

*The
Stieger
Sanction*©

part 3 of 4

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Stieger awoke to a splitting headache and the distant sound of sirens. His head was still fuzzy but it took him only a minute to look around and guess that he was screwed. He was still at the funeral home, in the very same room in fact. Before him lay the body of Haworth, his head surrounded by a halo of blood that had drained out of a neat little hole in the forehead. Stieger woke to find his 9mm in his right hand. It was not difficult for him to put the two together. Whoever had knocked him out was gone, as was the letter that made Stieger look like he had been in on moving his wife's body, the letter that tied him to this whole confusing affair. It couldn't have been the young guy who had met him at the door who had held his arms like that, it was someone stronger. The young guy was gone too though, likely having called the police. An unarmed Haworth, killed by Stieger's gun, and probably the young guy was going to say that he did it in cold blood. Stieger had been set up well; the only wonder of it that Haworth had gone down so willingly into his own slaughter.

He had been lucky that the ether he had been knocked out with had worn out fast, before the police arrived. So moments later he was off and away, a fugitive now at least until he could figure out what the Hell was going on. The police would be looking for him, thinking he was linked somehow in Kluwer's murder, and almost certainly in Haworth's. Even if time would prove him innocent, he felt as if time was not something that was on his side. He went to the only place he could think of.

“Well,” Madeline exclaimed with a raised eyebrow, “this is quite the surprise.”

“Events have gotten away from me. I need your help.”

She turned away and walked back into her house, leaving the door open for him, “I think I see blood droplets on your jacket. I can’t wait for you to tell me.”

And tell her he did, knowing as he did so, how little any of it made sense to him. It all sounded like the senseless ranting of a lunatic, yet he somehow couldn’t dismiss it. Something was drastically wrong. Madeline listened to it all with rapt attention, displaying not one whit of surprise.

“This is what I’ve been trying to tell you along.”

“Well you haven’t done a very direct job of it,” he observed, irritated.

“As I told you, there are Rules about what I can and what I can’t tell you.”

“Whose rules?”

“They are the rules of antiquity. The Lost Gods, your Christian God, who knows. It’s like asking whose rules govern gravity or the motion of the planets. They are simply the rules and I am bound by them.”

“Whose side are you on?” he asked her, knowing it was both a stupid and desperate question.

She shrugged, “I find you rather entertaining, so I suppose I am rooting for you at the moment. It could change depending upon your behavior.”

It was an honest sounding answer at least. “What can you tell me?”

“Since the man Haworth has told you much, I can try to clarify what he has told you. What I will say will sound improbable, yet you will know it to be true.”

Stieger found a comfortable chair and, thankfully a glass of bourbon found him.

“First,” Madeline began once he was ready, “I would pay little heed to Haworth’s talk of Lost Gods and whatnot. My grandfather created a certain mythology around himself and found converts to his cause. He was of the opinion that religious zealots made for the most loyal of sycophants.”

“Haworth took a bullet for the cause, so he must have been on to something.”

“My grandfather may have been indestructible, but he was far from infallible. He wielded great power during his life, but he also drank heavily and was given to great rage. When he drank he would sometimes talk about having past lives. Being raised from a child in such an environment, I had little reason to be skeptical of his claims, but even now with the resources at my disposal I can say that the people my grandfather claimed to have once inhabited were real, documented people, each of them powerful and angry. Haworth has told you much about the nature of my grandfather as he sees it. The truth is that my grandfather, throughout his lifetime was the host for some kind of parasitic being, a soul with no body of its own, but which steals bodies from others. Taylor Francis was certainly not the first host, and obviously was not the last.”

Stieger drank. It helped. “So that’s what Haworth was saying, that this parasitic soul infected my son, then my wife, then me, trying to keep itself from dying?”

Madeline nodded, “That is the basics of it. The parasite seems to be able to transfer to a new body at the moment of death of the old. It cannot move at will, otherwise it would have left my grandfather long before he died as my grandfather died of a long and painful illness. He finally died at the same time and in the same hospital

when your son was born. The parasite is limited in how far it can travel; to die alone is a death sentence for it. In a crowded hospital though, it's no problem. The parasite prefers to infect infants, as it can easily eject their own souls and take possession of the body. With adults, it has a much harder time. It may be forced to compete for control of the body, or indeed lie dormant with little control. It's only hope is to weaken the mind of the host to the point that it can eject the host and take possession. When your wife, perhaps already experiencing post-partum mental illness and sensing the evil that had possessed your son, killed him, the parasite had no choice but to infect her. Though her mind was weakened, certainly, she ultimately hung herself rather than submit to its rule. The parasite must have been quite desperate then, alone, dying. Not all cells in the body die at once, and it's not clear how long the parasite can survive in a dying body, but things must have seemed quite hopeless until..."

"...until I came home and found the bodies."

"Discovering the murder suicide must have weakened your psyche considerably, enough that the parasite could nudge your behavior to sign that odd document moving your wife's corpse. It was the parasite's loyal minions, however, who have controlled the plot to shock you with your wife's body, then have you framed for murder so that you would mentally break down and give the parasite the opportunity it needs to control your body. Once that happened, the evidence against you in the murder of Haworth would certainly evaporate; the witness recant, the forensic evidence become lost. The parasite could resume your life as if nothing had ever gone wrong."

Stieger found himself shaking his head. This was simply the most outlandish thing he had ever heard of. Even if it wasn't true, all this talk about a parasitic soul, at the very least Taylor Francis had managed to convince a small group of followers of his paranormal nature. In the end it was they who had moved his wife's body and set him up for the murder of Haworth, all in an effort to supposedly make his mind more malleable for this parasite. If they had done that, then they had murdered Charles Kluwer too. Now it was just a matter of finding out whom they were. It was time to go back to the beginning, investigate the murder of Charles Kluwer. Haworth hadn't been some random person; he had volunteered to be murdered. Perhaps Kluwer had done the same. It made more sense to think he was up against some nutty cult than to believe there really was some kind of spiritual parasite living in his head.

"The last two days have been the oddest of my life," Stieger muttered.

"You should stay for the night," Madeline said.

Stieger raised an eyebrow.

Madeline laughed, "Not like that. It's becoming late and you must be quite exhausted and still recovering from being drugged. I'll have the maid turn down a room for you."

Stieger thought about it for the moment. On the surface, it was simply stupid. Any other investigation and Madeline ought still be a person of interest, if not an outright suspect. It couldn't be said that she came across as the benevolent type, yet she had been pushing and nudging him at least vaguely in the direction of the truth, at least

within the bounds of what she called the rules. The idea intrigued him as well; once in a position as chaotic as tenuous as his own, timidity no longer held any appeal. It was true, too, that he was exhausted and still sick from the ether. Assuming the he was a suspect himself in the death of Haworth, he could not return to his own home. So he agreed and became Madeline's guest for the night. She was clearly pleased by it, and as they dined later that night, Stieger could sense the change in her, that she had come fully into his camp. In a moment of clarity he realized why.

“You're lonely here aren't you?” he asked.

She laughed and blushed, looking down into a glass of wine so red it looked like blood, “Being descended from Taylor Francis left a taint on our bloodline. My father went mad and killed himself. I had a brother who, at eighteen, left home and has never been heard from again. As for myself, well, I have never worked and played well with the other children. I see the world very differently from most people. It's like everything is just a game. Even now, I'm playing with your life, you know. If you succeed, then I beat my grandfather.”

It was an answer that wasn't an answer. He reached out with one hand and touched hers, gently, barely running his fingers along the back of her hand. She didn't recoil, but watched him uncertainly. It was the first time that he felt as if he actually had the upper hand with her. Her skin was soft and warm, and he enjoyed the feeling against his own fingertips. Her eyes, fiery and intense, watched him like those of a feral cat. Pushing his good fortunes no more, he drew his hand away and said only,

“Well, I hope you win.” Tired, and yet intensely exhilarated, he excused himself for bed.

Although it was difficult for him to sleep, the night passed peacefully without event. A part of him wondered if Madeline might have come to him in the night. He hadn't been with a woman since his wife died and Madeline certainly had a kind of electric interest in him. It was just wishful thinking though and she left him undisturbed. That meant he was left to his own thoughts and he pondered the merits of the supernatural story he had been fed, first by Haworth, then by Madeline. He wasn't one to naturally believe in hocus pocus, and he certainly didn't feel like he was sharing his skull with any parasitic spirit. On the other hand, if anything was going to break him, being a police officer sent to prison certainly could do it. What an option there, either get abused in the general population, or spend 24/7 in isolation. Either way he'd go nuts. Parasitic spirit or not, he was in it deep unless he could prove that he'd been set up for Haworth's murder. Odds were, once an investigation got going, he'd be cleared, but a lot of damage could be done by then.

He got up early and left before Madeline was awake. He drove across the state, a drive of about forty minutes, to the home of Charles Kluwer. There he met Kluwer's mother, a woman as old as the seas with a sharp mind and a body running on fumes.

“I already answered questions about Charles,” she said after he had introduced himself. “I don't know what he was doing in that section of town, nor who would want

to kill him.” Her voice told the story of grief being ripped open again and again by one set of questions after another. She was tired of talking about her boy, just wanted him in the ground with herself soon to follow.

“Charles has had a few scrapes, hasn’t he? Did he ever mention anyone in particular who might have it out for him?”

“Charles was a good boy,” his mother said, defensively, rocking herself on the porch of her rickety old 18th century house. “He just couldn’t tell a good scheme from a bad one. He was getting himself straight though; ready to turn a new corner.”

“Did he mention anything about getting involved in religion lately?”

The old woman shook her head, “Charles never was one for sitting still much and listening to sermons. Same with school; sitting still was not his thing. Guess they’d diagnose him with that ADD nowadays. He’d be too busy sleeping off his Saturday adventures to go to church on Sunday morning.”

So no overt religious overtones; still getting involved with a cult might have been something that he kept from his mother. “Any change in his behavior lately?”

“Just for the better,” she replied. “Like I said, he was trying to go straight. Got himself a straight job selling cars.” Stieger frowned at that, not sure that selling cars was his definition of a straight job. Going from selling junk to the elderly to selling junk cars to everyone else wasn’t exactly a switch in tool sets. Just as well the old woman hadn’t noticed his frown.

“Did he say what set him on the straight and narrow?” Stieger asked.

“Last time he got himself arrested, this cop saw potential in him and gave him a little helping hand, helped him get a real job. That officer was helping Charles turn things around.”

Stieger had never met Charles Kluwer, at least not intact, but a read of his police file offered little to suggest much by the way of potential. “Did Charles tell you the name of this police officer?”

“Sure,” the old woman said, and a small smile emerged as she seemed to remember the officer fondly, probably for the help he had given her son, “nice Providence officer by the name of Springer.”

Stieger was running off of an adrenaline high, some kind of mixture of anger and excitement. That damn officer Springer had played him right from the beginning. Springer had contacted him directly, and it was Springer who claimed to have gotten the tip about Kluwer’s murder in the first place. The bastard had set the whole thing up, killed Kluwer, and got the ball rolling for Stieger to find his wife’s body. Springer must have planted the fingerprint of Taylor Francis at the scene. How exactly he had done that was still a mystery; maybe he had reconstructed the print somehow from old military records, maybe he even still had Francis’ hand lying around someplace, who knew? Probably Springer was the guy who had got him from behind and ethered him at Haworth’s funeral home too, he was a big enough guy for the job.

A little probing in the Springer’s background and whereabouts at the time of

Kluwer's and Haworth's deaths would take the heat off himself. With this in mind, he pulled into the parking garage underneath the State Police office in Providence. He was going to have to turn himself in, but he was confident now that it would be only a short time before he could set things right.

With a thrill coursing through his veins, Stieger switched off the ignition and opened the door of his car. When he looked up he was staring down the barrel of a 9mm. The thrill drained out of him like semen from a ruptured condom.

"Get back in the car, Detective," Chief of Ds Pryczinski commanded from behind the gun, "you and I are going for a drive."

.....to be conclude.....

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