

The Big House



I thought I was lost. Directions

from a service station mechanic in Olive Branch had sent me out a snow covered road lined with woods and an occasional open field, but no houses. I had already decided to turn around when the road I was traveling changed from highway to driveway – I think. Two brick pillars sat next to the roadway with the word ‘Dumont’ displayed in large gold letters on each one. Guess this was the right place, I hoped.

Other than the sign on the brick pillars I still had no indication that I had arrived at the home of Matthew Dumont. The same narrow road stretched out in front of me and I drove for another mile before finding anything that indicated otherwise.

Blocking the snowy road was a large gate, and it was attached to a brick fence that stretched beyond view in both directions. I stopped several yards short and a hefty uniformed man stepped out of the snow and walked up to my car – no idea where he came from.

I rolled down my window.

“Can I help you?” His voice was pleasant but firm, and he was carrying a .38 in a belt holster.

“Yes, I’m Carson Reno – here to see Mr. Matthew Dumont.”

“Please go ahead Mr. Reno,” he motioned with his arm as the gate slowly slid open. “Just park in front of the house and try to avoid the weather, it seems to be snowing harder.”

“Thank you,” I managed before rolling up the window. It was nice of him to be concerned about the weather, since he seemed to be standing out in the middle of it with no shelter that I could see.

Checking my rearview mirror, I hoped to see him return to where he'd been hiding; instead my greeter remained in the narrow roadway watching until I drove out of sight. Interesting...strange but very interesting.

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*T*he big house seemed to appear from nowhere, jumping out of the snow as I approached. Perhaps the size of the house was enhanced by the light fog and snow, but there was no doubt that I had reached the home of someone who enjoyed their space. Looking left and then looking right, I was unable to see where the building ended and the real world began – it was a big house, in case I haven't made that clear.

As directed, I drove around the circular driveway and parked near the large steps that lead to a narrow porch and a massive wooden front door – it opened before I got out of the Ford.

“Please come in Mr. Reno,” I heard from a small, grey haired black man standing in the doorway. He was elderly and neatly dressed in all white – pants, coat, shirt, gloves, shoes and bow tie. “Just leave your vehicle there, it will be fine.”

After wiping the sticky snow from my shoes, I stepped through the large doorway and nodded to the grey haired gentleman holding the door.

“Thank you, the snow seems to be getting heavier.”

“Yes sir,” he said, ignoring my comment. “May I take your coat?”

I was wearing my red goose-down ski jacket, which I always wore on cold snow days; over a white Christmas sweater that mother had given me. My .38 was resting comfortably in the glove

compartment of the Ford. No gun play was expected at the Dumont mansion.

“Thank you,” I said again, handing him my jacket.

The grey haired gentleman turned and started to walk down the enormous hallway. “Please follow me.”

As instructed, I followed him and my coat down the hall, past a giant stairway, numerous closed doors and finally to a large room at the rear of the house. It had to be at the rear of the house, considering how far we walked – or at least I thought it was.

The old gentleman pushed on a sliding door, gestured with his hand and I stepped into a room much different from what I expected and much different from what little I saw during our walk. The hallway walls were covered with paintings, tapestry, bookshelves, antiques and anything that would make a visitor feel uncomfortable. But this room had none of those.

One wall was solid glass. It was fogged over, and with the heavy snow falling against it I was not able to see what was on the other side. I assumed it looked across the grounds at the rear of the house and imagined it a wonderful view when the weather wasn’t interfering.

A roaring fire in one corner provided most of the illumination, with only a small table lamp offering artificial light. Thankfully the huge chandeliers and oversized lamps weren’t wasted on this room’s environment. The decorations and décor were intended for comfort and relaxation. I liked it.

The old gentleman hung my coat on a rack next to the door, then walked to an open bar close to the glass window and handed me a drink. “Your Jack Daniel’s and Coke have already been prepared; I hope they are to your liking. Mister Dumont will be joining you shortly.”

Damn! It seemed that Matthew Dumont really DID know a lot about Carson Reno. I hate being taken for granted.

I tested my drink, nodded my approval to the old gentleman and added, "Thank you, its excellent."

Without comment, he turned, walked to the door and then stopped, as if he had forgotten something.

"Just ring the bell should you or Mister Dumont require anything. Mister Dumont will be joining you shortly," he repeated.

"Bell?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Yes, it's located on the wall near the light switch. Enjoy your drink, Mister Dumont will be joining you shortly," he said for the third time.

The old gentleman left the room, only partially closing the sliding door behind him. I walked slowly around the room, enjoying my drink while inspecting the numerous photos and paintings that covered most of the walls and the oversized mantle above the fireplace. The paintings were comfortable outdoor scenes, mostly of landscapes and secluded lakes and rivers.

The photos were of family engaging in various activities, swimming in the pool or frolicking on a beach in some far off place. All were pictures of happy times and I'm sure this room was meant to preserve those memories.

I had just picked up a framed photo of a woman holding a baby and a man with two small girls at his side when the distinct odor of French perfume tickled my nose. Turning to find the source, I almost dropped the photograph when I did.

Leaning against the open door frame was a woman whose beauty is almost indescribable. Dressed in a white, skintight evening gown she had enough poise and confidence to fill a room twice this size. Brown hair hung to her shoulders surrounding a face that complimented the gorgeous body that I'm sure was underneath that tight dress.

Raw beauty made it unnecessary, but she was wearing enough jewelry to shame any jewelry store. Rings, earrings, bracelets and a double necklace sparkled with the light from the fireplace. This lady

was dressed for the evening, and some lucky man would obviously have his hands full.

Her dark eyes had been watching me move around the room and I wondered just how long she'd been standing in the doorway.

"Do we need to lock up the silverware?" she said with a voice that matched her looks.

"I was just...just admiring some of the family photographs. I'm Carson Reno and have an appointment to meet with Matthew Dumont." I was still holding the photograph and took a step in her direction. My intent was to ask who was in the picture, but I never got the chance.

"Oh really," she said without moving. "You're not exactly what I expected."

Not knowing how to take that remark, I stood up a little straighter and took another step toward where she was standing.

"Well, I'm not sure what you were expecting, but I am Carson Reno. Nice to meet you Miss...?"

"Dumont, Marion Dumont," she finally moved from the door entrance and walked past me to the bar without acknowledging my greeting.

"What are you meeting with grandfather about?"

Miss Marion Dumont picked up a bottle of Vodka from the bar, poured a straight shot in a glass, and then turned to face me. She seemed a little annoyed that I had not immediately answered her question.

Walking back to the fireplace, I replaced the photograph before speaking. "I have no idea; the reason for the meeting wasn't discussed. I was invited to share cocktails and meet with Mr. Matthew Dumont." I wanted to say 'fetched', but figured the word would just be wasted on her beauty. As usual I was wrong.

“Invited by my loving sister Scarlett, I bet.” She drank the Vodka and sat the glass back on the bar.

“Yes, your sister came to my office this afternoon and said your grandfather wanted to meet and I was invited for cocktails.” (I still wanted to say ‘fetched’.) “But, as I told you, I have no idea what he wants to meet about.”

“Did lovely Scarlett invite you to do anything else?”

“Excuse me?” I wasn’t sure where that statement came from.

“Never mind,” she said before pouring herself another shot of Vodka. “Did you think Scarlett to be a little...a little strange in her manner and appearance?”

“Uh...”

“Never mind,” she said again before downing the Vodka. “I know you did, everybody does. She trapes around like she just walked off the set of *‘Gone with the Wind’* and thinks every man she meets is her ‘Rhett Butler’.”

“Uh...”

“Don’t worry about it. She has the same effect on all men and I’m quite sure you’re no different.”

“Miss Dumont, I don’t...”

“My sister has no respect for men,” she interrupted. “She treats them all like a Dixie Cup – use it once and throw it away.”

“Miss Dumont, I don’t think you understand. I don’t really know your sister...Scarlett. This afternoon was the first time we met and our meeting was strictly business I assure you.”

“Give her time Mr. Reno; you’re a nice looking man. She probably just threw her latest Dixie Cup away and is searching for another one.”

Before I could respond the old gentlemen stepped back into the room and interrupted. "Miss Marion, your car is ready. Please be careful, you know the roads are bad."

"Thank you Cheese. Fetch me my fur coat and I'll meet you at the front door."

There was that word again – 'fetch'.

"Cheese," I mumbled to myself. "That's an odd name."

"Yes, that's just what granddaddy has always called him. Cheese has been working here for as long as anyone can remember. His wife, Cracker, was our maid until her death a few years ago."

"Cheese and Cracker," I repeated slowly.

"Yes," Marion laughed. "And please don't ask me their real names; I'm not sure granddaddy even knows. They've just always been a part of the family – Cheese and Cracker. After mother died Cracker practically raised me and my sisters...we sure do miss her. Granddaddy always teased that if Cheese and Cracker ever had a child he would call it Wine!"

She'd made a joke, but it didn't keep me from noticing a small crack in the toughness emulating from Miss Marion Dumont. It was obvious that Cracker had meant a lot to her – I wonder if she felt that way about her real mother.

"I have to go," Marion said while walking to the door, "I expect you won't be around when I get back, so let me say this now and get it over with. My grandfather wants to talk to you about our stepmother, I'm certain of that. And, so you won't have to ask me about it later let me be perfectly clear – my stepmother is a bitch, a liar and a thief. She's gone...I'm glad she's gone and I suspect everyone else is glad she's gone including my father."

"I see," I said, not knowing anything else to say.

"Enjoy your evening and enjoy my granddaddy's whiskey," she grunted before stopping at the doorway and turning to face me. "And watch out for Scarlett, she's not as harmless as she seems."

“Thanks for the warning; I’ll keep that in mind,” I said through the open door and watching her waltz down the long hallway before disappearing at the staircase.

“Wow,” I mumbled to myself while searching for the Jack Daniel’s Cheese had used to make my drink. Miss Marion Dumont was quite a character, and frankly so was her sister Scarlett. I wondered what the rest of this interesting family was like.

“Another drink, Mr. Reno?” Cheese had returned and caught me rambling through the liquor cabinet.

“Guilty sir and I am quite capable of making it myself. I’m just having trouble locating the whiskey.”

“No...no allow me,” Cheese said, shuffling to one side. “Mr. Dumont would never allow his guests to prepare their own drinks.”

“Thanks.” I stepped out of the way and watched Cheese perform his magic.

“Were you and Miss Marion having a pleasant discussion?” he asked before handing me my fresh drink.

“I’m...I’m not sure. She seemed a little rushed and we didn’t have much time to get acquainted.”

I figured Cheese had heard every word of our conversation anyway, so what was the point of talking about it. Eavesdropping, that IS what butlers do...isn’t it?

“Miss Marion has a date this evening. In fact, she has a date almost every evening – dining, dancing and gambling at a private club over in West Memphis.”

“I see,” I said for no reason.

“Miss Marion does like to party,” Cheese said while walking to the door. “Please ring if you need anything and Mr. Dumont will be joining you shortly.”

I’d certainly heard that statement before.

I busied myself with the fireplace and was wondering if it might be better to excuse myself and reschedule my meeting with Matthew Dumont. Then, without announcement, the sliding door opened and an elderly gentleman in a wheelchair rolled himself into the room. I assumed this to be Matthew Dumont and turned to greet him.

“Mr. Reno my apology for keeping you. I’ve been engaged in a rather lengthy phone conversation that might actually have some bearing on why I wanted to see you.”

Ignoring any formal greeting, he rolled himself up near the fireplace and turned around. He was wearing a full three-piece blue suit, white shirt and red tie, all loosely covered by a faded and worn bathrobe open in the front. A full head of neatly trimmed gray hair covered his large head, and black horn-rimmed glasses sat on a small nose which shadowed an insignificant thin mustache.

Guessing at age I would say he was in his middle to late 70’s, but I’m not good at guessing age. However, other than the wheelchair and bathrobe, it was evident that Mr. Matthew Dumont still had plenty of spunk – regardless of age.

“CHEESE,” Mr. Dumont said louder than normal. Immediately Cheese appeared at the door. Evidently the ‘bell’ wasn’t necessary.

“Yes sir, Mr. Dumont,” Cheese said softly while walking into the room. “How may I help you?”

“Pour me a Sherry, fix Mr. Reno another drink and leave the whiskey bottle where he can find it.”

“But Mr. Dumont, you never...”

“Nonsense, he’s a grown man and perfectly capable of making his own drinks. Then I need you to go find yourself something to do and stop snooping around. I’ll ring for you if we need anything else. Mr. Reno and I need to have a private conversation.”

“Yes, Mr. Dumont, as you wish.”

Cheese followed instructions, pouring a glass of Sherry and handing it to Mr. Dumont, then locating a bottle of Jack Daniel’s and setting it on the bar.

“And keep those granddaughters of mine away from this room and in some other part of the house. I want to be alone with Mr. Reno and not disturbed.”

“Yes, Mr. Dumont, as you wish. But ‘the girls’ are not home this evening. Miss Marion just left and Miss Scarlett and Miss Grace haven’t been home all day.”

“Damn weather,” he grumbled before tasting his Sherry. “Those girls don’t respect anything. Don’t they know we’re having a snow storm?”

“It’s not quite a storm yet, Mr. Dumont. I’m sure they’ll be home before the roads get too bad.” Cheese walked out the door and slid it shut behind him.

“Excuse the wheelchair, Mr. Reno, but its doctor’s orders,” he huffed, rolling himself away from the fireplace. “Damn ticker isn’t what it used to be and my doctor would have his own heart attack if he knew I was drinking this Sherry.”

I found a comfortable chair near where Mr. Dumont had positioned himself and sat down. “I understand,” I muttered softly.

“Well, I’m glad you do because I’m not sure I do. Dealing with this family would drive anyone to drink, and frankly it’s the only thing that keeps me my sanity.”

It was obvious that Mr. Matthew Dumont was a man who got down to business quickly, avoiding all the formality and informality that often got in the way. I liked that.

“What did you want to see me about?” I ignored his comments.

“Ah,” he offered with a small smile. “Business first and pleasantries later, I appreciate that. I like you and knew I would.”

I didn’t comment.

“Almost five years ago we had a tragedy in this household. My daughter-in-law, Amelia disappeared. That was my son Brigham’s second wife. His first wife Ida and mother to my three granddaughters, Marion, Grace and Scarlett passed away suddenly a few years earlier. Brigham and Amelia had been married for about ten years when she disappeared.”

“I see,” I said for no reason.

“Anyway, Grace was 19 at the time, Marion was 17 and I believe Scarlett was 16. Not girls anymore, they were young women and old enough to understand the things that were happening.”

“You said she disappeared?” I questioned.

“Well, she disappeared and then she reappeared – dead. It’s quite complicated and the story was all over the local newspapers, despite my efforts to keep it quiet. I’m sure you read all about it.”

“I see,” I said again.

“No you don’t see. What was rumored and what was in the papers is simply not the truth – although I’m not sure what the truth really is.”

I avoided comment and let him continue.

“We were all gathered at the Memphis Country Club celebrating a birthday; I believe it was Scarlett’s 16th if I’m not mistaken. Amelia and my son, Brigham got into an argument – a very visible argument and over what I can’t imagine because they certainly had everything. Regardless, it was very public and after a few pieces of china got broken, Amelia left the party. For some reason she had driven her car to the club, which was unusual, but she left the club alone in her car and disappeared...at least for a while. Anyway, when she failed to return to the house that evening or the next day the police were called. There was an intensive

search for her whereabouts until her wrecked car was found partially submerged in the Wolfe River – no body inside. Because of the public argument at the club, Brigham was questioned and eventually arrested. The police suspected that he followed her that night when she left the Memphis Country Club, they fought again, he murdered her and tried to hide the crime by pushing her car into the river.”

“Did he?” I asked.

“Did he what? Kill her...no. Follow her when she left, yes. Brigham claims he followed her but never caught up or saw her again. When he couldn’t find her, he came back home and drank himself to sleep, which he does quite often.”

“Did anyone else follow her when she left the club?”

“Good question and one I’ve never been able to answer. I suggested to the police that Amelia might have become a victim of the serial killer...the ‘Ring Finger Killer’ that had been preying on women around the Memphis area.”

“What did the police say?”

“Initially they dismissed my theory, saying that all the victims’ bodies had been left where they would be easily found. And since Amelia’s body had not been found, they pointed their investigation in another direction and arrested Brigham. Obviously that was very upsetting to me and my granddaughters.”

Matthew Dumont took a sip of Sherry before continuing. “When Brigham was arrested I hired a Private Detective to investigate, which was a waste of money. He charged me a fortune and never came up with anything to prove or disprove Brigham’s story or my theory. That’s when I began to check on you, Mr. Carson Reno. My intent was to fire that guy and hire you to take over the investigation, but all that became unnecessary.”

“Interesting,” I took a sip from my watery drink.

“Yes you are interesting, and I’ve been following your adventures ever since. Your stories make for good reading, and

Lord knows the way the world is going some good reading does come in handy.”

“Why did it become unnecessary to contact me?” I was trying to get back on the subject.

“Because they found my former chauffeur, Brady Lyons hanging from a chandelier in a cheap motel room on Madison Avenue – suicide,” he answered with gritty words. “His handwritten note confessed to being the ‘Ring Finger Killer’ but made no mention of Amelia, although several items of her jewelry were found in his room. Two days later Amelia’s body was discovered near a small park next to the Mississippi River. She was bound, gagged and a plastic bag taped over her head – the ring finger of her left hand was missing.”

“A victim of the ‘Ring Finger Killer’,” I nodded.

“That’s what the police concluded and Brigham was released.”

“That’s quite a story.”

“Yes, and that’s just it...it’s all a story and all bullshit. The police believe he took her jewelry after killing her and before killing himself. I mean, he didn’t take jewelry from his other victims – just their fingers. What changed?”

“But, wasn’t he found with some stolen property, property that came from this house?”

“A necklace that I had given to my wife years ago, before that it had been worn by my mother. I hadn’t seen it in years and wouldn’t have even known it was missing if it hadn’t been found in that motel room. It was not something that Amelia would have worn.”

“Where was the necklace kept? I mean, he did work here and had access to the house; maybe he stole it before killing Amelia. Do you lock up your valuables when not being worn?”

“Sure, what idiot doesn’t? But, that necklace was probably lying around in an open jewelry box on one of the women’s dressers because it wasn’t valuable. It only had sentimental value. I doubt

that it's worth \$200. Amelia wouldn't have been caught dead wearing it – she knew it was just costume jewelry. Guess that was a bad choice of words...sorry," he said before taking another sip of Sherry.

"What did your son and daughter-in-law argue about at the birthday party?"

"According to Brigham they were arguing about me. Mr. Reno, I can be a hard man sometimes and my son has a huge responsibility running the business that I've built for him and our family. Amelia was a beautiful and loving woman/wife, but she just didn't agree with the way I pushed Brigham. I've never had a problem with that because I respect and appreciate people who stand up for themselves. Unfortunately it was Amelia and not Brigham who was doing the standing up."

"What do you think happened to Amelia?"

"I don't know and sometimes I wish I'd hired you then to find out, but that wish disappears quickly when I really think about it. While we were all saddened by Amelia's death, it was best for the business and family to put this behind us and move on."

"When all this happened were there other valuables discovered missing from the house? I mean during times leading up to Amelia disappearing?"

"Yes, and they continue to disappear on a regular basis! I suspect it's my granddaughter's way of supplementing bad habits that can't be handled by their very generous allowance. But Mr. Reno, let me be perfectly clear. I did NOT summon you out here to resolve Amelia's murder. What I want to discuss might or might not be related, but the reason for our meeting is totally different."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"Pour me another Sherry, fix yourself another drink and toss a log on the fire. We've got plenty of time; I hope you're not rushed."

"Mr. Dumont, I can stay here all night if necessary. I have nothing else on my schedule." I poured him another full glass of

Sherry, found a log for the fire and fixed me another Jack Daniel's and Coke.

"Mr. Reno, I don't mean to be giving you orders, but it is nice to have someone around other than Cheese to bark at," he chuckled.

Picking up a photograph from the fireplace mantel, the one I had been examining earlier, I handed it to him and returned to my seat.

"Is that a picture of Brigham, Ida and their daughters?"

"Yes...yes it is, and in much happier times I'm afraid. The girls were very young when their mother died, just babies really. But it's something you never actually get over - and especially losing their mother under such awful circumstances. " He was staring at the photograph and I could sense his mind wandering.

"Lovely family," I added.

"And a quite different one from today," he leaned forward slightly, gathered his thoughts and handed me the photograph. I took it and replaced it on the mantel.

"What happened to their mother, Ida? You mentioned that she had died a few years before your son remarried."

"I was busy building my business, Ida was busy raising the girls and Brigham was busy...well he was busy with other things."

I watched Matthew Dumont as he paused before continuing.

"Ida took her own life, I'm certain of that. Brigham's activities were not well hidden, if they were hidden at all. He'd met some woman on one of his travels and they had been seeing each other for quite some time prior to Ida's death. I never knew her name but I don't believe it was Amelia."

"I see," I said again for no reason.

“Don’t misunderstand; Amelia was a very welcome addition to our household. The girls liked her, the staff liked her and I had hoped that things would be normal again; however, that was not to be.”

Matthew Dumont sipped on his Sherry, and it seemed his mind was a million miles away before he spoke again.

“Have you met my granddaughters?” His thoughts returned to our meeting as quickly as they had left.

“Only Scarlett and Marion,” I nodded. “Scarlett at my office this afternoon and Marion while I was waiting for you.”

“I see,” he grunted. “Then you’ll understand it when I say Scarlett lives in a fantasy world that very few people recognize, and Marion lives in a world that moves too fast for most everyone but her.”

“And Grace, what is she like?”

“A tomboy and very good at it,” he chuckled, “which is unusual because other than me, and her father on a part-time basis, she wasn’t around men in her early years. Oh we had chauffeurs, gardeners and of course Cheese, but for the most part she lived in a woman’s world. My wife died when Brigham was a teenager and Cheese’s wife, Cracker raised him and those girls. Ida was close to her daughters, but Amelia was too busy to spend time with them, and perhaps Brigham and I were too. I think when Grace got old enough she’d had enough of the woman’s world and decided to make one of her own.”

“I look forward to meeting her.”

“You will, provided she decides to take time away from her horses, pickup trucks, boyfriends or her other outdoor adventures. But, I think you’ll like her. She seems to have it more together than the other two.”

“More Sherry,” his glass was empty and I reached for it.

“No, no...I’ve already exceeded my limit. But please don’t mind me. You’re not drinking alone; I’m with you in spirit just not the activity.”

“Mr. Dumont, if not regarding the circumstances surrounding your daughter-in-law, then please tell me why I’m here and how I can be of assistance?”

“Oh, it’s about my daughter-in-law alright – just not Amelia.”

“Huh?”

“Nine months ago Brigham began running around with a woman named Stella Morris. He might have been seeing her long before, but that’s when I found out about it. Stella worked as a waitress in one of our hotel lounges and lord knows how she and Brigham got together, I don’t even want to imagine. Anyway, when I learned what he was up to I instructed one of my security people to check her out. Now, they are quite efficient in providing security but damn lousy as detectives. When they finally provided me a report it was too late. Brigham and Stella flew to Las Vegas, got one of those ‘hurry-up’ weddings and she became Mrs. Stella Dumont - a disaster then and even more of a disaster today.”

“What was in the report from your security people?”

“Married twice and arrested three times with one conviction for shoplifting, she spent 6 months in the Shelby County jail. The first two marriages did end in a proper divorce, so the marriage to Brigham was legal – which was disappointing. Evidently she kept her maiden name through the marriages because all the documentation uncovered was recorded under the name Stella Morris.”

“Any family?”

“Two brothers, both with similar police records – petty crimes mostly. Mother and Father are both deceased.”

“What has your son said about her? I mean, I’m sure you two did discuss it?”

“Discuss!” he said louder than necessary. “Hell yes we discussed it, before and after they ran off to Las Vegas! But he doesn’t care, he’s in love – or thinks he’s in love. He’s let his libido take control of his good sense. Mr. Reno this woman is not young, like I would have expected. Not like those he had been dating since Amelia’s death. In fact, she and Brigham are about the same age.”

“Hmm,” I mumbled.

“He moved her into this house...into Amelia’s place just like nothing had ever happened. He allows her to wear Amelia’s clothes, jewelry, gave her a car...made her, or tried to make her a part of the family. I can’t tell you how upsetting that has been for my granddaughters, and frankly the entire household and staff.”

“Including you?” I asked.

“Including me...especially including me.”

“Mr. Dumont, I’ve heard your story but you haven’t told me what you want me and the *Drake Detective Agency* to do for you.”

“Be patient, Mr. Reno...I am getting there.”

“Yes sir,” I answered humbly.

“Exactly two weeks ago this whole situation came to a head and it happened at a party I was hosting for a new hotel franchise owner. It started with Stella throwing a glass of wine at Brigham and then Marion returning the favor to Stella. Brigham and Stella had loud words, she stormed out of the house and he followed.”

“Sounds awful familiar,” I muttered softly.

“It is. Stella hasn’t been seen or heard from since running from the house and driving away.”

“Let me guess,” I stood up and added some ice to my drink. “Because of what happened with Amelia, you haven’t called the police. Is that right?”

“I can’t do that to Brigham and I can’t do that to the business. Both suffered five years ago and I’m afraid this time one or both might not recover.”

“So...what is it you want me to do?” I was afraid I already knew the answer.

“Find Stella and prove to me that she’s alright and hasn’t been harmed.”

“And then...”

“And then I’ll deal with the situation like I should have done weeks or months ago.”

“How’s that?”

“She can’t stay here. I’ll buy her out, and if Brigham wants to follow her...well...well then he can just follow her. But regardless of what she says she can’t stay in this house.”

I walked around the room for a moment, sipping on my watery drink and thinking about how to respond. I didn’t want to offend him, but somehow I believed there was more to the story.

“Okay Mr. Dumont, I think I understand. But before I give you an answer I have some questions. Is that acceptable?”

“Absolutely, and you wouldn’t be worth your salt if you didn’t have questions – fire away.”

“During the time she was here how did Stella get along with everyone? How was she treated?”

“I told you, it was a disaster. Constant bickering and arguing between her, my granddaughters and the rest of the staff; we couldn’t even have a decent meal in peace. The only ones she really got along with were Cheese and Scarlett. I’ve not sure why them.”

“What about between her and your son...Brigham and Stella, how did they get along?”

“Good at first, but I think the whole situation was getting the best of him too. Don’t misunderstand; I think everyone is happy that’s she’s gone. But...she is still married to my son and I have to...I have to look after the business.”

“What about between you and Stella, how did you two get along?”

“I tolerated it, that’s all you need to know.”

“What about between you and Brigham, how were you two getting along?”

“What do you mean?” That question upset him.

“Were you and your son arguing more, or more than usual?”

“No...no I don’t think so,” he answered almost like he had just asked himself the question. “We have a business to run, a big business that requires a lot of decisions to be made. Brigham runs the business on a day to day basis, and yes we do disagree about certain things. However, I don’t think that has any bearing on the situation I’ve just explained to you.”

‘I wonder about that,’ I thought to myself.

“What if I can’t find Stella?”

“You’ll find her, that’s why you’re here. You’re good Mr. Reno, otherwise we wouldn’t be talking,” he nodded.

His confidence was nice, but not very reassuring.

“Okay Mr. Dumont, I’ll go and see if I can find Stella Morris Dumont, but only on my terms. Are you willing to agree to that?”

“Not until I hear your terms,” he answered with a strong tone.

“They are non-negotiable,” I added.

“Let me hear them and I’ll give you an answer – stop beating around the bush with your bullshit. Everything in life is negotiable, even breathing.” That was an odd response, but he was direct and I respected that.

“If/when I locate Stella I will report back to you on her location and how she can be contacted. I will not get involved in family discussions between her and any other member of the Dumont household, but will tell her what I am doing and why I tracked her down. The rest is up to you.”

“Fair enough,” he said quickly. “What else?”

“If she’s been harmed, then I will turn the entire matter over to the police and let them handle it.”

“Fair enough,” he answered again. “What else?”

“If my investigation uncovers any information regarding the death of Amelia Dumont, then I will also turn that information over to the police.”

He stared at me for a long moment before responding.

“I know you said non-negotiable, but will you share that information with me before giving it to the police?”

I didn’t want to say yes, but I did. “Yes.”

“Fair enough, anything else?”

“I’ll need permission to interview any/all of your household staff, your daughters, your son and anybody else I think might have information relative to my investigation. I’ll also need a copy of the report your security people put together on Stella Morris, no point in covering the same ground again.”

“Done,” he said with a smile. “I think we have a deal.”

“I get \$100 a day plus expenses. You’ll get an invoice when my work is complete.”

“Nonsense,” he snorted. “Nobody works for me at that kind of wage.”

I just stared at him, not knowing what to say.

“I’ll send someone around to your office tomorrow with a \$10,000 retainer. If/when you use that up, come back for more. I pay my employees well, and that includes Private Detectives that I trust. I also expect quality results for that pay. Agreed?”

“I, uh...” Words weren’t coming out. I was trying, but the \$10,000 retainer had removed all the air from my lungs.

“In fact, I’ll send Brigham with the money. You need to talk with him anyway and you can get that done without making another trip. He’ll also bring a copy of the security report on Stella. Is our business concluded?”

“Almost,” I somehow managed to hide my shock, catch my breath and get back to business. “When you first came in you mentioned a phone call that might have relevance on what we were going to discuss. What was the call about?”



“When Brigham brought Stella into this house she had very few clothes and no car – didn’t have much of anything for that matter. Brigham gave her a car, one from my stable – a 1963 Lincoln Continental, I have several. The evening she left she was driving that car. The call that delayed me was from the manager of a hotel I own. It’s located on East Summer Avenue and one of our busier properties. The manager reported that the car Stella had been driving was parked in his lot and had been there for several days, he wasn’t sure how long.”

“But, how...”

“As I said, I have several of these cars, they all look alike except for a small windshield sticker and he assumed one of my staff had left it there. When he finally called the corporate office to inquire, he was told it was a car for my personal use so he called me to check. I told him someone would be out tomorrow to get the car, but said nothing about who had been driving it.”

“Can we leave the car where it is for another day or so, at least until I get a chance to check it myself?”

“Sure, not a problem,” he answered quickly while rolling his chair away from the fireplace. “Now, it is getting late and the weather has turned for the worse. I’ll have Cheese prepare one of the guest suites; you can stay over and return to Memphis tomorrow. It will be daylight and the road conditions better.”

“No, I can’t stay,” I objected. “The roads are fine and I...”

“Nonsense,” he interrupted. “In case you haven’t noticed this is a large house and we have plenty of room. There is no point in driving back to Memphis tonight – you’ll stay here.”

Matthew Dumont was not a man that liked the word ‘No’. I saw no point in arguing with him.

“If there’s nothing else, I’m feeling those glasses of Sherry and suspect I need to rest.”

“No sir, nothing else. I’ll call you when I have something to report.”

He rolled his chair over to the door and pushed the ‘Bell’ button. Cheese opened the door almost immediately.

“Please show Mr. Reno to one of our guest rooms and make sure that he has everything he needs. He will be spending the night and returning to Memphis in the morning. Mr. Reno is working for me and will need to come and go as he pleases – advise our security people. Also instruct all the housekeeping staff to make themselves available for Mr. Reno when, where and as needed.”

“Yes sir, I’ll take care of it,” Cheese said before retrieving my coat from the hanger. “Please follow me Mr. Reno, I’ll show you to your room.”

I turned to face Matthew Dumont, but he had already spun around and away from the doorway. “Thank you for your hospitality and confidence. I’ll be in touch.”

Matthew Dumont rolled his chair back into the room without responding.

~

*B*efore reaching the stairway Cheese stopped and turned to face me. “Mr. Reno, if you have a moment Miss Grace Dumont has returned to the house and would like a word with you. She’s been waiting.”

“I would love to meet her,” I said looking around, expecting to see somebody – the hallway was empty.

“She’s in the library.” Cheese walked to two large closed doors on our left, opened one and gestured me in with his hand.



I walked into a huge room surrounded with books and book shelves lining two of the four walls. Another contained floor to ceiling windows hiding behind massive drapes and the other wall a fireplace with a roaring fire. Standing with her back to the fire, and one foot on the hearth, was a woman dressed in tight wool riding pants, black riding boots and a tan blouse with the top two buttons open. She had a glass of red wine in her left hand and a cigarette in her right. This was Grace Dumont, I presumed.

“So you’re Carson Reno,” she said with a frosty voice, before taking a large draw from her cigarette and blowing a mouthful of smoke into the room.

In contrast to Scarlett and Marion, Grace Dumont's hair was much lighter and auburn in color – perhaps a trait from another side of the family. It was short, slightly windblown and cut similar to a man's style where frequent trips to a beauty shop wouldn't be necessary. She had a small but distinctive face that was glaring at me and exhibiting no sign of friendship or emotion. However, unlike her sisters, she was dressed in a manner that permitted the viewer a better evaluation of what might be underneath the disguise of clothes and personality – if you understand what I mean.

“Yes...I am Carson Reno. Cheese said you wanted to have a word with me.”

Grace was very attractive, in an unusual way. Unusual because she didn't seem to have the need to prove it with dress and appearance, what you saw was what you got. I liked that. But, like her sister Marion, she brought a strong presence to the room and I'm sure was a woman accustomed to getting her way.

“Would you like a drink?” She tossed her cigarette in the fireplace and walked to a small portable bar parked in the corner. “It seems to be a good day for it.”

“No...no thank you,” I said hurriedly, but without moving from my spot near the door. “Your father and I had several; actually more than several.”

“Nonsense, you're a big boy.” She turned to the bar, picked up a prepared drink and walked to where I was standing. “I had Cheese make this for you while we were waiting.”

I took the glass and also took a closer look at Grace Dumont. In addition to being confident, she was also a beautiful woman. Her flawless complexion had just the right touch of tan, showing that she enjoyed the outdoor life – the sunlight rather than the artificial light. A hint of perfume tickled my nose when she got close, but it was pleasant and not distracting.

Finally showing a smile, she grabbed my arm and pulled me nearer the fireplace. “Relax Mr. Reno and come join me for a minute. I don't bite – unless it seems to be the appropriate thing to do.”

We stopped near a long couch that faced the roaring fire and she turned to face me again. "Don't you just love the snow? I've been riding in it all afternoon and the thrill is exciting. Have you ever ridden a horse in the snow?"

"Not that I recall," I answered casually. Actually I'd never ridden a horse in the sunshine, much less the snow! "I'm a summer person and prefer the outdoors when I can see the grass and the trees don't seem so naked."

"Naked," she snickered, before sitting down on the edge of the couch. "Have you met my sisters?"

"Yes, I have met them both."

"And Scarlett?" she chuckled. "You know Scarlett?"

"Yes, I have met both your sisters." I answered, not knowing why I was being questioned.

"Are you...are you and Scarlett close friends?"

"I met your sister Scarlett for the first time this afternoon in my office; she asked me to come visit with your grandfather. I met your sister Marion in the den about an hour ago. Before that I had never met any of your family. Why do you ask?"

She sat down and patted the couch cushion next to her. "Please sit with me for a minute; I'd like to know what you and granddaddy discussed."

"I can't tell you that." I put my drink on the nearby coffee table and followed orders, I sat down.

"Well, you don't have to tell me because I know what you discussed – my missing stepmother, Stella."

I didn't respond.

"And you also discussed my dead step-mother; Amelia. I know granddaddy would have told you about that."

I looked at Grace, but didn't respond.

'Okay, murdered if that's the word you want – but I know he told you about what happened.'

'Yes, we did talk about your step-mother. I know that must have been a difficult time for you.'

'Yeah, it was difficult for everyone, but we were working through it until daddy brought the 'bitch' home. That changed everything.'

'I take it you don't care for your stepmother, Stella?'

'Don't care for her? I guess you could put it that way. But what you really need to hear is that she's a bitch, a liar and a thief.' That was the second time today I'd heard those words used about Stella Morris Dumont.

'What did she lie about or steal?'

Grace shifted herself on the couch. 'She lies when it suits her or when it helps her get her way. And, in addition to stealing my father, my mother's place in this house and my happiness, she stole my mother's jewelry.'

'How do you know she stole jewelry?'

That question upset Grace, and she stood up before answering. 'Because it's missing and I'd didn't invite you in here to ask me questions!'

'But at some point I may need to ask questions, and the reason for you accusing Stella of stealing might be one of them. I hope you understand that.'

'Look, Mr. Reno, I know granddaddy has hired you to find Stella - to find her and prove that my father had nothing to do with her sudden disappearance. He probably had something to do with her leaving, and I hope he did, but he hasn't harmed her – I know that. She's run off just to upset everybody, that's what makes her happy, that's what makes her tick – upsetting this family.'

“Hmm,” I mumbled.

“She’s gone and everybody’s pleased about that. But I want you to know that my father has not harmed her in any way. He may have thrown her out, and that’s what should have happened. But, if she’s been harmed he isn’t responsible.”

That was an interesting comment and I just left it alone.

“Do you know where I might be able to find her?” I asked slowly.

“No...no and I don’t care where the bitch is. And when you find her tell her she’s not welcome here anymore. I’m glad she’s gone and don’t want her back in this house. Nobody does.” Grace walked to the bar, fumbled for another cigarette before lighting it and then pouring herself more wine. Then she turned to face me and gave a look that told me this meeting was over.

“You can go now,” Grace said before turning away. I had been dismissed.

“I’ll be in touch.” I stood, walked across the room and glanced back at Grace before opening the door. She was staring at the fire and ignoring me.

~

Cheese was conveniently waiting outside the library door; he always seemed to be ‘conveniently’ waiting somewhere.

“This way Mr. Reno,” he said before stepping onto the long and steep stairway.

I followed and it seemed we would never reach the landing, which was about fifty feet above the main floor. Cheese led me to a room with an open door and we paused while a maid dressed in a white uniform shuttled out of the room, past us and then down the long stairway.

"I believe your room is ready," he said, handing me my jacket and remaining in the hallway. "Do you require anything else?"

"No...no, I will be fine. Thanks for everything and have a pleasant night."

Cheese turned and left without speaking.

The room was large, considerably larger than my whole apartment. A king size bed sat along one wall and an equally king size dresser along another. The far wall was mostly glass (much like the comfortable room downstairs) and covered with drapes that were partially open. A small couch rested in front of the corner fireplace, which was glowing with a fresh fire - ample wood had been placed on the hearth for refreshing when required. Another door was in the other corner of the room and partially open, I presumed it led to the bath and was just about to check it out when there was a slight tap on my door. Cheese entered without being invited.

"When he was younger Mr. Dumont always enjoyed a nightcap and cigar before retiring, I thought you might like one as well."

Cheese was carrying a small tray containing a fresh Jack Daniel's and coke and a Fuente cigar. He sat the tray on the dresser.

"Are you a mind reader too?"

"Beg your pardon?" His face wrinkled with the question.

"Never mind, but can you tell me what's out there?" I pulled back the curtains, exposing the frosted window and pointed.

"Beyond the terrace garden and behind a small wooded area is the garage where Mr. Dumont's automobiles are kept. There is also living quarters for the chauffeur and stable manager above the garage. A barn, horse stables and riding rink are about a quarter mile from the garage - that's where Miss Grace keeps her horses. Why do you ask?"

“I just imagined it a beautiful view when the weather wasn’t interrupting, and I was also curious about where everyone parked. I saw no other cars when I arrived.”

“Would you like for me to have your car moved to the garage for the night? I’m sure there is plenty of room.”

“No...no that’s fine. I’ll be leaving early in the morning and wouldn’t want to interrupt anyone’s schedule.”

“I assure you there won’t be a problem,” he insisted.

“No, my car will be fine where it is. It’s accustomed to being in the weather, I wouldn’t want to spoil it,” I smiled. Actually I wanted my car where I could find it if necessary – not hidden away in a garage that I didn’t know existed. I certainly didn’t expect to need a car this evening, but I also hadn’t expected to be spending the night in Olive Branch, Mississippi either.

“Very well,” Cheese huffed. “Will you be joining us downstairs for breakfast in the morning or should I have something sent up?”

“Neither,” I answered, turning to stare out the frost and snow covered window. “I’ll be leaving for Memphis early.”

“Very well,” Cheese repeated as he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

~



I was wondering to myself exactly what ‘early’ was around the Dumont household, as I tasted my drink and stared out into the darkness beyond my bedroom window. I was about to light the cigar when there was another slight tap on my door.

Assuming Cheese had forgotten to tell me something important, I thought nothing of it. That was a mistake.

“Come in,” I said quietly before glancing at the open door. It was Scarlett Dumont and she was dressed...or rather undressed for bed!

Slowly closing the door behind her, she stood and stared at me without speaking for a moment – giving me time to catch my breath.

The short black hair now had large curls which seemed to be everywhere, reminding me of a child’s doll I had once seen in a department store. Her beautiful face was absent make-up and there was no glowing red lipstick as a distraction. In this ‘raw’ form it was easy to see that Scarlett Dumont was a very attractive and very YOUNG woman – her dress and appearance at our first meeting had been a disguise, and I’m sure she used it often.

“What...what are you doing here?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“I knew you would come to see me...I just knew it.” Scarlett ran across the room and threw her arms around me. “I knew when I left your office today you would be coming to see me...I just knew it.”

“Wait a minute!” I said louder than necessary. “I came to meet with your grandfather – you delivered the message. Where did you get the idea...?” I managed to push her away...slightly.

“I know you came to see granddaddy, but you also came to see me too. I knew you would come...I just knew it,” she said again.

“Scarlett you need to leave.” I put my outstretched arm between us and tried to not touch anything sensitive. I’m not sure I was successful in my mission, but she definitely didn’t like the outstretched arm.

“Why? Why should I leave? I don’t want to leave.” She turned away and took a couple of steps toward the bed. Her sweet smile had turned sour and I was now seeing a darker side of Scarlett Dumont. “Don’t you like me? Am I not pretty enough? Am I not pretty like your other girlfriends?”

“Yes...yes Scarlett you are very beautiful and I like you very much. Just...just not in the way you’re thinking. It wouldn’t be appropriate if someone found you here...here in my bedroom. Especially...well especially the way you’re dressed.”

“You don’t like the way I’m dressed?” She reached for the little string that was keeping the ‘little’ thing she was wearing from falling to the floor. “I can fix that.”

“No...no...no don’t do that – please. What would someone think...”

“Damn someone...damn everyone,” she was getting louder. “I’ll do as I please and dress how I want to dress or not dress at all.” Fortunately she had not pulled the little string...yet.

“That’s fine Scarlett, just not now and not tonight. Please, do that for me. I’m a guest of your grandfather and...well, it just wouldn’t be right.”

“But this is my home too! I do what I want in my own home. Don’t you? I guess I’ll just come to your house and see for myself. Is that what you want?” She took a couple of steps in my direction.

I was walking myself down a rat hole and wondering if I was going to be able to find a way out.

“You’re a beautiful girl and I’m sure lots of boys are just dying for your attention.”

“Boys...that’s what they are...just boys, and I am not a girl! I am a woman.” Without warning she threw her arms around my neck again. “But you’re not a boy, you’re a man and I like men.”

I pushed her away and backed up. “Scarlett you need to leave and you need to leave now. Don’t make me throw you out - that just wouldn’t look right.”

“So who’s looking?” She took another step toward me – I took another step back. However, I was running out of room to retreat.

“Scarlett you need to leave and you need to leave now,” I repeated.

Scarlett stopped her advance, gave me a VERY nasty look, then stomped to the door and turned around. “Bastard,” she shouted before opening the door and then slamming it hard, making a noise loud enough to wake up anybody who wasn’t deaf or dead! And I’m sure some of the china in the downstairs kitchen rattled from the impact. Miss Scarlett Dumont had a temper, and it showed when she didn’t get her way.

Staring at the door and sipping on my Jack and Coke, I was disappointed in myself for allowing that to happen – I knew better. She was a beautiful woman with an odd outlook on men, on life and she had a violent temper. I can’t say that I hadn’t been warned about Scarlett or at least about the men part anyway.

Scarlett had left my room, but the aroma of her perfume and the memory of her visit hadn’t...it was nice.

~

I finally lit my cigar, sipped my drink and sat down in front of the fire to analyze the day.

The most significant thing I got from my conversation with Matthew Dumont was his determined effort to defend his son, Brigham. It was obvious that their relationship was strained, and I wondered why he took that position. Mr. Matthew Dumont didn’t impress me as a man who would accept inferior performance even from his own son.

While I saw a remarkable resemblance in the granddaughters, there was something really different between Scarlett and the other two. It went beyond her strange behavior and sexual permissiveness. She lacked the poise and presence I had seen with Grace and Marion, and perhaps used her behavior to make up for it. However, there was something else...something I just couldn’t put my finger on.

My new friendship with Cicero Grimes was an interesting one, especially considering his knowledge of the serial killings that apparently took the life of Amelia Dumont. I would talk to him again if things didn't go as planned. Her murder had nothing to do with the assignment from Matthew Dumont, but for some reason I just could not get it out of my mind.

Search for Stella would be easy and routine. Unless she had left the country, we would easily find her and report that information back to Matthew Dumont. How the family handled it from there would be their business, I didn't care.

However, for some reason I had the strange feeling that this was a can of worms that this investigation would be opening. A can that might be better left closed.

I finished my drink, my cigar and went to bed. The lingering smell of Scarlett's perfume would make the coming of sleep more difficult – I needed to put that incident behind me.

~

Cheese was standing at the foot of the stairs holding a tray with a cup of coffee sitting on it. "Coffee black, I believe is your preference. Did you rest well?" he asked, handing me the cup.

I just wonder if he had heard the late night yelling and door slamming. Hell...he was probably just down the hall watching to see what happened. I doubt that very little, if anything went on in this house without his knowledge.

"Yes I slept well; thanks for the coffee."



We walked to the large front door before Cheese turned, retrieved a medium sized brown envelope from somewhere in his uniform and handed it to me.

“Mr. Reno, I have no idea what’s in this envelope. But Ms. Stella told me that I should give it to authorities if anything were to happen to her. I don’t know if anything has happened, but I know she’s missing and believe you would be the best person to open it.”

Without comment I took the envelope, handed him my empty coffee cup, put on my coat and walked out the front door into the snow. Cheese closed the door behind me.

~

You’re right, I couldn’t stand the curiosity!

The Ford started easily, and after clearing gathered snow from my windshield, I drove out the circle driveway and then down the narrow road - away from the Dumont home and away from the strange people who lived there.

The same snow covered guard stopped me a few thousand yards from the house and I offered a smile and no conversation while watching him open the giant gate. He still appeared to be standing in the weather without shelter.

Finally passing the guard, who waved from the middle of the snowy roadway, I stopped on the roadside and opened the envelope Cheese had handed me. I wasn’t going to leave without knowing what was in it.

It contained two wire tapes (recordings). Neither had a note or label about what was on the recording, but I recognized them as the type used by dictation equipment.



This should really make Marcie happy! The hotel had recently furnished dictating machines for all secretaries to use with their work, so I knew we had equipment to play the tapes. But, Marcie refused to use it and sent hers back down to the storeroom with a note attached: **PLEASE DESTROY!** Marcie did not like or use a dictation machine.



<http://www.carsonrenomysteryseries.com>

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