## The Fempiror Chronicles



The Initiation of David

George Willson

The Fempiror Chronicles: The Initiation of David is available at <u>Amazon.com</u> and https://www.createspace.com/3385945

Text copyright 2009 by George Willson Adapted from the original unproduced screenplay of the same name by George Willson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author.

First edition, August 2009

Printed in the United States of America

www.fempiror.com

For Tasha and the girls,
who inexplicably continue to tolerate my insanity
and love me in spite of it.

Special Thanks to Don, Bert, and the other readers and screenwriters at SimplyScripts.com, without whom this story would not be what it is. June 1775

## PROLOGUE The Stranger

Rufus had been in Hauginstown several times over the past few weeks, and when it came to people at night, there were very, very few. Most of the population went inside after dark, and those that did venture out usually either traveled in a group or spent their evenings at the Whitt's End Tavern carousing the overnight hours away. It made his mission of finding the new recruits his superiors were looking for that much more difficult as this trend was similar throughout all the towns he had visited. In addition, his habit of returning to the rakad fren for supplies with no recruits to justify their support was wearing on his superiors' nerves.

He looked around the little town and shook his head. It had been a long time since he had lived anywhere regularly enough to call home, and he marveled at the simplicity these people enjoyed, completely oblivious to the world changing around them. Even "quaint" was too complex a word for this town who had, to Rufus' amusement, a statue in their town square dedicated to someone named Gerald Haugins who he

understood to be the great-grandfather of the present mayor (though better referred to as the patriarch) of this little berg.

As Rufus looked at this rather ostentatious and pointless tribute to someone that no one outside of Hauginstown ever had heard of or ever will hear of, voices floated over the air from the tavern. A man in his forties, whose face was weather beaten from years of field work and drinking, stumbled out of the tavern and hit the ground in a drunken heap. Rufus snickered. The man's waistcoat hung limply open, every button unfastened; his woolen stockings rested around his ankles; and he didn't even have his hat.

Another man who Rufus immediately recognized as the tavern's keeper stepped out of the tavern and looked at the drunken man on the ground. He was dressed properly, but with a worn, old face and an apron over his clothes.

"Hey, Ben, you gonna be all right?" he asked.

Ben climbed to his feet and turned to the keeper. "I'm fine, Whitt," he said. He took a step before losing his balance again and tumbling back to the ground.

The tavern keeper, Mr. Whitt, stepped over to him and helped him back up. "Maybe I should walk you home, Ben," Whitt said. "You're drunker than a toad."

Rufus sighed at the thought of selecting this older man, but also considered his desperation at this point. Ben might not appear to be the best addition to the order, but he seemed strong enough that once he got off the bottle, he might be useful. But if Whitt was going to walk him home...

Rufus shook his head. He considered the possibility of taking them both, but dealing with two of them tomorrow would be out of the question.

He looked back at the pair to see Ben shake Whitt's grip.

"I said I'm fine," Ben insisted, "I been worse, you know. You just go on and leave me alone. So what if I sleep outside? It don't matter none."

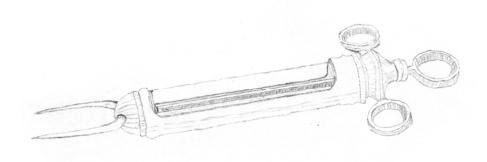
"You'd best get inside," Whitt warned. "Some people tell of a stranger around here lately – roaming the town at night."

"Leave me alone," Ben said again. It might have been an attempt to yell, but through the drunken slur, it barely came out at all, much less sound anything like anger.

Rufus smiled broadly as Whitt shook his head and walked back inside. Ben walked unsteadily away from the tavern across the little road that led into town from the south and wound around the town square. He eventually reached the statue and leaned on it, supporting his tired weight.

Rufus knew this was his chance. The next time he returned to the rakad fren, he could bring a new recruit with him. Then they will know that they did not waste their time and resources on him. Ben took another step and hit the ground again.

Rufus moved silently towards him. As he walked, he rolled up one of his sleeves and then opened an eleven-inch long cylindrical leather satchel attached to his belt. He reached into it and removed a tool that his order used to bring in new recruits: a nilrof.



The first time he had seen the nilrof, the combination of its eye-striking beauty and deadly appearance had surprised him. It was about ten inches long and made of bright polished silver with two sharp points that resembled fangs at one end. These fanged ends connected to a cylindrical chamber with a glass side so one could observe the level of liquid it contained. A small piston pump that fit tightly into the chamber controlled the flow both in and out of it. The nilrof had a long history, but in these times, it served only one purpose.

Rufus stabbed the fangs into his own arm and drew out a cylinder full of blood. The deep red stood in stark contrast to the clean polished surface of the device. He placed the nilrof back into its satchel, made to carry a fully loaded nilrof without pressing the pump or spilling any blood.

Ben pulled himself up again. "Walk me home," he muttered. "What does he think I am? Drunk?" He continued in an uneven line across the square.

Rufus broke into a short run and stopped directly behind Ben. Ben continued his walk. He had heard nothing. Rufus frowned. He looked down, picked up a twig from debris on the ground and snapped it between his fingers behind Ben's head.

Ben stopped. He turned slowly to face Rufus. Rufus watched Ben's face screw up as Ben squinted his eyes. Finally, Ben asked, "Are you the strangers?"

Rufus grimaced. He wondered if this was really a good idea. This old man was an idiot – probably the village idiot, for all he knew. He would bring this imbecile back to his superiors, and they would hang him for his lack of judgment. At the same time, though, no other opportunities had presented themselves. Perhaps this first one would make others easier to acquire. He removed the nilrof from its satchel and held it ready in his hand.

Ben looked down at the device and sobered quickly. He broke into a run away from Rufus. Rufus rolled his eyes and quickly placed the nilrof safely back in its satchel. He easily caught up to Ben and tackled him to the ground.

Ben quickly rolled over out of Rufus' grip and ran back towards the tavern. Ben was still recovering from the alcohol, and Rufus knew he could move literally a hundred times faster than Ben could hope to in his present state.

Then Ben opened his mouth again. "Help," he yelled, this time louder than when he had attempted to yell at Whitt.

Rufus needed to end this as soon as possible. He ran at top speed towards Ben, and before Ben had a chance to say anything else, Rufus grabbed him.

Despite the old man's weight, Rufus held him easily for a moment over his head and then tossed him to the base of the statue. Ben hit the marble base hard, knocking the wind out of

him. Helpless, he gazed up to Rufus, slowly walking towards him. Rufus saw the fear in the old man's eyes as he knelt beside him.

Rufus spared a quick glance back to the tavern to see Whitt, staring directly at him through the tavern window. As their eyes met, Whitt quickly looked away. Rufus smiled. The keeper would do nothing. And if the town as a whole lived in the same state of fear, no one would dare interfere with him, no matter how loud Ben screamed. And he would scream.

Rufus pulled the nilrof from its satchel again and held it in front of Ben's face for Ben to get a good look at it. Ben breathed heavily, both winded from the fall and in fear of the stranger that had easily bested him.

Rufus leaned close to him. "Welcome to the family," he said, remembering the words that had been spoken to him on a similar occasion, years before.

He stabbed the fanged ends of the nilrof into Ben's neck and pressed the pump, emptying the full contents of the glass chamber. As Rufus removed the nilrof from Ben's neck, Ben grabbed the place where it had entered, breathing even more heavily. Rufus stood and watched as the serum quickly moved through Ben's veins and changed him from the inside out. Soon, the serum would reach his heart.

Ben convulsed violently. He arched his back, drew in two lungs full of air and let out a scream that pierced the quiet of the night.

## CHAPTER ONE Hauginstown

David Taylor was a handsome, well-built young man with sharp, blue eyes and short, brown hair, and on this day, he churned a shirt in a barrel of blue dye. It was boring, tedious work, and his father had only assigned him this duty because at the age of seventeen, he was the youngest of the three Taylor brothers. He hated it, but also understood the necessity of it. After all, it was his family's work to be purveyors of garments, and it was his duty to learn it.

This is not to say that he was a master of the trade by any means. No, the privilege of learning the finest ins and outs of the tailoring business had gone to his oldest brother, James, who not only displayed mastery, but also shared ownership of the family business with his father, Jonathan. David and his other brother, Mark, could choose to continue working in Hauginstown or to take the family trade to another town to make their own lives.

While David at least understood the business, Mark was, in David's opinion, completely incompetent at it and did not intend to leave Hauginstown to go anywhere. It was also David's

opinion that Mark should be out here in the alley churning the dying shirt to allow David more experience in the shop. But knowing Jonathan, this was not to be. The youngest always performed the menial tasks around the shop. That's just the way it is, and until James marries and has children old enough to do this, it would be David's lot for as long as he remained.

And David did not want to remain. His father had denied him the heart of the business for so long that there were times he no longer wanted to be a tailor. Unfortunately, clothing was all he knew anything about, but he still longed to see what lay outside of his little world of Hauginstown. As he slowly churned the shirt in its barrel, his mind wandered to the unknown places he had never been – the places he longed to see.

Stories he had heard of the rest of the world came solely from the more learned and traveled men of the town when they returned from these other places with tales of music they compared to the singing of angels, of buildings that looked like monuments to the gods, and of books they had been privileged to read in great libraries. David had never been anywhere, not even to the mountains west of town, and he could only read a tape measure and drawings of patterns. In his position, nothing else was required.

He sighed as he snapped from his far away thoughts and gazed around him. The alley was about the most ordinary place in the world. The walls of the stores were unfinished wooden brown, the ground was dirt and also brown, the barrel was brown, the stick was brown, the doors were brown, and the fence

with the gate leading out of the alley to the town square was brown. Could one be in a browner world, he wondered. The only points of color were the water, which maintained its brilliant blue, the clothesline that possessed a rainbow of colors from the dyes that had seeped into it, and the washing kettle at the back of the alley, which was a deep black and not really a color.

Even David provided no source of color as he wore brown breeches, off-white wool stockings, and an almost white shirt that was tinged with (of course) brown. His waistcoat and hat rested on a hook on the outside wall of the shop, placed there by David for days such as this, not wanting to risk ruining those items with the dye.

He was sent to the alley after Mr. Franklin had decided the new shirt his father had finished for him only last week needed to be blue after he had returned from one of his travels with a supply of Prussian Blue dye for Jonathon Taylor. His father had tried to talk him into a new shirt since dying a finished shirt will not yield the same high-quality results as dying new fabric, but Mr. Franklin insisted, so they would do their part. David had been sewing, another job for a tailor's table monkey, when his father had told him to head out and fire up the large kettle that they washed fabric in prior to dying it.

While the shirt was in the hot water, he had carefully mixed the Prussian Blue dye in the barrel they always used for dying in preparation for the shirt to receive its deep blue color. After the shirt was in the barrel, he continually and carefully stirred it around with the stick that had been whittled down to a

very soft end so it would not damage the fabric to ensure that the dye would soak through the fabric evenly.

He glanced at the shadows in the alley and guessed that it had been nearly enough time for the dye to soak in. Soon, he would remove it from the barrel and dry it on the rainbow-colored line before washing it in the kettle again, but this time in cold water.

He closed his eyes again and tried to listen to the voices of the faces he was unable to see outside the alley where the world was a little greener. He wondered why they had a fence anyway. No one steals anything in Hauginstown. If he could see out, at least he would have a green view of the town square.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Taylor," a familiar voice sounded over the fence. He heard his father respond from inside the shop, and a moment later, Abraham Barber opened the gate and entered the alley.

Abraham was only a few months younger than David, and being cousins (David's mother was Abraham's father's sister), the two were inseparable friends. Abraham had a hard, chiseled face, far removed from David's softer appearance, with dark blue eyes and reddish hair that often hung over his ears – an irony given that his father was the town's barber.

His clothes were the same style as almost everyone else in Hauginstown as the Taylor family made the majority of the town's clothing. He wore brown breeches, light stockings, a simple white wool shirt, a brown waistcoat, and a wide brimmed hat. Simple elegance, his father called it.

As they knew each other so well, David knew exactly what Abraham had come to talk about. The town had no secrets, and the tavern keeper's tale of the attack on Ben Thurman from the previous night was nearing legendary status already. What could throw a man around the town square, force an otherworldly scream from him, and then carry him off before anyone could respond? Still, David would have to play along for a while to appease his friend and to see if anything new had come out.

"Good afternoon, Abraham," David said, unable to help the boredom coming through his voice.

"Did you hear about last night?" Abraham asked right away.

He is not wasting any time, David thought to himself. "Which version?" he asked.

"What have you heard?"

David had been in the alley for a couple hours. It was all anyone talked about, and he had heard wafting stories of all kinds – everything from an unknown wanderer attacking Ben to God himself striking Ben down for his drunken ways. David was certain that if anyone would know what really happened by now, it would be Abraham. He also knew that Abraham would have sorted through the stories, so David would get about as close to the truth as he could.

"I know he didn't come home," David answered. "Did they find him yet?"

"They're not going to," Abraham replied, "I heard he was

attacked."

"Says who?" David asked.

"Says the keeper at the Whitt's End Tavern," said

Abraham. "He says that old Ben had had too much to drink last

night and was stumbling home when—"

"I hear that happens every night," David interrupted. He knew the interruption would rile Abraham into telling even more, and Abraham really disliked David's interjections of blunt fact into his stories.

"You know," David continued, "one time we found him all the way out by the old Miller's place east of town half dead of thirst after two days." David was actually one of the people to find Ben on that occasion, though only Abraham would know why he had been there at the time.

The Miller's place was an old, long abandoned windmill that passers-by used primarily as a landmark near town as well as a temporary shelter in the wide-open European landscape.

"Let me finish, David, this is different," Abraham said. "Mr. Whitt said he was attacked by a creature with glowing red eyes and wings and -"

"A what?" David laughed. He found this to be beyond ridiculous, but Abraham continued with the tale, ignoring David's interjection.

"It chased him around the town square, picked him up and threw him like a rag doll before this thing leaned over him at the end. Mr. Whitt thinks it was drinking his blood."

"You can't be serious," David said chuckling.

"The mayor's declared no one should be out after dark just in case," Abraham finished.

David shook his head in total dismay at the foolishness of the whole situation. "I think all of you are drunk off the tavern keeper's wares to believe in that nonsense," he said.

"But after last night?" Abraham asked.

David laughed. "Last night, Ben probably upset someone, and they took out their rage on him," he said.

"What about this thing throwing him around the square," Abraham challenged, unconvinced.

"Who knows," David said with a shrug, "Only Whitt saw it, and Lord knows what he'd been drinking."

"Mr. Whitt is not known for making up stories, you know." Abraham reminded him.

David nodded. Abraham was right. Barliman Whitt was not a man who was even capable of spinning a yarn, much less make up something this far-fetched. He was known to exaggerate, and there was no doubt that Ben was missing. David was convinced that Whitt had seen something last night, but a flying devil with wings and glowing eyes was out of the question.

He looked back at Abraham and started to say something else, but he noticed Abraham was staring at the barrel.

"What are you doing?" Abraham asked.

David raised the churning stick out of the dark water to show Abraham his very wet lump of fabric. Despite their lifelong friendship, Abraham never seemed to grasp what David did. David never had any problem with this, as he never grasped what Abraham and his family did either.

"What is that?" Abraham asked him, looking at the dripping mass at the end of David's stick.

"It's Mr. Franklin's," David explained, "All the menial work still falls to me, so I am out here dying the shirt. Washed it in the kettle before that. I'll be drying it here in a moment."

David lowered the shirt back into the barrel and continued to churn it. Abraham watched it for a moment before the door on the side of the shop opened.

Jonathan Taylor, a large, middle-aged man with a kind, nurturing face and trimmed mustache and beard, stepped into the alley and walked over to David carrying a white wool shirt.

"How's that shirt coming along?" Jonathan asked.

David dutifully raised the shirt again, without a word.

Although he disliked the work, he took pride in it. Careful not to touch it, Jonathan inspected the dyed shirt. He nodded.

"Excellent," he said, "give it some time to dry, and then wash the excess dye out. In the meantime, you can start on this one."

David's shoulders sank. "Another one?" he asked incredulously.

"Also Mr. Franklin's," Jonathan explained handing David the shirt. David took it dutifully.

"How long am I going to be out here today? I wanted to help inside," David said.

"David," Jonathan began. David knew that tone of voice.

Jonathan had used it many, many times, usually when David was complaining about something. "The life of a tailor is not always easy. Sometimes, the simplest jobs are the longest and the most important."

"But how long," David insisted.

"Dry this one and while it's drying you can start washing the new one," his father replied. "Hopefully, you'll get them both done today."

David opened his mouth to say something more, but his father's no nonsense look kept him quiet. Mr. Franklin wanted them today. David nodded and looked back at the barrel in defeat. "Yes sir," was all David could manage.

Jonathan turned back to the door, but paused and looked at David. "Go ahead and take a break while that one dries and the water heats," he said, "five minutes should be plenty."

David nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said. David raised the shirt up over the line, carefully avoiding the drips. He had become rather good at transferring wet fabric from the barrel to the line, though he normally removed his shirt for this.

Jonathan looked at it for a moment, and then back to David. "Don't forget to turn it when you get back to dry the other side," he said, "and get that fire going again so the water's warmed as well."

David nodded again. "Yes sir," he said and walked to the tinderbox sitting next to the kettle to work on restarting the fire he had put out just after he had placed the shirt in the dye barrel.

Jonathan's middle son, Mark, who was twenty-one and

looked like a gangly version of Jonathan, but with his clothes in perpetual disarray, stuck his head out the door into the alley.

"Father, Mr. Diddle gained weight since we measured him and now his pants don't fit," Mark whined.

David looked up from his tinder and rolled his eyes. He knew exactly how to correct this particular problem, but somehow, Mark never seemed to grasp it so their father always helped him through it. David was sure that when their father could no longer work in the shop, James would continue to help Mark through his shortcomings. That's what family does, his father would have said.

"I'll be right there," Jonathan told Mark. He turned back to David. "Five minutes after you get that fire going," he said, and then walked inside the shop, closing the door behind him.

David stared after him without a smile. He looked back to Abraham, who smirked and apparently enjoyed the entire exchange. David had told him many times about his frustrations, and Abraham's rather cruel enjoyment of it never sat well with David. David rekindled the fire under the now cooling water in the kettle.

He stood, pulled the churning stick from the barrel, and held it before him like a sword. "You know," David said, "there are days when I'd just like to—"

With that, he swung the stick like a sword in a narrow figure eight pattern in front of and behind him twisting himself around the alley and narrowly missing the clothesline, the hanging shirt, the walls of the shops, and the barrel. Abraham

took a step back, his mouth opening in disbelief. David released his mock sword, and it plopped harmlessly into the barrel.

Abraham stared at him. "You do that much?" he asked.

"I spend a lot of time in this alley," David replied retrieving his waistcoat and hat from the hook. "Let's go."

Abraham walked with David on the well-maintained dirt road that circled around the square plot of grass in the center of town that contained the statue of Gerald Haugins. The town was alive with people walking between the shops and their homes. Abraham loved it and could not see his life or his future any differently; he knew where he was and where he was going, unlike David, who seemed to be abysmally disappointed.

In fact, Abraham noticed, David was still staring at the ground, lost in his own little world of never-ending disappointment. Abraham shook his head, wondering how someone with so much going for him could be so down on it all. He could take no more of it.

"If you don't stop brooding, cousin," he said, "I'll put you out of your misery."

"You know I hate this," David sighed.

"Is this still the tailor thing?" Abraham asked, knowing the answer already.

"What do you think?" David asked.

"Do you even know what you want anymore?" Abraham asked in return, "one day, you want nothing to do with it, and

the next you're wishing that your father would focus some energy on you instead of Mark and James."

"I just," David began, but he stopped and shrugged. "I don't know," he said finally. "Do you ever feel like you're just not made for something, no matter how hard you try?"

Abraham shook his head resolutely. He knew what he was made for, and the life his father had laid out for him was everything that he wanted.

"My profession," Abraham said, and he definitely meant his profession, "is a combination of old alchemy and modern hair styling. 'Cut their hair and keep them alive,' my father says. Hardly boring."

And he meant that, although he much preferred the mixing of the chemical ingredients to make the various medicines that his father's shop provided to the ailing over their more common task of cutting people's hair, but one must take the good with the bad – the boring with the interesting. And it was the lot of a barber to handle those types of needs.

"So you're satisfied?" David asked.

"I would say so," Abraham said, nodding. "It's not as if we're going to see the world or anything." He looked at David who shrugged.

"We might," David said.

Abraham shook his head. Did David really think they would go somewhere else? Create some other life? The people who had founded Hauginstown were trying to get away from the wars and conflicts that continued unceasingly in the world. They

had never experienced any of it because they were so far away from everything else. No one in modern Hauginstown even knew what country would even claim them, since boundaries continued to change so often, or so his father had told him of the world.

They could acknowledge that they were in Europe, but as to a country, they did not care. The affairs of the world were of no concern to them, and they preferred to keep their distance from everyone else. The nearest town Abraham had heard of was Frinton, but he had never been there. Others had moved there to start their own businesses away from their older siblings who had taken over the local family business. He feared this would be David's destiny, and it scared him. The very thought of leaving this peaceful town to see a warlike world was a thought that Abraham could not even begin to fathom.

"Sure," Abraham said, acknowledging David's supposed hopefulness, "if you're not a tailor here, you'll be a tailor somewhere else. You'll settle down with your little wife, and stay in the same little town your whole little life. Just like I will. Just like our families have. Just like—"

"Just like everyone else in this town," David said quickly,
"I know. I need to swallow my pride or something."

It sounded as if David was reciting the words, and sure, it was something they had talked about before – far too often for Abraham's taste. He needed to change the subject.

As they continued walking their circle around the town square, Abraham glanced around and noticed a girl behind them

carrying a large ball of yarn. He smiled as he saw her walking very quickly toward them, passing several older women who regarded her with disapproval as she held her dress off the ground with one hand and sped across the town square.

She was also seventeen with a bright energetic face, long brown hair, deep brown eyes, and a smile to die for. If anyone could change the subject effectively, she could. She was dressed in a simple blue and white dress with a white cap, both of which she had made herself under the tutelage of David's mother.

Every time she joined them, Abraham's heart fluttered just a little. Abraham looked at David.

"Well," Abraham said, "at least you know who you're going to end up with."

David looked up in surprise. "What?"

"Good day, you two," the girl said as she caught up to them.

"Good afternoon, Beth," Abraham greeted her.

"Hey, Beth," David said.

"David. Abraham. What are you two doing?" she asked.

Here it was. The opportunity Abraham wanted. If anyone would get David back to reality, it would be Elizabeth Carpenter.

"Oh, you know," Abraham said, "just brooding over a dull future." Of course, Abraham did not believe his future was dull, but it evoked the response from Beth that he wanted.

The three of them had been friends their entire lives: a known trio in Hauginstown where one was rarely seen without the other two. Like Abraham, Beth held her future as

exceptionally hopeful, and she looked forward to the very life that David was brooding over.

"Dull?" she said incredulously, "come on, life is out there. What could possibly be dull about it?"

"Well, this isn't so much me as your intended here,"

Abraham informed her.

Beth's eyes grew wide. "Abraham, hush," she said in a whisper.

David gave him a dirty look that also requested silence on this particular topic. Abraham was well aware of their desire to keep their courtship secret, but he also felt that David needed at least to acknowledge how lucky he was to have Beth at his side. He knew that if he were in David's position, he would never be unhappy again.

"David's got you," Abraham said to Beth, "and I have Mary Dillinger, the singular biggest eye-sore in this god-forsaken town. If I ever had one reason to get out of here..."

Not that he intended to go anywhere, and Mary Dillinger was fairly attractive in her own right. Her family moved into Hauginstown within the last fifteen years, so most people considered them "outsiders," but his father had befriended hers, and she was only a few years younger than he was. By the time he would be self-sufficient in his father's trade, she would be of age, and they would be encouraged to marry.

"Abraham, you know better than to—" Beth began, pulling Abraham out of his thoughts.

"I know you're trying to avoid public scrutiny,"

Abraham said interrupting her, "but don't you think people will figure it out?"

"Not as long as certain people keep their mouths closed about it," David finally said out of his silence. "This gossip-laden town does not need to know about us yet."

"They'll figure it out," Abraham insisted.

"How?" David asked. "We've been friends forever, and you'd be as big a suspect as I would. Besides, we're well known as a threesome right now."

"And that's the way it will stay until we're ready as well,"
Beth added.

Wait a minute, Abraham thought. Did she really just say that? Surely, Beth did not believe that their lives would change as a group. After all, if Mary Dillinger came into his life, he would never think of leaving his friends of so many years.

"I know life will go on," Abraham said, "but we're not going to break up the threesome, are we?"

Beth smiled at him, looking a bit sad – or was it condescending? Abraham was unable to decipher her, but a nervous flutter rattled his stomach telling him that he was bound to dislike whatever she was going to say.

"Be realistic, Abraham," she said, "We're friends forever, but life will make a twosome someday."

Abraham stopped in his tracks. No, he did not like what she had said, but there it was. It was hard enough that David was going to have Beth, but knowing that once they ended up together, they would leave him behind made it all the worse.

What is "friends forever" if they leave him? Is that what his friendship means to them?

Abraham shook his head away from these thoughts. He was just over thinking it all because he was afraid of David and Beth leaving him alone someday – going to Frinton, perhaps. He ran to catch back up to them. David and Beth were staring at each other talking quietly. They stopped as Abraham reached them, and David turned to him.

"Well, I do need to be getting back," David said.

Abraham looked back to his father's barbershop to find his father standing in front of it looking at him. "Me too by the looks of it," Abraham said.

"Very well. See you later, Abraham," David said as he and Beth walked together back towards the alley.

Abraham nodded, knowing they had left him alone. "Right," he said watching them go. "I'll see you later."

Beth turned to him with a smile and a wave. "Bye," she said, and then turned back forward, walking with David until they disappeared into the alley. David closed the gate behind them.

Abraham sighed. He had no feelings for this Mary Dillinger that lay in his future, because there was a lot of truth in what David had said. Abraham could be suspected as much as David in having Beth's heart. In truth, his heart had been with her since before she and David had privately declared their love for each other.

He tried not to give it too much thought, however, since it

would only lead him back to wondering how David is better than he is. What was it about David that led Beth to him instead of Abraham? He shook his head and tried to clear these negative thoughts before returning to the barbershop.

He turned back to his waiting father, his mind still reeling from how quickly they had gone from three kids who were always found together to a couple with an extra person. David and Beth had been extraordinarily discrete, however, and when they met, Abraham was usually there as well. It was their desire for everyone to see the three of them together before David and Beth left him and went somewhere else alone. They left it to Abraham to cover for them when they went, whether he wanted to or not. It was only a matter of time before they disappeared entirely, and left him alone with nothing to keep him company but his father's shop and an endless supply of needy people.

Every time they disappeared, Abraham felt as if they took his heart with them.

Beth finally had David alone. They were locked in a tight embrace behind the fence blocking the alley beside the Taylors' store from the rest of the world, and she never wanted the moment to end. If they had announced their intentions for each other to the town, moments like this would never come. The entire town would scrutinize their every movement to ensure that young love didn't run away with itself.

But if love didn't run, why bother with it? When the

embrace broke, she looked into the eyes of the friend she had come to love over the years. How long had it been since she had first given her heart over to him? Long before she ever admitted it on her fifteenth birthday on this very place. She remembered the nervousness of that moment, as she had timidly told him that she was very fond of him, and how he had shared those feelings.

However, these past two years had been some of the most difficult for them as they had struggled to keep their love a secret after having seen how parents reacted to other couples in town once they made their intentions for each other known. They had told Abraham, and he seemed happy enough for them, though it took a few moments for the shock to wear off. He had also been good to both of them as he continually covered for their movements when the three of them had been spending time together before her and David suddenly and inexplicably disappeared.

It saddened her to consider that she and David might be using Abraham, and she wondered how long their friendship could possibly continue once she and David were actually married. What would become of the trio when two of them had become one? Naturally, they would all be lifelong friends, but everything would be different. She and David would want to spend time alone together, and they would not have the time they did now to include him.

"I've been waiting all day for that," David said, interrupting her personal reverie.

She smiled at him, taking in his face again. "Me too," she

said.

David looked down to her ball of uncolored, wool yarn. "What's this for?" he asked.

She laughed. That ball of yarn had taken her the better part of a week to spin on a spinning wheel that belonged to David's mother, Mary Taylor, who also served as the mantua maker for the women of the town – a task that Mrs. Taylor was only to happy to teach to her. Beth also felt that someday she would join David's mother as the next Mrs. Taylor to be the next mantua maker since she was learning the art quickly and had even made her own dress and cap. She had been over at his house while he was at his father's shop almost every day working on her yarn from the wool she had gathered from the sheep at the Shepherd family's farm north of town.

"I've been working on a blanket for two for whenever we get married," she said. "When that day finally comes, it should be done."

"Sounds good," David said with a broad smile. He was always so encouraging of her notions of married life. It only further served to fuel her excitement of an engagement, hopefully sooner than later.

"I can't wait until we're able to tell the world about us," she said, almost dancing in his arms. "Just to be able to show them how we feel about each other."

"We will," David said, "but now is not the time."

She pouted. While she wanted the engagement, she was also unwilling to lose these little rendezvous with him. Between

the public announcement and wedding, everyone would hardly allow them to talk privately without someone close by watching them.

"Can you come out tonight?" she asked him.

"There's a ban on going out after dark," he reminded her.

"Besides," he added with a smile, "it isn't entirely proper."

Of course, she knew this. She also knew he did not believe a word of the demon talk going on around town, and probably believed Ben was where they had stumbled on him last time he came up missing. They were lucky in that no one had asked too many questions as to why David had suggested the old windmill as a possible location for Ben.

She knew the truth, and it was nothing too complicated. As the windmill almost never had visitors, they tended to go there to be alone, and on that particular occasion, they were not alone. They quickly returned to town where she and David both went home immediately, and the next day when everyone was discussing where to search for Ben, David had suggested the windmill as a place he might have ended up. She smiled as she remembered the cavalier way in which it had just "come to him."

"It's never stopped us before," she tossed back to him.

David laughed and nodded. She leaned in close to him again. "I'll see you tonight then?"

They kissed again. She pulled him close to her and took in every part of him she could. It would be too long before they could be close again. The kiss broke and she looked into his eyes again.

"Me and you, right?" he asked as he often did.

"For all eternity," she replied.

"No matter what," he finished.

It was their own parting greeting, and they had used it ever since it had come out at the end of a long day, and they were just barely out of earshot of their parents and were unable to touch or use the normal "I love you" parting words without someone noticing them. To Beth, the words were sacred and meant everything to her to hear him start it.

She slowly backed away from him to the gate of the alley. With a final smile, she exited the alley back into the street. A quick look around showed that no one had so much as noticed them disappear or were the least bit interested in a girl going into an alley alone with a boy. After all, they were David and Beth: the oldest of friends.

A personal satisfaction at her secret still intact, she walked to her house where she looked forward to another day and evening of knitting and preparing for the day that her parents thought was far off, and she knew was closer than anyone imagined.

The Fempiror Chronicles: The Initiation of David is available at <u>Amazon.com</u> and

https://www.createspace.com/3385945