

*The  
Stieger  
Sanction*©

part 2 of 4

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**Just past four, Stieger sat on a bench in the main corridor at state police headquarters in Smithfield. He was calm now, the psychological ache that had coursed through his body since morning having finally subsided to something tolerable. He had spent the last few hours mostly not speaking, for he was afraid of what he might say if he tried. Finally the clouds were parting and he was becoming sure that he was going to be able to make sense of all this somehow.**

**The chief of detectives, a tall skinny black man improbably named Pryczinski approached Stieger like one might a cottonmouth. "So you feeling any better?" he asked gingerly. Pryczinski was, at heart, a nice guy. That might not have always made him the best chief of Ds, but his people loved him for it. Stieger was appreciative of it at the moment too.**

**"I'm good," Stieger said, inwardly thinking he was emphasizing the positive, but he did indeed feel better.**

**"The ME was able to confirm the identify of the, eh, body," Pryczinski said. It wasn't a surprise and Stieger only nodded. Gently, but being a cop, Pryczinski pressed on, "Any ideas how your wife's body came to be in the casket of Taylor Francis?"**

**Stieger shook his head, "Nope. Never met Madeline or her grandfather before in my life. She must have known me though, she was just about tickled pink playing games with me and waiting for me to see inside that casket."**

**Pryczinski pursed his lips thinking for a minute, "You know, all common sense tells me it's time to take you off this case. Your wife's body suddenly pops up in the middle of all this and you're starting to drift into the person of interest zone, you understand?"**

**Stieger nodded. Pryczinski was right; as an objective investigator he was done.**

**Damned if he was going to let it go, but there was no point arguing with Pryczinski over what was obvious to both of them.**

**"I'm going to assign the case to another detective," Pryczinski told him. "Given the circumstances you've just been through, you're going to take a week's leave. I suggest you take some vacation time. Of course what you do on that vacation time is your own business, you understand?"**

**Stieger looked up. Pryczinski was covering his own ass, while giving Stieger carte blanche. Of course, if Stieger screwed it up, he'd be swinging in the wind with no backup.**

**"Madeline Francis is in interrogation room B. She refuses to speak to anyone but you and we've got nothing to hold her on. As far as I'm concerned your leave can start tomorrow." Pryczinski walked off without a further word. Silently, Stieger watched him go.**

**Madeline was like a lioness lazily picking at the bones of her kill, "Did you enjoy your reunion with the dearly departed?"**

**An hour ago, her words would have torn at him like razors, but he had hardened himself to it by now. "I think you're smart enough to guess how I feel. Why does it matter to you? I've never met you before; I can think of no reason you should take pleasure in my misery."**

**"It's not as simple as that. Things are so much, much more complex," she purred.**

**"Why don't you tell me how?"**

**She shook her finger in the air back and forth, gently, like she was scolding a young child, "Das ist verboten."**

**Stieger sat down across the plain wooden table from her, "Look, I just don't get it. No way I randomly get called to a crime scene only to find my wife's body someplace it doesn't belong. You knew from the second you saw me who I was, and you wanted me to get to that casket. Which means you lied by the way."**

**At this she actually looked hurt, deeply and sincerely hurt, "When, I never lied!"**

**"You said at first you weren't going to let me exhume that casket and only relented by getting me to answer your questions."**

**"That's not true; I never said I wouldn't let you exhume the casket."**

**"You told me to get a court order."**

**"No, you said you were going to get a court order. I can't help it if you paid for something I would have given you for free." She sat back in her chair, relaxed again, satisfied she had addressed the issue, "I only told you that I never lie, but the truth is not like figs on a tree to be picked at one's pleasure, it must be dug out of the ground with bloody hands like gold."**

**Stieger leaned back as well, feeling frustrated. He couldn't remember their conversation all that well, but he felt that, technically speaking, she was right.**

**She sat forward again, her eyes blazing, "You think I asked you questions to which I already knew the answer, well let me ask you one more."**

**"You're not even offering anything in return."**

**"My question is what I'm offering you."**

**Stieger sucked in a long uncomfortable breath but said nothing. Madeline took it as acquiescence and leaned forward in the chair like a journalist drilling a reluctant source. "Why did your wife kill your son?"**

**Stieger wasn't going to let her questions get to him anymore. He wasn't going to**

give her that power. "She had schizophrenia," he said simply.

"No that is not an answer!" she banged her fist angrily on the table so hard that he flinched. "Many women have schizophrenia," she continued on, "and don't kill their children."

"Some do."

"But why, why them? What makes them so different?"

"This all relates somehow with why my wife ended up in your grandfather's coffin?"

"Absolutely," she said in such an exasperated tone that Stieger managed to feel somehow like a fool.

Stieger sighed, "Alright then, well they're paranoid,...I dunno they usually think their children are possessed or something and they're saving them. The crazy ones at least."

"Right," Madeline said, pointing one slender graceful finger at him like it were a poignard. "Consider for a minute that maybe they're not wrong."

Stieger shook his head, "Listen I've seen a couple of these ladies, and frankly they're always on their way to the mother ship. I can even remember back to the week or two before my wife died and can remember the signs that she was coming apart. I didn't do enough about it at the time and I know that now, but that's what happened."

"Consider what it would be like to be a woman in such close proximity with a being of such ultimate evil, caring for it, trying to love it, letting it suckle at your breast, gradually suspecting that something was wrong. Wouldn't that begin to take apart someone's mind, to come to realize that your child has become infected by something straight from Hell?"

**This was all becoming too much for Stieger. She was distracting him with all this nutty talk, perhaps already setting the foundation of some kind of insanity plea. She was at the heart of Kluwer's murder, had to be, whether she had done it or knew who did. "None of this helps me understand how you knew my wife was in that casket." He looked at her for a moment, an icy stare meant to make a suspect uncomfortable. She didn't look away though. "Did you kill Charles Kluwer?"**

**It was her time to sigh, and she suddenly sounded very weary, "I told you already, I know nothing about Charles Kluwer." There was a momentary pause while she stared at him hard, "I'm disappointed in you, Detective Stieger. Follow the breadcrumbs and you'll begin to get your answer. Just don't blame me if you don't like it." She stood up, gathering her things, "I assume that I am not under arrest."**

**With a twinge of defeat he nodded, "You're free to go at any time."**

**She walked to the door and as she passed by him he caught the scent of her skin and it was like cinnamon. She turned at the door and smiled at him, some of her ironic warmth returning, "We'll meet again, I'm quite sure of it."**

**On his way out of the building, the medical examiner's office called. The examination of his wife's body was complete and, aside from it being in the wrong casket, there was no evidence of any wrong doing. They had catalogued everything about the incident that could conceivably be evidence, although technically the whole incident looked more like a mistake at the mortuary home than it did any kind of crime. The connection with Kluwer's murder was certainly odd, yet unclear. Bottom line, they were ready to release the body and wanted to know what Stieger wanted to do with it, being next of kin.**

**Good question, Stieger thought and then made a snap decision, "Send it to any mortuary other than the one that screwed up the first burial. Have them cremate her; I'll pick up the ashes when they're done." There was no sense in going through another funeral. As much as anything else, he just as well assumed that his wife's family never find out about this whole sordid affair. No use in opening up those old wounds. He'd just scatter his wife's ashes over the original gravesite.**

**In thinking about that, it begged the question though, didn't it? If his wife had ended up in the grave of Taylor Francis, where the Hell was Taylor Francis buried? Was he stuck in the grave where his wife should have been? It was time to visit a certain mortuary house and raise a little Hell of his own.**

**Driving over to the mortuary house that had handled his wife's burial, Stieger worked himself into a mental frenzy. Either they had made one colossal, lawsuit-worthy FUBAR or they were somehow in cahoots with Madeline Francis, for reasons unknown. Neither option made him very happy. The guy who opened the door at the mortuary, dressed and mannered conservatively was young, not someone Stieger recognized from his wife's burial. Then again, he was in such a fog those days that who knew. Stieger flashed his badge and explained the circumstances in the starkest and most legal terms and the young fellow had wilted like a flower in the hot Texas sun. The young guy scurried away to find the mortician himself.**

**Waiting for the mortician, Stieger wandered a bit from room to room, impatient. It was amazing how mortuaries managed to be so elegant and beautiful and yet so hideously ugly at the same time. In one room an elderly woman was laid out in her mahogany casket, ready for a viewing to occur later that evening. Right now they were**

alone together, Stieger and the deceased, she looking much more tranquil than he. Here, inevitably, everyone ended up, he thought to himself. This brought back memories of his wife's wake. She'd been in the right casket at the time, so the transfer to Francis' must have come after, between the wake and the burial. Beside her had been their son, the boy that she had killed. His had been a closed casket. Even a nine-mil, it seemed, could make a child's skull fly apart when the fontanelles weren't all closed up yet. That, without question, had been the lousiest day of Stieger's life.

At last the man arrived, a short squat lump of a man in a black suit with a white shirt. He looked like nothing so much as an 8-ball with an impending coronary.

"I'm Detective Stieger, State Police..." he began as the mortician entered.

The man held up a hand, his manner unimpressed, "I know who you are and why you are here."

With every twist, Stieger felt more and more like he was being drawn into some kind of black hole. There was little he could do for the moment other than to raise his eyebrow and wait.

"It was inevitable that you should return one day," the man said calmly, almost distractedly as he sat at a desk and rifled through the drawers for some paperwork.

"Of course it would have been better for you had you not."

Stieger watched the man carefully. He remembered the guy's name, Mr. Haworth, it was. His demeanor now was quite different than during his wife's funeral. Stieger was on alert, ready in case the fat man reached for a gun. "So then, you put my wife in another man's casket on purpose?"

The man looked up from the desk, the first time in fact that he had made eye contact, "Oh yes. That was always the intention. Once events had gone awry there was no

**other easy way to put them back."**

**The man was talking sheer nonsense and Stieger could make nothing out of it, "I have no idea what you're talking about."**

**The man had retrieved whatever piece of paper he had been looking for, but made no move as of yet to show it to Stieger, although certainly that was his ultimate intention. "You will understand fully in time. I am but a bit player in this, a mere servant to a higher power, so there is only so much that I can tell you."**

**"You were only following orders, is that it?"**

**"I was following orders, but gladly. It is my greatest joy to serve the dark power of the Lost Gods and Their Son on Earth, just as it is your joy to be his living host."**

**The guy really seemed to be daft in the head. Sounded like he was spouting off some kind of cultist nonsense. This was certainly a different direction than he had expected this interview to take. He needed to get this guy into custody, down to the station where he could be interviewed properly. To hell with going on vacation. He could arrest him right here for tampering with a corpse, his wife's corpse, if nothing else, and see what he might know about the murder of Charles Kluwer.**

**"Whose orders?" Stieger demanded. "Who told you to put my wife's body in the casket of Taylor Francis?"**

**"Why you did," Haworth the mortician answered evenly, and only now slid the paper he had recovered across the desk for Stieger to see. There it was all typed out, a formal request of all things to bribe Haworth to make the body switch. And there at the bottom of the paper was his signature. It was an excellent forgery of his signature. It had to be; who after all would write down such a conspiracy so nicely for posterity? And yet...and yet...**

**"It's not possible..." Stieger stuttered. "Only a fool would commit a conspiracy like this to paper." There was, however, a flicker of a memory teasing at the corners of his consciousness.**

**"Neither of us is a fool, Detective Stieger," Haworth assured him without warmth. "I am but an obedient servant, and you I regret to say, were simply a victim of circumstance. As were your wife and son. It's finally coming to a close for both of us however. I am to be off to my reward in Hell. I envy what is to come for you, for you will know first hand the blessings of the Lost Gods. What I would have given to be in your place."**

**"You're not making any sense," Stieger said, his voice shaking, but he was rubbing his head where suddenly it hurt very badly.**

**Haworth watched Stieger curiously, "It was simply a matter of fortune. Taylor Francis had been the Son's host for years and years. It was fortune that your son was born as Taylor Francis died; fortune that they would be but mere feet from each other in the Emergency Room." It was true; his wife had given birth in the Emergency Room, before she could make it to maternity. Had a man died in the ER that same night?" Stieger couldn't remember; he'd had enough to focus on at the time.**

**"Thus the Son in abandoning Francis' decrepit body-took your boy to be his new host. Your wife sensed it, and the closeness to such power drove her to madness. She said something was wrong with the boy, but you didn't listen. Eventually in her madness, she killed her own child, hoping to drive the Son from this world forever," Haworth's voice rose as he spoke, becoming enraptured with his own narration. "Surprised and weakened, the Son had no choice but to take her as a host, yet she remained determined, took the rope from the garage. Struggling for control of her**

**own body with the Son, she strung the rope from a rafter and hung herself. Desperate, with no one near to take as a host, the Son looked to have been vanquished. All hope was lost until at last, at the final moment..."**

**"Stop!" Stieger screamed, driving his fist into the table with such force that it caused even the resolute Haworth to jump back in surprise.**

**There was a moment of silence until at last Haworth smiled, pure pleasure spreading across his face. "Until at last her husband came home, to find her and to offer himself as host."**

**Stieger coughed, staggered, feeling confused and disoriented. "This is just nonsense," he said, but somehow didn't believe it himself.**

**"I'm sorry to do this to you, My Grace," Haworth said, that smile still plastered on his face.**

**Stieger looked up, confused as much by the salutation as anything else. As he did, a body pushed against him from behind, tall, strong. Stieger felt his arms pinned to his sides and a rag thrown against his mouth. There were acrid fumes and, confused through he still was, he knew enough not to breathe in the fumes, struggling as best he could against his captor. Haworth just watched on, always smiling. Stieger held his breath, pushing futilely against the powerful arms that encircled him. Of course, eventually, everyone needs to breathe.**

**.....to be continued**