

The Frain Legacy

Reid Frain pulled his Lexus into the driveway and shut off the engine. The wind sent red and golden maple leaves swirling around the yard like small, colorful tornados. He peered at the old house through the rain spattered windshield. Lord, it was ugly. Those old multi-paned windows with the thick glass made everything outside seem slightly out of focus when you looked through them, and the worn wooden shingles seemed to need scrapping and painting every second year. And stuck on the end, that stupid round room, the Frain library, that looked like it should have been part of a castle with some blonde babe up in the turret hanging her long hair out the window. Two floors of musty, moldy books that ought to have been hauled away in a dumpster years ago.

Reid glanced at his watch. Good. He was three minutes early. The last thing he wanted was a lecture from Aunt Grace about punctuality. Frain men were always punctual. And, according to Aunt Grace, Frain men were also well-mannered, impeccably groomed, restrained in their behavior and opinions, and they always had good posture. Frain men didn't have much fun, either. As the last of the line Reid figured he had an obligation to all his polite, well-dressed, standing-up-straight-and-had-to-be-miserable male ancestors to enjoy life any chance he got.

Reid pulled up the collar of his coat and ran for the house. He stepped into the back porch and shook off the rain. How many times had he told her to keep the doors locked? Stuck out here by herself who knew who could come walking in, hit the old girl over the head and---. And what? Reid shook his head. What was there to steal? Old books? Old heavy, dark wood furniture? Old velvet curtains and lace tablecloths? Who'd want the stuff?

"Reid, is that you?" a distant voice called.

"It's me, Aunt Grace," he replied, stepping into the kitchen. "Where are you?" He heard the sound of creaking wood and slow footsteps coming up from the cellar. The basement door opened and Grace Frain appeared.

She crossed to the sink, set a large flashlight on the counter, and began to wash her hands. She was, as always, dressed in a blouse, dark skirt and matching cardigan, with her gray hair twisted in a bun at the back of her head. She looked like the librarian she'd been. Reid tried to picture her, dressed like the old doll in the condo next to his. Mrs. Minton wore sweatpants and sneakers all the time and had an outlandish collection of tee shirts. That morning in the elevator she'd been wearing one that said, *I'm Old But I Have Money*. Reid couldn't help smiling. He couldn't imagine Aunt Grace in sweatpants. Her only vanity was shoes—high heeled ones. Except when she was working in the yard, heels were what she wore from morning to night. In his opinion she was way too old for those kind of shoes. One mis-step could end in a broken hip. He'd even tried to talk to her about it. She'd dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

"I put on my first pair of heels when I was twelve years old," she'd said. "I didn't fall then and I'm not going to fall now."

Reid rubbed his hands together. "It's cold in here," he said.

Grace finished drying her hands on a small white towel. She hung it on a hook by the sink, and turned to face her great-nephew. "I've told you before, Reid, a good quality thermal undershirt and a sweater vest and you wouldn't notice the cold nearly as much. Your grandfather added a sweater vest to his suit on the first day of October every year and wore one every day until the fifteenth of April."

His grandfather. The sainted stick-up-his-butt Eben Alexander Frain. In the almost twenty years since he'd died he'd gotten more perfect. The great Eben Frain went to the office until the day he died. That was *where* he'd died. The great Eben Frain didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't swear. The great Eben Frain was in the second pew on the right every Sunday morning. In fact sometimes it amazed Reid that he had the great Eben Frain to thank for his existence. It was hard to believe the old guy had ever done the deed that resulted in Reid's father.

He took a breath and let it out. "Aunt Grace, it would take more than a vest to be warm in this house today."

"I'm aware of that," she said. "That's why I was in the cellar. I was putting wood in the furnace. It seems ridiculously early to have to do so, but that's what happens when as a society we allow development to go on unchecked. The ground and air become contaminated and we have December weather the last week of September."

He'd heard Aunt Grace's speech about development dozens of times. Frain land went back for acres and acres behind the house. One developer or another had been trying to buy some part of that land for as long as he could remember. And Aunt Grace had been saying no. Reid had tried a couple of times to convince her to sell. One small section could easily bring in a million dollars.

"That land is part of the Frain legacy," she'd say, squaring her shoulders. "Your legacy."

The freaking Frain legacy. The land, the old house and Lord knew how much money, his legacy, all in the hands of his Aunt Grace. Reid's grandfather had died at ninety. His other sisters had made it to ninety-six and ninety-nine, respectively. Grace was only eighty-four and the healthiest of the lot. (Reid's father was the only Frain to die young and that had nothing to do with his genes and everything to do with a drunk behind the wheel of an SUV.) By the time he got his hands on the Frain legacy Reid was going to be too old to enjoy it.

The furnace came on then with a groan and a whoosh. Reid put his hand over the grille in the floor. The air was barely warm. "It's not very hot," he said. I'll go down and take a look at it."

"Here, you better take the light," Grace said, handing him the flashlight. "Though I don't know what you think you can do." Reid felt his way down the steps. The light wasn't much help. The basement air was stale and cold. The stone foundation may have been old, but it was solid.

The furnace sat in the middle of the cellar like a giant gray octopus, ductwork snaking out from it like tentacles. It was noisy, inefficient and older than he was. It was like everything in the house—old, useless and past its time. Of course Aunt Grace wouldn't have it replaced—it still worked. She used the oil as little as possible. Instead she hired someone to cut, split and stack wood from Frain land to heat the house, just the way it had always been done.

Reid looked the furnace over—not that he knew anything about how it worked. He tried moving some of the leads, maybe they were clogged and he could shake something lose. Everything seemed solid until he got to the flue, snaking into the stone chimney. It was loose enough to come out in his hands if he pulled. He sighed. That meant a trip to the hardware store for some duct tape to seal it in place until he could get a technician out to check the furnace and be sure the house wasn't going to fill up with carbon monoxide.

He trudged up the stairs. Grace was waiting in the kitchen. Behind her the cold water tap dripped steadily in the sink. The faucet was so old they didn't make washers for it anymore, but she refused to have a new one put in. "That would be money down the drain," she'd said. He didn't think she'd intended the pun. So instead she shut the water off under the sink when she wasn't using it.

Reid opened his mouth to tell her he was going to the hardware store but she spoke first.

"You bought a new car," she said.

"I did," he said. "Do you like it?"

"Since it's not my car it hardly matters whether I do or I don't like it." Her hands were clasped in front of her, her stance as perfect as if she were balancing a book on the top of her head. "What does matter to me is the amount of debt you're carrying. That condominium, the furniture you bought for it, that was all completely unnecessary. You could be living here with me. There's plenty of room for the two of us."

Right. Move in to the mausoleum with her and never have a bottle of wine, a cigar or a woman ever again.

"Now you've added to that debt with a new car."

Reid ran a hand back through his hair. It was the only part of the Frain legacy he'd gotten so far. Thick, blonde and it didn't go gray until way after everyone else. Of course as far as Aunt Grace was concerned it was always a bit too long to be respectable.

"I can handle the payments," he said. And he could. Frains had a knack for making money. His grandfather had been a successful stockbroker. So had his father. So was Reid. He didn't know if it was talent and their la-di-da lvy league educations or more the Frain looks, charm and a healthy dose of good luck.

"That is not in dispute," she said, primly. "What concerns me is the way you're managing your money and your life."

"I'm taking care of everything, Aunt Grace," he said evenly, forcing a smile he didn't feel. "You don't need to worry." Anger gathered into a tight, hot knot in his stomach. He wouldn't have had to take on any debt if she'd given him some of the Frain legacy she was always going on about. He wouldn't have had to spend his days sucking up to people who didn't have one tenth his skill at making money. He should have been the one managing the Frain legacy and turning it into a Frain fortune.

She looked at him for a long time and when she spoke it seemed more to herself than to Reid. "I guess there isn't anything else to say." She brushed some invisible lint from her skirt. "Reid, would you bring in some wood from the pile by the back door, please?" she asked. "I have a phone call to make." She turned on those ridiculous high heels and left the room.

He just stood there for a moment. Then he remembered that he hadn't told her he needed to get to the hardware store before it closed. His hand was on the handle of the french doors into the living room when he heard her on the phone. He squinted through the wavy glass. "Timothy Hawthorne, please," she said. "It's Grace Frain, calling."

Timothy Hawthorne, of Harris, Hawthorne & Townsend. The Frain lawyer. He reminded Reid of a lizard with his thin lips and knobby head. Reid could picture the man, sitting behind the massive desk in his stuffy office, his tongue darting out to lick his lizard lips

He took a step back from the door. What was she doing? "Timothy, I need to see you tomorrow," Grace said. "No, it can't wait," she continued. "I need to make some changes to my will. I'm sorry it's come to this, but it has, and I have to do the right thing."

The right thing. The old bat was going to cut him out of the money—him, the last Frain out of the Frain legacy. Reid turned and walked carefully, quietly all the way out to the porch. His heart was pounding. He clenched and unclenched his hands trying to somehow get hold of his anger.

The cold seeped through his trench coat and suit, but it didn't cool his temper. How many holidays had he spent sitting in that gloomy dining room eating freaking roast beef and Yorkshire pudding—the Frain tradition for all holiday meals—when he could have been skiing with his friends, or lying on a white sand beach with a blonde in a bikini? How many Saturdays had he given up to clean half-rotted leaves out of the gutters or pick sour, spot-pocked apples? How many armloads of wood had he lugged down those creaky old basement stairs?

Reid glanced over at the cellar door. The furnace was still laboring to warm up the old house. The furnace, with that loose, leaky flue that needed fixing. The flue that could be leaking carbon monoxide into the house.

Than again, what did he know about furnaces? As Aunt Grace was always pointing out, he hadn't inherited his grandfather's mechanical abilities. He could be wrong.

He stepped out the back door and quickly gathered an armload of wood. Downstairs he dumped it in the wood box. There was a blue silk handkerchief in the breast pocket of his suit. (Frain men always wore a matching tie and handkerchief.) Reid used it to cover his hand before he took hold of the pipe leading into the chimney. He pulled it from side to side. Bits of some kind of seam sealer, dried-out and gray with age, fell onto the floor. He bent down and scooped them into his handkerchief, stuffing the whole thing in his pocket. Yes, that pipe definitely was loose.

Upstairs Grace was waiting in the kitchen. It was surprisingly easy to smile at her. "I just took some wood down," he said. "I'm going back for another load."

He made three more trips up and down to the cellar. "The wood box is full and I've stoked the furnace as well," he told her after the last trip. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No thank you, Reid," she said. "But I do need you to come back tomorrow. There are some things I need to talk to you about."

"I could come out about six," he said. He was confident nothing in his face was giving him away. There was a reason he was such a good financial advisor. Not to mention a damn good poker player.

"That will be fine."

"I'll see you tomorrow then," he said.

Reid glanced back at the house in his rear-view mirror as he wound his way down the driveway. That musty, dreary old place would be the first thing to go, he promised himself. And old lizard lips would be the second.

Timothy Hawthorne called Reid's office right after lunch the next afternoon. "There's been an accident," the lawyer said.

Reid's hands were shaking. "I'm on my way," he said, and hung up. He tried to swallow and couldn't. *Oh, God*, he thought. *What did I do? What did I do?*"

He drove out to the house, pushing the little sports car way beyond the posted speed limit. Hawthorne's towne car was parked by the back door, along with a couple of police cars, an ambulance with its back doors open, and the rescue squad truck.

The lawyer was pacing in the kitchen. "Ah, Reid, you're here," he said, offering his hand. He was wearing fine grey leather driving gloves.

"Where is she?" Reid asked. His heart was pounding so loudly in his ears he wondered if the other man could somehow hear it too.

"They still down there, trying to get her stabilized before they move her."

"Stabilized? You mean she's alive?"

Hawthorne gave him a look Reid couldn't quite make sense of. "Yes, she's alive."

He put a hand on the counter to steady himself. She was alive. He hadn't... She was alive. Then the rest of the sentence sank in. "Wait a minute, you said, 'down there.' What do you mean? What happened? Where is she?"

"Apparently the furnace stopped working sometime during the night. This morning she must have gone down to the basement to see if she could get it going again. It looks as though she caught her heel a couple of steps from the bottom. I heard them say her hip is broken."

"You found her?"

Hawthorne nodded. Pacing back and forth in front of the sink he explained that when Grace hadn't shown up for her appointment he'd telephoned the house. When she didn't answer his repeated calls he'd driven out to see if everything

was all right. That was more an indication of just how much the Frain's were worth than because of any great concern for Aunt Grace, Reid thought. Still, he was glad the lawyer had come out.

"She was unconscious when I found her. The mailman arrived just after I did. It seems he's been bringing her mail to the door instead of leaving it in the community box out on the road—even though it violates the delivery policy the post office put in place last year." There was a slight tone of disapproval in the lawyer's voice.

"She wasn't breathing, but he knew CPR. I called 911, and then I called you. If it hadn't been for him coming with the mail your aunt would be...gone." He kept running his thumb over the edge of his gloved fingers, Reid noticed.

Reid let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Thank you, Timothy," he said. "You saved her life. That, man...the mail carrier. I'll have to get his name. I...I want to thank him."

He heard the sound of voices then and footsteps coming up the cellar stairs. "Easy, easy now, one more step." The door swung open. A muscular young man lifted his end of stretcher over the top step and into the kitchen.

Grace Frain's eyes were closed. Her skin was the color of newsprint. She looked small and old. Reid reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm here Aunt Grace," he whispered. He felt a faint squeeze back. *Lord, what had ever made him think he wanted her gone?*

The paramedics loaded the stretcher into the back of the open ambulance. "I'll be right behind you," Reid said to the two men.

"I'll go." Hawthorne was behind him in the doorway. He pulled a white handkerchief out of an inside pocket and wiped the sweat off his forehead. There was no color in his face.

He's worried about her, Reid thought.

"The police are going to want to talk to you," the lawyer continued. "I'll go be with her. You come as soon as you can."

"All right," Reid said. "I won't be long." He went back into the kitchen and down the cellar stairs. The officer in charge was a woman. He introduced himself. "There's nothing to suggest it wasn't an accident," she said. "Your aunt caught her heel on the step, fell and the hip broke. She did hit her head on something when she went down. We're not sure what, yet. Go to the hospital. I'll talk to you there."

Reid started back upstairs. Halfway up he paused and turned. "I'm not so sure that furnace is safe," he said. "Even if you could get it to come on."

"That's not a problem," the officer said. "I used to work in Goose Bay. This isn't even chilly."

Hawthorne was waiting by the triage desk when Reid arrived at the emergency room. The lawyer's navy wool coat was folded neatly over his arm. His color was back along with his self control. "They've taken her for a CAT scan," he said.

Reid sank into a chair and ran his hand across his neck. "I'm going to have to get some help in for her," he said. "At least in the daytime."

The lawyer nodded. "That's going to be expensive."

Of course cost would be the first thing he'd think of. Timothy Hawthorne was the third generation of Hawthornes to handle the Frain legal affairs. He couldn't have been much more than his mid-fifties but he dressed and acted like a man twenty years older. Reid had a feeling Timothy Hawthorne had been born old.

"And that furnace will have to be replaced," he said.

"Are you sure you can afford everything?"

Reid looked up at the other man. "What do you mean? There's all kinds of money."

"In the Frain trust, yes. But your Aunt Grace depended on her pension for all of her own expenses. It's really unfortunate that she fell before our scheduled meeting today."

Reid could hear his heart begin to thud again in his ears. "I don't understand," he said, slowly.

"I guess there's no harm in telling you. Your Aunt Grace was planning on changing her will. But since she didn't make our appointment of course none of the changes will take effect."

"But what does that have to do with the money, with paying for her care?"

Hawthorne looked almost...smug? "She was going to leave everything to you. And put you in charge now. She seemed to feel you couldn't make a success of your life without the Frain money at your back. Under your Aunt

Grace's existing will, all the Frain assets are held in trust. My firm manages the money on a day to day basis. When she's gone it all goes to charity. It can't be touched."

Reid felt as though he'd been hit over the head with something large and heavy. She'd been going to give him the money. Not take it away.

"That can be changed. As soon as she's settled in a room you can draw up the papers."

The lawyer shook his head. "I'm sorry. I should have told you right away."

"Told me what?"

"Grace had a stroke, in the ambulance on the way here." The other man's voice seemed to be coming from farther and farther away. "Her heart is strong, but there appears to be massive brain damage. There was bleeding under her skull. So unfortunate that she happened to hit her head on a piece of wood when she fell." He smiled down at Reid. "But at least she has you to take care of her."

His lizard lips were moving so Reid knew the lawyer was still talking, but Reid couldn't hear him anymore.

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