

*The
Stieger
Sanction*©

part 1 of 4

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Alan Stieger sipped at his freshly squeezed orange juice and tried not to step in any sticky pools of dried blood. Around him hummed a dozen or so local police, crime techs, coroners and the usual characters; Stieger mostly just watched and let them do their work. The lot of them were in some kind of abandoned mansion, abandoned owing to the main rail lines of Providence Station running through what once might have been the back yard. Now it was an elaborate dump, owned by the state and containing one human body, slightly used.

"Hey Stieger," called one of the local cops, fellow by the name of Springer, "where's your partner?"

"Got the flu," Stieger responded with a yawn. Figures the weird cases would come down the pipeline on a week he'd be on his own. "Find the rest of him yet?"

Springer put his hands in his pockets, "Well, the fingers and toes are all on the stairs, one on each step. Go figure there happen to be exactly twenty steps. Head's upstairs in a toilet. I hate to trample on you state police's delicate sensibilities and all, but the fellow's smoking his own cigar in the Freudian sense, if you get my meaning."

"I was able to follow along, thanks."

"We're still doing an Easter-egg hunt for all the teeth. Think the perp maybe didn't like this guy so much?" Springer laughed, enjoying his poke at the obvious.

Stieger allowed a smile, humoring local PD, "Don't suppose the vic has ID?"

"Nah. Prints could be in the system though. And lookee over here." Springer pointed over to a column not far from the body. A bloody thumb print sat like a big red button right at eye level. "Ain't she a beaut? Looks like an easy case to me, buddy. Lucky you. State property, state case; tag you're it. Probably have it all wrapped up by lunch; get your name in the paper and everything."

"Yeah, pinch me."

Stieger looked the body over real carefully. From what he could tell, the fellow looked to be fairly young, not elderly at least. Hard to tell for sure with no head. Suit looked to be of good make, through it was now pretty ripped and bloody. Looked like the guy had been beat down, then pulled apart while still alive, the decapitation likely being what killed him, although the ME would have the last word. Nice piece of work. What the hell was a guy in a suit doing in this dump?

"What did he just wander over from the train station or something?" Stieger searched the guy's pockets for tickets, or any kind of ID, but there was nothing.

"Dunno," Springer allowed. "You're the high-price state detective. Me, I just direct traffic." The local fuzz snorted, rubbing it in Stieger's face that he was washing his hands of the case. Quite a tool, this Springer.

"Who found the body?" Not too many folks had reason to be in this building. Anyone poking their head in here would be someone Stieger wanted a look at.

Springer shrugged, "Anonymous call from a payphone around the block. Came

right in to the precinct."

"Alright Springer, I can see you're anxious to go get a donut. Don't let me stop you." Stieger sighed and finished his orange juice. Well, might as well see where the fingerprint evidence led,...oh, and try to finishing finding all the mook's teeth."

Stieger didn't have the case wrapped up by lunch, but by the time he was filling his gut with a cholesterol and sodium patty on the banks of the Blackstone River he at least had the meat slab's name: Charles Kluwer. Young guy with lots of attitude, no brains and a penchant for small-time mayhem. Kind of mook that made his living selling investment scams to half-senile old ladies. Not a big loss for anybody but his mother; still the jerk was dead and it was Steiger's job to find out why. The sort of fella who'd send a guy off to the eternal hereafter smoking his own meat-pipe wasn't the sort to leave on the street.

The thumb-print proved to be a particularly interesting twist.

"We've got an ID on the thumb," Heather Blackwell told him over the cell while he ate. "Taylor Francis is the name. No record, but we got a hit off of his military file."

Stieger smiled without even noticing it. Heather was a real cutie. "So we got an address on dear Mr. Francis?" All wrapped up just after lunch, not too bad after all.

"Sure. The guy's six feet under at Swan Point."

"The guy's dead? How long? And how'd he leave a thumb-print at my crime

scene if he's dead?"

"Dead two years, and I'll leave the detecting to the detective if you don't mind."

Steiger's smile was gone. This was going to turn into a headache, he just knew it.

"Do you have an address for next of kin?"

That was how Steiger found himself down in Newport at yet another mansion, this one still perfectly inhabitable. Set just on the water, this place was three stories straight out of some Renaissance festival. Nice place if you liked living in a museum. Some stiff in a suit answered the door and ushered Steiger in to a "reading room." He poked around there, trying to look interested in the dusty books, for about five minutes before the lady of the house could meet him. The lady of the house proved to be well worth waiting for; as tall as Steiger, maybe thirty, with flowing red hair and a body that could cut glass.

"We don't get too many law enforcement personnel our way," she positively purred, posturing in the doorway like a well-fed cat.

Steiger, normally pretty good on the self-control, couldn't help but let his eyes slide up and down her body, an appreciative look that wasn't lost on her. "Yeah, well it's time for the policeman's ball again."

"You've come a long way to look for a date."

"I'm not even sure I know who I'm taking to," he observed.

"I'm Madeline Francis, and if it's really a dance you want you should know I'm

not a cheap date."

Alright, so that was how it was going to be, was it? Stieger flipped a picture of poor Mr. Kluwer's head out of his pocket and showed it to Madeline. It was a cruel thing to do, although at least the head had been cleaned up a tad. "Recognize this guy?"

She looked at the picture for a moment, and then whistled, "Just as someone who's having a bad day."

Stieger hadn't expected much to come of this visit, but here this lady was playing around with him like a dog with a biscuit. She didn't look to be the sort to tear apart a guy and stick his head in the toilet, but then again some chicks had rage...and friends. "You don't seem to be exactly awash with empathy."

"Neither do you," she observed. Good point, Stieger acknowledged silently and put the picture back in his coat pocket. "I don't suppose you'd care to share what this all has to do with me?" she asked, crossing in front of him and sitting in a plush chair.

"Fingerprint found at the scene belonged to your grandfather, Taylor Francis." He guessed she must have been his granddaughter based on their relative ages. His comment did get a raised eyebrow from her at least.

"Well the old fellow did get around," she mentioned as if discussing a small bit of trivia. "Of course he finds it a bit more difficult to get around these days."

"I'm aware he's breathing challenged," Stieger said and motioned toward one of the other plush chairs. "May I?"

"Please do," she offered graciously. "That certainly makes for an odd twist, now doesn't it?"

She didn't offer that maybe the print was an old one; maybe he'd been in the house years ago. He didn't need to tell her that the print had been left in the victim's blood, did he? Madeline was letting on that she knew more than she was saying, of that much Stieger was sure. Exactly what that meant was entirely open to interpretation. "I don't suppose you happened to keep one of your grandfather's hands as a memento?"

"I prefer pearls."

"I'd like to exhume your grandfather's body."

"I'd like to live forever and own more diamonds than any other woman in history."

"I can get a court order."

"Then I suggest that is where you should start."

"I will...get a court order," Stieger insisted, leaning forward in his chair.

Madeline leaned forward as well, licking her lips, "I'll make you a deal then, to make both of our lives more pleasant. I'll consent to the exhumation."

"And in return?"

"You answer any three questions honestly and to my satisfaction."

He laughed, but even he had to admit it was an uncertain laugh, "What do you want to know about? How often I masturbate?"

"Why ask about the obvious," she breathed. "Any three questions of my choos-

ing, answered honestly and to my satisfaction. No forewarnings."

Stieger sighed. He could get a court order for the exhumation, but it would take time, days maybe. He didn't like where this was going, yet how hard could her questions be?

"Fine," he agreed. "Although how do I know you'll keep your word once I answer your questions."

"I think you'll find I never lie. Not even when it would suit me best." She smiled, an enticing seductive even reassuring smile, "Do we have a deal?"

"Ask your first question."

Her smile broadened and she clasped her hands in front of her knees, leaning forward expectantly, "Have you ever been married?"

Stieger's eyes narrowed. It was an innocuous enough question, not much beyond what you might ask a new friend he supposed. She couldn't possibly know how closely she had come to old wounds with one little question. Cautiously he answered, "I was married once."

"Mmm..." Madeline purred as if satisfied with the answer but eager to know more. Sure enough she then asked, "How did the marriage end?"

Stieger tensed for real now. This woman had somehow figured him out fast and narrowed right on in for the kill. Otherwise it just didn't make sense. If she wanted the dirt on him why not ask if he had sent an innocent man to jail, or doctored evidence? He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. He looked down at his hand

and saw that it was trembling. So much for questions being harmless.

"Remember," she purred, "the question must be answered to my satisfaction."

He looked up at her, their eyes locked. He felt dizzy and almost nauseous looking into her cool blue eyes as if the power of her personality was simply overwhelming his identity. When he heard his own voice answering he was startled how weak and unsure he sounded, "We had a son together. She...uh...she, uh developed postpartum psychosis." He coughed, looked down, rubbed his head with one hand. Still, he pressed on, "One day she shot our son with one of my handguns, and then hung herself."

Madeline didn't blush, didn't blink or seem remotely surprised by the revelation. Her eyes flared as if she were aroused more than horrified. Stieger was left reeling, his brain on fire and exhausted at the same time. If Madeline noticed his discomfort, it affected her course of action very little. "There is just one more question. Are you ready for it?"

Stieger wrung his hand nervously. Damn, this bitch had gotten the better of him. He was a fool for letting things get this way. There was no backing down now though; to do so would only be to admit weakness, to give her greater power over him.

She pursed her lips as if thinking although he was beginning to wonder if she hadn't know exactly what questions to ask before he had even walked through the door. "Last question: Did you do everything that you could have to save them? I mean did you do enough to help your wife when she was becoming ill?"

Stieger sucked in a deep breath. How many times had he asked himself the same

question in the months and years after their death? Christ he never could have imagined that this woman could have gone straight for the jugular so quickly. It was like she could smell the blood, metaphorically speaking. "I knew she was sick, but no I didn't know that it was that bad. I kept working a lot before...before it all happened. So I guess, no, I didn't do everything I could have to save them."

She nodded, small motions of her head up and down as if considering his response thoughtfully, savoring it like she would a fine wine.

"Are you happy?" he asked her.

"No," she told him, the cruel vivaciousness leaving her suddenly, replaced by something dry and bitter. "You have no idea what would make me happy. You've kept your end of the bargain to my satisfaction, though. I intend to keep mine. Drive me to the cemetery won't you? I'd like to be there when you dig old Grandpa Taylor out of Hell."

It wasn't as easy as that, of course. There was paperwork to be signed, a digger to be acquired, workmen to be assigned. At her request, he picked her up the next morning. She was warm to him in her subtly vicious way, acting like they were lovers but she didn't know how to love except through hatred. Given the fierce soul twisting she had given him the day before, and the nightmares he had experienced in the interim, the hours with her were awkward to say the least.

They stood silently, side by side, as the digger clawed the earth out of the grave.

Still, silent, they watched as Taylor Francis' casket was lifted out of the ground. It was only as the workmen bent over it with their crowbars that Madeline leaned over his shoulder and whispered in his ear, her breath hot and moist against his neck.

"I think you're going to be pleasantly surprised," she cooed.

With a crack, the casket lid was pried open and flew to the side revealing what lay within. Stieger could only gnaw on the inside of his lower lip.

"Oh yes," Madeline purred, "this has been worth it just for the look on your face."

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