

The Rococo Paradox

By Frederick Louis Richardson

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BEHIND the .38 Special aimed squarely at Frank Rococo, a hard silhouette took on the softer contours of a bright blonde with a vein of darkness, her skin veiled with dark cashmere. She had grown tall in stiletto heels over the dying Reba Dickerson, nearly at peace beside her dog's warm cadaver. "Isn't this just a little too precious?" Icy Steals scoffed. "I shouldn't have to say a word. Should I, Frank?"

Rococo leered at the hunger of this starving lioness on the prowl. "Icy, somebody poisoned my dog with contaminated glucosamine. Have any thoughts about who that might be?"

"Not everybody's a dog lover, Frank. You feed them, walk them around, you collect their poop...not much there to love."

"Ashley handed you the bottle of glucosamine so I could see it."

"But it doesn't mean I killed your dog, does it?"

"I know you killed Judge Lattisaw, and I didn't see that."

An acid giggle widened the steely blue opals of her nervous eyes. "Your gut is guessing. I can tell."

"I'm guessing this is what Ashley meant when she said you were always going to be *in the zone* when some really weird stuff is going down. Rosella didn't witness Mejia killing Judge Lattisaw. My gut says she became the judge's housekeeper the way she became mine. Then you met the judge in the same way you met me. Lattisaw was a sexual freak for young boys—and girls. He asked you to watch him have sex with Rosella. I only say that because Ashley told me how you like *to watch*."

"I could beat the snot out of her for telling you that. But I won't have to, because Ashley's dead—an overdose of painkillers mixed with alcohol. Prescription drugs pretty much ruled her life. How do you forgive human nature, Frank? Do we have choice?"

"So you must be in mourning—the reason you're wearing all black. I almost mistook you for a *ninja*. Been on any rooftops lately?"

"I have a fear of heights."

"Did you stop by to take me out...or to *take me out*?"

"And kill the father of my child? Not on your life."

"Icy, there's little pleasure in using a condom and no protection without one. But without sex any pleasure at all is absolutely impossible—so are the chances of making a baby."

"You thought Sonja was flushing your condoms, didn't you? Frank, when you trust someone, you must verify. A love-glove is not 100% effective except for carrying man-milk, if it's tight enough. They me ask

if I would get pregnant with your sperm. I told them I was down with it. Anyways, it's happening. I'm going to have your baby, Frank! Isn't that really bizarre and amazing?"

"Then you came here to kill Reba—and this shit about a baby is a way to fuck with my mind."

"No! It's to continue the bloodline—did I do right? You're good at solving riddles so here's one: If you used a condom, which you did, but *I'm* the one pregnant, which I am, where's your protection?"

"It's standing right behind you, honey." Leo's worn lungs rattled like rusted pipes, followed by the sound of a wet pop and electric sting that folded Icy like a cheap lawn chair, collapsing to the floor.

Sitting flat on her butt, fingers glowed bright with blood. "*Ouch!*"

"See what you made me do?" Leo held a .357 Magnum automatic, scooping up her orphaned revolver. "You're not mad about this, are you? Want to hear a joke? It might help deaden the pain."

"Cocksucker!"

"Okay, so you don't want to hear a joke. Frankie, who is she?"

"Icy Steals." Two fingers feeling for Reba's pulse, Frank gently stroked this fallen bird lying still in silent grace.

Leo directed a severe gaze at his son. "*Icy*...that blonde you told me about, the one you wanted to share your life with?"

"Well, she's, uh..."

"Frankie, I won't always be around to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, so next time keep your eye on the doughnut and not on the hole. Think you can do that? Bringing this shit into your house like this...squatting where you eat..." He grunted his disapproval.

Icy emitted a dreadful scream. "Where did you put the bullet?"

"I aimed for your spinal cord. You must have moved." Leo rubbed the bloody threads of her cashmere. "The bullet's in your liver. Seriously, you're not really pissed about this, are you?"

"*Fucker*—you killed me!"

"What, you want to live forever?"

"*Shit!*"

"To tell the truth, you should be more worried about this sweater. It's not cashmere, is it? I'm pretty sure it's going to stain."

"Oh my God, I'm going to die..."

"Calm the fuck down; you're not going anywhere."

"It *hurts*." Icy screamed. "You murdered me!"

"We covered that. What else is on your mind?"

“I hate you!”

“You’ve got to be a little more laid-back about this. Okay, look, I was kidding. The bullet went in the middle there, somewhere—in and out. It’s a *boo-boo*. So...you’re going to have my grandchild? Now it could be anything but, boy or girl, it’s guaranteed to be an asshole.”

Frank pulled his father aside.

“They sent her here to take care of Reba.”

Casting his eyes on the corpse in the doorway, Leo bemoaned. “That one I liked. Why her?”

“Reba’s with the CIA.”

“Then who’s this one?”

“She’s one of Herzog’s assassins.”

“Frankie, a normal person wouldn’t have these kinds of answers.”

“Dad, do I need to worry about you?”

“Wait until you have to change out my colostomy bag someday. Then you’ll have something to worry about. Relax, son, I’m an old man—a train wreck.”

“And these people are going to leave you alone because you’re an old man—where’s the logic?”

“How’d you think I got to be an old man? Son, who you can count on counts for everything. They blew up the boat, you didn’t call.”

“I didn’t want to worry you—how’s Pittsburgh?”

“It’s still there. I heard the news about Gerry. This why you’re worried about me? I need to use the head.” Leo retreated into the bathroom. “I only need to piss, but this is going to take a while.”

Frank stooped to face Icy clenching cashmere and a fistful of blood. “I’m thinking this is not your happy face.” She looked pale and dreadful. “But I have a few questions. Who killed Sooty Settles?”

Icy huffed with tortured breath. “Call 911....”

“We’ll see. Who killed Settles?”

“Don’t know. It *burns*. Call! Can you do that?”

“Not until you tell me...where’s PEEPS?”

“It’s nowhere; it’s Omar. Goddamn it, motherfucker, *call*.”

“Otto Jett has multiple killers. Who’s *Ola*? Are you the Rabbit?”

She sneered at him. “Do I look like a freaking *rabbit*?”

“No, Icy, right now you look like an organ donor.”