



PROLOGUE

Mansions, even those built in modern times, have an eerie quality at night. Large acreage,

with high rock walls cutting out the sounds and sights of the city's activities create a silence that increase old images of horror and evil beings.

Del walked briskly by the north side of Howardton Place, his senses alert to the preconceived notion of mansions, trying to bring those feelings in tune with the time and place. Shadows from shrubs and trees made patterns on his white terry cloth robe and the belt, hanging to each side, brushed his legs with an unusual sensation of dread.

He thought he heard a noise and looked around, then up. Some forty feet above his head he thought he saw movement, which brought him to a halt just as he saw a large object hurtling down toward him. He had the impression it was a gargoyle. That was the impression and with it the wish he had left after the wedding. Next came the thud, which shook the ground. Then there was silence.

I

An involuntary shudder ran through Professor Del Channing's frame surrounding a crazy, eerie feeling in the pit of his stomach. Surely I'm not this averse to marriage, he thought. He strode with purpose along the broad walkways of Howardton Place, an estate in the Highland Park area of Dallas, Texas. His blond hair was a little longer than current fashion, his tall frame carrying well the black tuxedo he wore. As he glanced down he watched the sun reflect off his patent leather shoes and saw the sharp creases of his tux pants.

"Del," Bif called.

Bif stood on the top step leading into the sun room where the wedding ceremony would be performed. His stocky frame filled with nervous

energy. From the oppressive heat, beads of perspiration stood out on his broad face.

“You’re late. I’ve been afraid you’d miss your best man duties,” he said.

“Sorry, I got caught up with Professor Yarrington and lost track of the time,” Del said.

“Vern’s nervous. Try to calm him down,” Bif said.

Bif’s red hair stood at attention and his round, freckled face frowned from the stress of the unfamiliar duties, as he led Del down the aisle.

Del followed Bif’s broad back to the end of the long, narrow room where a flowered bower accentuated the spot where the minister stood. He noted how short Bif’s hair had been cut, making his features remarkably neat.

Bif, in his capacity as an usher, gestured at Del to stand beside the bride groom.

“Vern,” Del said quietly. He clapped his old roommate on the shoulder and smiled, showing a row of white, gleaming teeth.

“Don’t look so relaxed, Del,” Vern said. “You make me look like a nervous nerd.”

“Sorry old man,” Del said.

He tried to control the exhilarated feeling he still had from his discussion with his old mentor Professor Yarrington.

Vern, looking as anxious as he used to look on test days, buttoned and unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket. As his dark horn-rimmed glasses slid off the bridge of his thin nose, he kept pushing them back into place with a shaking index finger. His dark eyes, behind the glasses, shifting restlessly from the minister to the guests and back again.

“Here,” Vern said. He nudged Del’s ribs to get his attention, then handed him the wedding ring.

Del sobered, holding the elaborate diamond encrusted ring in the palm of his hand, his gaze, full of questions, raised to meet Vern’s.

Vern looked defensive and turned away.

Vern Gooding, BS, MS, PHD in the field of agronomy had struggled through his schooling at great effort to keep his tuition paid and the wolf away from the door, only to turn to his one and only love, painting, when his mother passed away. ‘Academics were to please her,’ he once said. ‘Only to please her.’

Having failed miserably at painting he had gone to work in a research lab for a large conglomerate and started a small lawn care

business on the side. Last night, at the bachelor dinner, he had seemed happy with his work, but uncomfortable with his role as future husband to an oil heiress.

Del looked down the length of the room. Most of the seats were filled and the lady guests were dressed in pastel finery. The older women in gloves matching their dresses, and in large hats befitting the daytime reception which would be held immediately after the service.

He wondered, not for the first time since he arrived in Dallas, how much money was concentrated in those “friends of the bride” who attended the groom’s dinner. Judging from those sitting on the “bride’s side” of the room who were arrayed in what appeared to him expensive apparel, costing more than he would see in a New York minute, Del chuckled to himself, or even a Massachusetts mile, he thought.

He, along with the crowd, turned to face the back of the room when the organ began to play the bridal march. First appeared a young woman of about twenty-five, wearing a sleek periwinkle satin dress. She was petite, with a mass of auburn hair pulled back from her face and accentuated with white and blue flowers on each side. She

carried a nosegay of white roses with a fluff of blue netting puffed around them.

Del looked at Vern with interest. His look of appreciation for the bridesmaid was too great for a man on his wedding day.

“Cat’s daughter, Valorie,” Vern whispered.

Del nodded, feeling as though he were reading a text book, not realizing that a couple of pages were stuck together, therefore not giving him enough information to make sense of the material being presented.

Next came the bride, Catherine Howardton. She wore an elaborate gown of ice blue satin, with a long train, the bodice covered with individually sewn seed pearls. A bouffant veil covered her face. Del could see long raven hair and an appealing, though stocky, figure. Again, the bride did not look like someone Vern would ever meet, let alone propose to.

The bride walked down the aisle with a gentleman appearing to be in his late sixties. A distinguished mop of grey hair, tanned complexion and a faint frown, emanating more from his demeanor than from facial lines, bespoke a grim countenance. He was not comfortable with the affair, or maybe it was the

union. His eyes never raised to meet those of the minister or the groom. When the bride had taken the hand offered by Vern and had stepped toward the minister, he stepped back, taking a front row seat on the aisle next to a dumpy-figured woman in a brown dress and white gloves, his eyes still averted.

Del was surprised that for such a lavish affair there were only three in the party who had made their way slowly down the aisle.

“Dearly beloved,” the minister’s voice intoned.

Del went back to watching as a disinterested bystander, his view was of the bride and groom along with that of the maid of honor. She stood stiffly to the left of the bride, her eyes narrowed to slits. He also noticed a woman approximately his own age, dressed in a stylish cream suit, sitting on the front row, left side, next to the woman in brown. She too had auburn hair and her quiet countenance reminded him of Marva.

“I d -- d -- do,” Vern stuttered.

Del was brought abruptly back to the ceremony realizing that he must give the ring to Vern. Then the minister suggested that Vern kiss his bride. He watched as the bride lifted her

veil and raised her face to receive the kiss. Vern glanced around, looking to Del like a trapped animal. He then planted a kiss somewhere in the vicinity of the bride's nose and turning, stepped to Del and gave him a bear hug.

“What do I do now?” he whispered nervously.

“Escort your bride out of this room over to the reception area,” Del said quietly.

He turned Vern around, then smiled at the bride.

“I'm Del Channing. May I wish you happiness.”

He held out his hand, but the bride strained on tiptoe to place a firm kiss on his lips.

“My name's Cat, and I'm glad to finally meet you.”

The wedding march began and Vern led Catherine down the aisle and out of the room, crossing the wide lawn to the south.

Del followed, and as per his prearrangement, stopped at the edge of the lawn to wait for Bif.

“My, aren't you the handsome one,” a voice said in his ear.

Del looked down at the woman who had entwined her arm in his. Her deep violet eyes peered up at him from black mascaraed lashes. Her ivory complexion was surrounded by auburn locks, her sleek figure adorned with a handsome satin suit the color of lilacs.

“I’m Violet Howardton. I was named for the color of my eyes, but you may call me Vi. I’m sister-in-law to the bride,” she said.

Del nodded, smiling shyly.

“Isn’t this just the most elegant party you’ve ever attended? I so love elaborate affairs, don’t you?” she asked.

“Mm,” Del said.

“Too bad it has to be spoiled by that horrid blue dress of Cat’s. She wanted to wear white, can you imagine?” she asked.

“Mm,” Del said.

He looked back toward the sun room, hoping to see Bif coming.

“No one, I mean absolutely no one, wears white on a second marriage. Cream, maybe, but never white,” she said.

Vi smiled up at Del, tightening her hold on his arm.

“I read a book not long ago where the heroine rebelled at tradition and wore red. I said to Cat, ‘You’re just like the heroine, Jezebel. All you ever do is rebel at tradition so you may as well dress the part. She said, ‘If that’s what you want I’ll play your Jezebel game and wear red’. But she, thank heavens, didn’t. She picked that ghastly blue job.”

“Mm,” Del said.

He glanced around again looking for Bif and saw him coming out the sun room door.

“How old is Vern?” Vi asked.

“Er -- hovering in his late thirties,” Del said.

Violet shrugged and smiled coyly. “Cat’s been hovering around her late thirties for the last twenty years,” she said.

Bif walked up.

“Del may I see you for a moment?” he said.

“Er -- yes. Ms. Howardton, Mr. Fredrickson,” Del said.

“Oh, another strong, handsome one,” Violet said. “I’ll see you both later.”

Vi moved hesitantly away and Del breathed a sigh of relief.

“Glad that’s over,” Bif said.

“Do you mean Violet, or the ceremony?” Del said.

“The ceremony.”

Del saw worry lines on Bif’s forehead.

“Not a happy ceremony,” Bif said.

“You noticed that too, did you? I thought it was me -- that I’d acquired a strong aversion to the institution of marriage,” Del said.

They wandered through the intense heat, over the formal lawn and onto a long terrace. Following the crowd, they entered a lanai. They immediately felt relief from the outside heat by a blast of cold, refrigerated air. Through the central door of the lanai they walked into a large hallway running the length of the mansion, there they found tables laden with finger food. Further on down the hall another table groaned under the weight of a huge, elaborate wedding cake. On top, the small bride and groom appeared to be a replica of the newlyweds; the bride in a pale blue gown with a bodice of seed pearls. In a room off the hall an orchestra played popular dance music.

A waiter passed by with a tray of champagne allowing both men to take a glass.

“To marital bliss,” Bif said.

He raised his glass and clicked the rim of Del’s.

“To bachelorhood,” Del said smiling.

He reached out taking a puff pastry from a tray being passed among the group.

“Hells Bells, Del, you’d think that by our age we’d have settled down.”

“What do you mean, settled down?” Del said chuckling. “As a musty old professor of global history, if I get any more settled I’ll be history.”

“I meant in our private lives,” Bif said.

“Been there, done that,” Del said dryly.

Another waiter passed by. Del took another canapé and popped it into his mouth.

“Only once,” Bif said.

“Two less than you,” Del said teasing.

“You love to rub that in, don’t you?”

“Not really. I just like to remind myself of the pitfalls. One ‘Jacqueline’ was enough for me,” Del said.

“What you should have done is marry Marva when you had the chance,” Bif said lightly.

A waiter with a bottle of champagne stopped by to top off their drinks.

“Tell me about it,” Del said sadly.

He thought of Marva, a calm quiet personality who had been his lifeline to sanity through the rigors of University life. The plans they’d made. The separation while he got his Masters at Yale and his PHD at Cornell. Then he’d met Jacqueline and before he could blink he was married. Before he could blink again he was divorced. Too many years had gone by before his father’s tragic death brought him back to San Francisco and he had found Marva again only to learn she was married.

“Sorry Del. I didn’t mean it to hurt,” Bif said.

“Hurt?” Del asked.

“Yeah. You’ve never had a good poker face,” Bif said quietly.

Del shifted from one foot to another, then suggested, even though they knew no one, they should walk among the wedding guests.

“We can smile a lot and help Vern with a little PR,” he said.

As they strolled among the guests, Del saw the man who had given Cat away, talking

agitatedly with the woman in the brown dress. Her grey hair showing signs of having been flaming red in her youth.

When they arrived beside the food table Del's attention was drawn to the bride talking with a large group of friends and Vern standing alone, down by the table which held the wedding cake, with both champagne glass and bottle in hand.

“What's wrong with this picture?” Del asked.

“The groom, who doesn't drink, is getting drunk,” Bif said.

“And the bride's lovely smile has yet to reach her eyes,” Del said.

Del watched as a waiter came up to the bride, whispering in her ear. He saw her make her apologies and head for a room at the far end of the grand hall. He also noted that Vern was too absorbed in his champagne to notice.

“Let's get a plate of food,” Bif said. “I don't know about you, but I'm famished.”

The two men loaded their plates with the various delicacies and headed for a pair of empty chairs out on the lanai. They sat eating, quietly talking, and watching the milling guests.

Suddenly, from behind them at the far end of the terrace, they heard a scream. One of horror, then another verging on panic. Both men were on their feet and running toward the noise. As they reached an open door, one of the wait staff came out wild-eyed and still screaming.

They entered the room and stood transfixed by what greeted them. This room was viewed by the family as the Safari room, housing memorabilia from Cat's many worldwide hunting trips. The walls were lined with trophy heads of animals, and of warriors shields and spears. On the wall across from the door, pinned securely by a spear thrust through her throat, hung the bride. Her blood had spurted out, running down her elaborate dress, staining it red.

There was a collective gasp from those who rushed to follow Del and Bif. From Del's perspective, the world turned into a slow motion adaption of Dante's Inferno. A couple pushed past him, then stopped as if struck dumb. The woman fainted. The man, with his hand over his mouth, struggled with another guest, eyes bulging, face white, to get the woman away from the door. The man who had given Cat away at the ceremony, turned to a potted plant just outside the door and lost his champagne and finger food.

The sensation seekers pushed forward with the wide-eyed anticipation of a thrill.

Del was aware that Bif was attempting to control the jostling, hysterical crowd of guests collecting by the door and managing to keep them out of the Safari room.

Violet had managed to wriggle her way through the throng and now stood in between Bif and Del. “How awful” she shrieked. “Red just isn’t her color.”

She threw herself at Del wrapping her arms tightly around, him and began to moan.

He patted her shoulder, trying to calm her hysteria. He, himself, could find no voice to utter condolences. He feared if he opened his mouth all he could utter would be an agonized scream for he knew the feeling of terror. This wasn’t the bride’s doing. Someone else had made her the Jezebel bride.