wanting to smack them! Besides...how would I explain myself to Christina after all these years? How could I make her understand what I did?"

"Ellese, how old is she now? Six? Seven? You could still be a part of her life, you could let her know you haven't forgotten her. You just have to be willing to try."

It seemed simple when Marge said it, but Ellese couldn't imagine how she could introduce herself to a daughter who probably didn't even remember her. "Marge, I wish I had your confidence that I could do it, that I could help her understand...I just worry that all I'd end up doing is confusing her. I worry that she'd end up hating me for not being there, or worse, that she'd understand enough that she'd start hating me and her father too. Would that be fair to her? Would that be right?"

"I don't know, but is it fair that she doesn't even know her own mother? Is it fair that if she does hear anything about you, it'll be coming from the woman who stole your husband?"

"No, but..."

"There's no 'buts' about it. You should be a part of your child's life, Ellese, you should at least try" Marge stopped for a moment. "When are you supposed to meet with Mark Reiner?"

The sudden change of topic caught Ellese off guard. She hesitated for a second, then said "Why

do you ask?"

Marge's paused before responding. "I was just worried about what could be bad enough that he'd ask you for advice."

Ellese's curiosity was now thoroughly piqued. "Why would you think that, just because he wants to talk to me? Besides, if he was, why should it bother you?" she asked.

"No offense, Ellese, but when we heard Mark was sick, it hit everyone here hard. Mark's helped more than a couple of kids from around here get in at UND. He did it without being asked, and that's something you don't forget. So, yes, I have a reason for hoping nothing serious has gone wrong in his life."

After her earlier support, the way Marge had phrased what she'd just said to Ellese was like a slap. Watching her face, hearing her voice, she quickly realized Marge wasn't trying to provoke a fight, she was just expressing some deep-seated fears. "Marge, to be honest, I don't know why Mark asked to see me. His email wasn't exactly filled with details, it just a mention that he was in town, and that if I was going to be here, he wanted to talk to me about some unspecific legal matters. To be honest, you probably know more about what he might need help with than me. Alfred asked me more or less the same question, and I told him the same thing. He claims he doesn't have a clue, so...have you heard anything? Anything at all?"

Marge thought for a second, her face clouding over somewhat as she was obviously going over everything she had heard, then she replied "To be honest, I haven't heard anything about Mark, which is kind of strange by itself. We all heard he was sick, and that it was cancer, but beyond that, nobody seems to know anything. People see him every once in a while puttering around the house, or walking around town, but that's about it."

Ellese pondered what Marge told her before replying. "Well, I can't guess what he might want to talk about, but I guess I'll find out when I see him."

"When will that be?"

“To be honest, he never told me any particular day or time. I guess I’ll have to find someone who’s got his phone number and give him a call to set up some sort of meeting. Don’t suppose you have the information I need?”

Marge smiled and said “It’s a small town, remember? He’s staying in his family’s old house. Do you remember it?”

“Yes, Marge, I remember where he used to live.”

“Well, I’ve got his number if you need it. The woman who lived there while Mark was away worked with me, so I know it by heart.”

“Thanks.” Ellese replied, then she looked at Marge. “I don’t want us to argue anymore. Truce?” she asked, holding out her hand.

Marge took her hand. “I don’t want to argue anymore either. Truce it is.”

The two women sat on the porch for a while, watching the sky slowly darken. Finally, Ellese spoke. “There are a lot of things I don’t miss about this place, but I have to admit, I do miss the evenings here. Being able to sit out and relax, the quiet of this place, it’s something special.”

Marge didn’t say anything for a few moments. “Yeah, I hope I don’t end up missing it too.”

“Why should you miss it? What haven’t you told me?” Ellese said, turning to face Marge.

“The bank was bought earlier this year. The new company is talking about closing this ‘branch’, as they call us now. Not enough business, not enough cash flow, to keep the doors open. Oh, they talk about keeping an ATM here so folks wouldn’t have to drive a couple hours to get cash, but still... I’m senior enough that they’ll probably offer me a job in one of the large towns. If I take it, I’ll have to move where ever the new job is, there’s no way I could drive to any of the branches I might be transferred to in winter. There’s nothing to tie Alfred to this town any more, and I don’t think the boys would mind if they had to live in a large town. Me...not having a chance to set on the porch on a quiet evening, that’s something I’d miss terribly. Despite the gossip, the occasional small-mindedness, I love this place. Did Alfred tell you what he thinks about the chances of the town’s survival are?”

Ellese nodded. "I think he's actually being pretty optimistic. If the stores left here don't have a bank they can deal with, I don't see them surviving. No stores, no bank, hardly any real jobs, how long could any town survive facing that? No, if the bank closes, even if there's an ATM here, this town is going to dry up and blow away. I think Alfred's right, I really do think the way things are going, there'll hardly be anyone living anywhere but the big cities before much longer."

Marge was silent, looking out over the scene in front of her, the shaking her head. "And what the hell happens to all these families, the memories, the community? Damn..." she half muttered to herself.

Marge and Ellese had sat in silence, both of them absorbed in a vision of the future neither of them wanted to see happen, yet knowing there was little they could do to stop it from happening.

Alfred came out to ask if Marge wanted to come inside. The boys were getting ready for bed and the TV was available for 'something she might enjoy', he said with a smile. Marge went in, but Ellese stayed outside, feeling a sense of how time seemed to be closing in on her. She knew the world changed, that nothing was constant, but to face the possibility that this place, the town she remembered from childhood, might cease to exist, how did anyone come to terms with that? The sky was completely dark, and her mind saw it as a fit metaphor for the thoughts dogging her. She wasn't a naturally defeatist thinker, though, and eventually she got up and went inside to see what her brother and his wife were up to.

The boys were absent, in bed at last Marge announced. A sitcom of some sort was on the TV and Ellese sat down to watch it. The show didn't really interest her, but having someone to set with after the dark reflection she'd been engaged in helped lighten her spirit. Eventually, she found herself laughing with everyone else.

When the news came on, Marge hit the remote and turned the TV off. "I, for one, am not on vacation. So if I'm going to be ready for work tomorrow, it's time for bed. Are you coming, my husband?" she asked Alfred.

“Only as often as you let me, my wife” he said with a playful grab after her.

“God made men for some reason.” she said, smiling, “But it obviously wasn't for living a life of chastity, I am convinced.” and left the room with Alfred.

Ellese bid them a good night, thought about it for a bit, and decided it was probably time for her to get some sleep herself. Knowing that with two other people getting around for bed, one bathroom would mean someone was waiting, she kept her seat. Like all old houses, the simplest way to know when someone was done using the bathroom was to listen for the sound of the toilet flushing. When she heard the second flush, she got up, turned off the light, and made her way to the stairs. Her brother was just coming out, and he smiled at her as she climbed the towards him.

“Watching for the smoke signals, were we?”

She smiled at him, “No, that was Dad, before we got him to stop smoking. You, on the other hand, are a lot easier to know when you're done. I just have to listen to the 'Whoosh!' of water going down the pipes and I know the coast will shortly be clear.”

“Oh, I'm so easy!” he said in a slightly falsetto voice, then added “G'night, sis.” and headed off to be with his wife in their room.

Ellese went into her room, collected her night clothes and tooth brush, then headed for the bathroom herself. Alfred, in a move she remembered well from when they'd both been living at home, had forgotten to put the seat back down. She shook her head, lowered it into place, and took care of her own business. After finishing, she flipped off the light and stepped out of the bathroom. Like in the old house, there was a small light just inside the hallway that stayed on all night for anyone in need, and went to her room. She opened the window a little further, flipped off the light, and climbed into bed. In a couple of weeks, anyone wanting to get any sleep would need a fan going to dispel the lingering daytime heat, there being no air conditioner. Right now, though, a cool breeze was coming in the window, and a light cover actually felt nice.

Ellese shifted around, trying to make herself comfortable, but sleep eluded her. While the

unfamiliar bed didn't help, Marge's question about why Mark wanted to see her bothered Ellese. Why would Mark ask to see her? The more she thought about it, the more she realized she was less concerned about any advice he might ask for than she was about seeing him again. Why? The question kept chasing itself around in her head, keeping her awake. Was she worried about seeing an old acquaintance again under such bad circumstances? Was she was regretting never having spoken to him since they'd both left school? Did she still have feelings for Mark? What had been wasn't coming back, her mind told her. So why was that the last clear thought Ellese had before she finally fell asleep?

Running feet awoke her the next morning. The sounds of her nephews tearing past her door making enough noise to put a stampeding herd of cattle to shame. Ellese got up, pulled on a nightgown and opened the door. Down the hall, the door to the bathroom was open, which, given her need for it, she blessed. Just as she was finishing up, there was a knock on the door, followed by Marge's voice.

“Ellese, breakfast's on the table if you want some.”

“Thanks, be down in a minute.” she'd replied. Ellese washed up and headed down to eat. Alfred was nowhere to be seen, but both boys were seated in front of large bowls of sugar-frosted something or other. “Gods, I wonder what your teachers did to get you kid's mom angry as that at them?” she'd asked, half to herself.

Both boys looked up at her and William, who's mouth wasn't completely full, mumbled “Whadda you mean, Aunt Ellese?”

Ellese smiled at him and said “Oh, nothing. How are you boys doing this morning?”

They'd both managed to get out a semi-understandable “Fine.”, then had gotten back to more important things, like building towards their morning sugar rush. Finding a box of some plain corn flakes, she'd filled a bowl and set down to have her own morning meal. Part of the way through her bowl, the boys had finished their own bowls and headed off for the living room. A few minutes later, the sound of morning cartoons could be heard, and Marge came into the room.

“So, mom, did the boys preempt what you were watching?” Ellese asked.

“Oh, god yes! I know it keeps them out from under foot until the bus comes to collect them, but there are days when I just wish the 'Transformer' had never invented!” she'd said, half turning her head towards the ceiling.

“Oh, and I'm sure you weren't like Alfred and me, always wanting to watch the Road Runner and Wilie Coyote go at it one more time.” Ellese had asked mockingly, a smile on her face.

Marge put a stern look on her face and replied “Of course not, I was trained from day one to be a perfect mother and never wasted any time on such frivolity. Besides, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd were a lot more fun!”

Ellese laughed at her, and added “Oh, they were a riot, but you have to admit, nothing beats a good anvil on the head scene.”

Both women spent a few minutes swapping memories of favorite old cartoon. Ellese finished her cereal, and said “I'll get the dishes. You can get those two wild children around for school. Oh, by the way, what did their teachers ever do to you?” Marge looked at her curiously, so she added “I don't know, but sending two boys with that amount of sugar in their systems...someone at that school must have gotten on your wrong side.”

Marge smiled for a second before saying “Oh, nobody's got me angry there, but unless it's cold outside, getting those two to eat anything that isn't smothered in sugar is damned near impossible. Even then, it's like they have a sweet tooth big enough for three grown men. Were you like that?”

“Me, no. Alfred didn't have it either. Our Dad, however, loved to put about four heaping teaspoons worth of sugar in a cup of coffee, so maybe they take after their Granddad on Alfred's side.”

Marge shivered when Ellese had mentioned her father's love for extra-sweet coffee. “Gawd, how could anyone drink coffee like that?”

“Don't ask me, anything past a single teaspoon makes me gag. You?”

Marge shook her head. “I tried coffee once, but it gave me the jitters so bad I stick to tea if I want any caffeine.”

Ellese got up and headed over towards the sink to empty out the left-over milk. “Haven't seen Alfred, is he around?” she asked.

“No, he leave early pretty much every day.” Marge stopped for a second before going on. “You don't have any way to know it, and I don't want you to tell Alfred, but we aren't very far from going under ourselves. The money I make at the bank covers most of the expenses of the house and pays for the boys clothes, but everything else...when we lost the farm, we still owed money Alfred had had to borrow for seed, fuel, you name it. Everything Alfred brings in goes to pay those loans down.”

Ellese stood next to her sister-in-law for a second in silence before she continued speaking. “Your father was the same way. I think Alfred saw him as the 'ideal man', how a male should act, and to be honest with you, there were times when I wanted to smack both of them. Neither of them would ask for help from anyone when it came to paying their bills. I think Alfred will stay in this town as long as he can, because he still wants to be a farmer. When he finally figures out he can't be one...it'll break his heart, I think we both know that, but he'd survive it. I don't look forward to being the one to tell him to give up that dream. It's not that he wouldn't listen, I know I could get him to. I couldn't stand to see hope fade in him, the way it will when he finally realizes it's over.”

Ellese actually felt sympathy for Marge, and put her hand on her shoulder. “It's what farmer's wives have always done. You watched your Mom do it, I saw how my Mom struggled with it until the day she died. I guess it was one of the reasons I decided I wanted out. I knew I didn't have the strength, the courage, to hold on like that. If he's going to figure it out, he's going to have to do it for himself. We both know him, if someone tries pushing him towards something, he'll resent it. Even if he knows you're right, he'd still resent it. I know you, and I know that you love my brother. I don't think you want that between the two of you.”

Marge stood there for a second, staring at nothing, then she bowed her head “No. I know what you're saying, it's why I haven't said anything to him, even before the bank took the farm, I could see it was coming. I kept my mouth shut because I knew if he had to listen to me on the one hand, and have

the bank hound him on the other, it'd break him." She raised her head and looked at Ellese. There were tears forming in her eyes, but she went on. "So, I played the part, and was silent. I've stayed silent, but, God, Ellese, it's getting so hard to stay that way..."

Ellese didn't know what she could say, so she put her arms around Marge and gave her a hug, letting her know, if nothing else, that she wasn't alone.

After a bit, Marge straightened slightly and Ellese let her go. "Well, I better get finished getting around for work." Marge said, taking a dab at her eyes.

"Okay, get what you need to do done. If there's anything you could need taken care of, let me know. I won't call Mark for another hour or two, so I'll have time to get a few things done for you if you need me to." Ellese told her.

"No, everything outside of the dishes is taken care of. Did you want me to tell you Mark's number before I leave though?"

Ellese slapped her forehead. "Duuuuuuuh! Yeah, that might come in handy."

Marge started to tell her, then looked at a small pad of paper hanging next to the fridge. "Now that I think about it, I don't have to. It's the one listed here for Sally Kessen. If you want, I think you could call Mark now. I've seen him up and about more than once when I was going to work, so chances are he's up already."

Ellese looked at the number, then said "No, I think I'll wait like I planned. That way, if he's not up, I won't wake him, and even if he is, it'll give me some time to get ready before I go over."

Marge looked at her with more than a little mischief in her eyes now. "So it's *that* type of meeting, is it?"

Ellese felt herself actually blushing. "No it isn't...well probably it isn't. I just wouldn't mind looking..."

Marge held up her hand and said "You want to look your best. I understand. Well, good luck with the meeting and remember, you two be careful."

The last was delivered with a wicked grin, and Ellese experienced a feeling of embarrassment that she hadn't expected. Was she really planning on making herself look as good as she could for this meeting? Was that part of the unease that had kept her awake the night before? She started gathering the dishes, getting things ready so she could get them done, knowing it was more a way to occupy her mind than in any desire to get the work done in a hurry. Marge and the boys stepped into the kitchen to say their goodbyes, and like that, she was alone in the house. The dishes were washed, dried and stored in short order, and Ellese began to feel something else she hadn't expected as she walked towards the phone: apprehension. Mark obviously remembered her, but what would he be like. How would he have changed? Worse, what would she feel like, how would she react, when she heard him again? "One way to find out." she said to herself.

She picked up the phone, hesitated, then punched in the number. On the other end, she heard the ringing. Once, twice, three times, four...just as she was beginning to believe she should have waited until later, she heard the phone being picked up.

A familiar voice said "Hello?"

Ellese froze. Then she physically shook herself and said "Mark, is that you?"

There was silence for a second then "Ellese? Hi, yeah, it's me. Sorry I took so long to answer the phone, but I was just... How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. How are you doing?" she asked in reply.

Marks' voice sounded strained when he replied "Oh, about as well as can be. Are you back in town?"

"Yes, I got in late yesterday. I'd have called, but I was pretty trashed from the flight and I wanted to catch up with my brother and his family. I got your email, but it wasn't too informative. What did you want to see me about?" Ellese asked.

Mark paused before replying. "A couple three things, actually. I could explain them better face to face. When do you think you could come over so we can talk?"

Ellese was starting to get a feeling that there was something she should be picking up from Mark's voice and what he was saying, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was. She put the nagging doubt aside. "Sure, I could drop over and see you. Is there a time that would be best for you, or should I just drop by whenever I'm ready?"

Mark waited, then said, "Well, I'm supposed to talk with my caregiver this morning, so how about some time after lunch?"

"This afternoon would be fine. Say, one-thirty?"

"Sounds fine. It'll be good to see you again, Ellese."

"I'll see you then Mark." Ellese had said, and hung up the phone. As she stood there, she wondered at what she was feeling. Hearing Mark again, his familiar voice, had stirred something deep inside her. At the same time, part of her mind was telling her that what she'd heard, how Mark had sounded, should be worrying her. Every time she tried to figure out what it was that troubled her, her conscious thoughts couldn't find anything to fix upon and she was left feeling frustrated. What *was* it? Foreboding? Unease? Whatever it was that was bothering her, she knew there was only one way to find out: she had to go see Mark.

