



My kitchen is like my bathroom – I never go in there unless necessary. This morning was no exception, so I stopped for coffee at the *'Adams Building Deli'*, which is located across from the elevator I took home each evening.

Harry and Mary Wong operate the small deli and grocery, and make a good living offering staples, sandwiches, coffee, and beverages to the residents of my apartment building. Chinese by heritage, they moved here from California several years ago, raised a large family and then opened the deli. I liked and respected them both.

Chinese food is something I have always enjoyed, although I understood that some of the things they are credited with are not really native to their country. However, making coffee (good coffee) was not something they have mastered, and should probably be left to others. In fact, Chinese brewed coffee (at least that brewed by the Wong family) had the consistency and taste of iodine mixed with motor oil – with more emphasis on the latter. I often wondered if maybe they didn't use rice rather than coffee beans!

Mary was standing behind the cash register when I walked up to pay for my coffee.

"How are you this morning," I said, dropping a quarter on the counter.

"Vely good Mr. Leno. We not see much of you lately. We afraid you move."

“Not a chance Mrs. Wong, I can’t think of any place I had rather be. Besides, where could I get such good hot coffee on a cold morning?”

“You funny Mr. Leno. Mr. Wong and I know that our coffee bad...but we try to make better.”

“Your coffee is fine, I can’t think of a nicer way to start my day.”

I was lying, of course, but until Andy opened the *Down Under* later today, I didn’t have any other options.

~

It was almost eleven o’clock on a cold and windy Sunday when I rolled the Ford out of the parking area and headed to 1021 Adams Avenue – it was only a few blocks away.

Vera Martel’s apartment building was very similar to mine, only with less height, without certain amenities and not as convenient. Regardless, it was still one of the nicer ones in the area.

Avoiding the elevator, I took the stairs up to the second floor, then gently knocked on the door of apartment 201. After all, it was Sunday morning and Vera Martel might not be up and around at this early hour – assuming she was even home.

But, I couldn’t have been more wrong even if I’d tried.

~

“**W**ho is it?” I heard from behind the closed door.

“Miss Martel, my name is Carson Reno and I’m sorry to disturb you this morning. I would like to ask a couple of questions, if you have a few minutes.”

The door to apartment 201 opened slightly and someone peeked through the gap before swinging it completely open.

Standing in the open doorway was a strikingly attractive redheaded woman dressed in a loose fitting silk housecoat – pink with fake fur around the collar. At the end of her long and shapely legs were matching pink slippers, also covered with similar fake fur.

Her initial frown quickly turned to a welcoming smile, and I was pleased that my morning visit didn't seem to annoy or to have disturbed her. I returned her smile.

Medium length hair had that 'morning' look and was pointed in several directions, and I suspected the time of day for make-up or lipstick had not arrived because none was detected. However, I don't believe she required much of either when that time did present itself.

Redheads have always been a favorite of mine. And, although this one was probably a little older than my normal preference, exceptions could be made. You always add points for experience.

Regardless of points, she was still a beauty – even at this hour on a Sunday morning.

She was holding a burning cigarette in her right hand and a half-full highball glass in the other. Looking me up and down with that welcoming smile, she licked her large lips and blinked her baby blue eyes. Then she slurred, "Well, well, well. Look what the magic genie has brought me this morning."

Confused, I stared for a moment. Not knowing anything else to say I mumbled, "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"I knew if I rubbed on this bottle long enough something good would pop out," she chuckled. "And...and yep...here you are."

Again I paused for a moment. It was obvious that Miss Vera Martel was on her way to a first degree drunk – and it wasn't even noon. Either she had been at this all night, or got an early start.

“Miss Martel, do you have a few minutes to answer a couple of questions?”

“Questions...I love questions. Yep, I’ve...we’ve got all day to answer questions – but let’s not spend it standing out here in the hall. Come...come on it...ah, ah...what was your name again?” She wobbled briefly, then stepped out of the doorway and closed the door, while motioning to me with her high-ball glass.

“Reno, my name is Carson Reno.” I walked inside her apartment, briefly looked around, and then searched for a place to sit – my options were limited.

It was a large apartment and extremely well furnished - what furniture I could see. Various pieces of clothing (both clean and soiled) were covering almost every inch of useable sitting area.

“Welcome...welcome to my home Mr. Genie...er, ah Mr. Reno. Don’t mind the clutter...I’m just redecorating,” she slurred, and then added a chuckle.

She followed close behind and hurriedly moved some discarded clothes from the couch to the floor, giving me a place to sit. I took her up on the offer and sat down. She remained standing, if you could call it that – remaining vertical would be a better description, and that was an obvious challenge.

“How about a drink Mr. Genie...I mean Mr. Reno,” she asked slowly. “I’m having whiskey...would that be alright with you? Would whiskey be alright? Don’t be shy, I got plenty of...well I got plenty of everything.”

“No I...”

“Nonsense – you’ve come calling this morning and I’ll expect you to do the proper thing and not let a lady drink alone. Whiskey it is...for both of us.”

Sticking the burning cigarette in her mouth, she picked up a bottle from a nearby counter, managed to pour another glass of whiskey and refill hers without spilling either or losing the cigarette. She handed me the glass, gave me another big smile and took a seat

on the other end of the couch. It was also covered in discarding clothing, but that didn't seem to matter – she just sat on top of them.

“Excuse the mess,” she slurred while thumping cigarette ashes toward a nearby ashtray. “Today is the maid’s day off,” she chuckled, before laughing loudly at her humor.

“That’s fine, I understand. I should have called first, but I really only have a few questions and it shouldn’t take long.”

“Mr. Genie...I mean Mr. Reno, you can ask me anything you want,” she slurred. “But keep it simple until we get to know each other better – I don’t like for things to move along too fast...makes my head spin.” She broke out in laughter again.

“Miss Martel I need to ask you about a phone call you received several weeks ago.”

“Drink up,” she shouted and pointed to my glass. “There’s more where that came from and we’ve got all afternoon to talk. I just hope that genie doesn’t have any more surprises – I’m not sure I could handle them.” She laughed again.

I took a sip of whiskey. “Miss Martel, do you know a man named Russell Maxwell?”

“Don’t get me wrong...I’m happy...I’m happy with you...your surprise. I’m just not sure I’m ready for any more surprises...at least not for a little while anyway.” She laughed again.

“Miss Martel, do you know a man named Russell Maxwell?” I repeated.

“Who?” She took a drink of whiskey, finally found the ashtray, put out her cigarette and began searching her housecoat for another.

“Russell Maxwell, he placed a long distance call to your phone number a few weeks ago.”

“Who?”

“Russell Maxwell, he called your phone from a place several miles east of here a few weeks ago. Do you know him?”

“A few weeks ago,” she mumbled while lighting her cigarette with a lighter from the coffee table. “I don’t remember a few weeks ago...and just...and just who are you...Mr. Genie, er ah Mr. Reno? These are...these are funny questions.”

“I’m a private detective. Mr. Maxwell has been missing for several weeks and his family is quite disturbed and worried. However, before he disappeared he placed a long distance phone call to your number. Do you recall anything about it?”

“Wow,” she took a drink and a long draw off her cigarette, before blowing a mouthful of smoke in my direction. “The genie not only sent me a handsome man...he sent me a handsome private detective man! I gotta’ be careful how hard I rub on that bottle!” Her words were slurred and getting worse – I needed to work fast.

“Miss Martel, do you know Russell Maxwell?”

I believe she actually thought for a moment – then answered. “Ain’t he...‘*hick-up*?...ain’t he one of them truck drivers that works for my boss – Jackson ‘asshole’ Gillis?”

“Yes, I believe he is a truck driver. Do you know why he called you?”

“Nah...he didn’t call me. You got somethin’ wrong Mr. Mr. Mr. Genie.”

“I have proof that he made a long distance call to your phone number. He also had your number written down on a piece of paper that was found in his car.”

“‘*Hick-up*?...he wouldn’t...he wouldn’t have called me – he might’ve called my brother...Butch – but not me.” Her words were running together and the situation was rapidly deteriorating. “Do you know Butch? He’s my brother.”

“Does your brother live here too?”

“Yeah...I mean no... not...not anymore. He usta’ live here, but he don’t live here no more.”

“Where is your brother now?”

“Dunno’...*‘hick-up’*...he moved out a few weeks ago and I ain’t...I ain’t seen him since. He ain’t called me – damn him.” She took another large drink from her whiskey and thumped ashes in the general direction of an ashtray.

“You have no idea where your brother is now?”

“Nope...might be working...I dunno’.”

“What kind of work does your brother do?”

“Humph,” she snorted and almost spilled her drink. “He’s a truck driver...ain’t everybody a truck driver? No – no...*‘hick-up’* you ain’t no truck driver...you’re a handsome private detective that came from my genie bottle...right?”

“Do you have any idea how I could reach your brother?”

“Nope...*‘hick-up’* – but you might ask my boss...Jackson ‘asshole’ Gillis. Butch works for him too.”

I stood up and sat my glass on the table. “Thank you Miss Martel. I’ve got to go. Thanks for the drink and the information.”

“Wait a minute,” she shouted. “You ain’t finished your drink and you ain’t asked me near enough questions yet. When do we get to the good ones?”

“Sorry Miss Martel, but I really do need to go.” I walked to the door.

“But...but you ain’t even called me by my first name...yet. It’s Vera, my name is Vera. Ain’t that pretty?”

“Yes Vera, very pretty, and just as pretty as you are. But, I have other business this afternoon. Thank you for your time, and perhaps we will talk again soon.”

“Talk! *‘Hick-up’*...why is it you just want to talk? Where is that bottle? What did I do with it? I gotta’ rub on it some more.” She tried to stand, but slumped back to the couch.

I gently closed the door behind me. Vera Martel was already at the end of a very short day.

From the novel ‘THE INNOCENT STRANGER’ a Carson Reno Mystery.

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