

FAIR WARNING

by Dennis Lawson

I was down in Rehoboth Beach, at Old Man Dino's beach house for one of his summertime poker games, when I saw her. She walked into the dining room where a little bar was set up, just as this old tough named Dick Henderson was pouring me a glass of whiskey. She was dressed plainly: black tank top, denim shorts, and black canvas sneakers, but she was as tall and gorgeous as I remembered her. Even more so, with her deep tan and her blond hair all pushed up and off her kissable neck. I recognized her right away—even though she was a brunette when I knew her—but she didn't seem to notice me. She grabbed the Hendrick's gin off the bar, mixed a Tom Collins, and walked away with the drink.

Dick noticed me watching her. "You know her?" he asked.

Dick was one of the most dangerous people I knew, so I tried to never give him much. "She looked familiar for a second." I took a sip of my drink. Dick's light blue eyes weren't easy to meet. "But maybe I was just fantasizing."

"I'd maybe fantasize about someone else. She's the boss's girl while his family is away."

"She's not dressed like I'd expect."

"She's also a gun." He pulled a pack of cigarettes out and jammed one in my mouth.

"Now stop talking about her."

The card table was set up in the living room. Mr. Dino was there, along with four other guys—two white-haired gents around his age, another who was probably mid-thirties like me, and then a young twenty-something who was about as young as I was when I first started the life.

I'd been out of it for a while now; I was set up in a legitimate business in Dover. It was a jewelry store and watch shop, if you want to know. But I still occasionally got called on to do a job.

The place wasn't decorated the way you'd expect a beach house to be. You know, like fish nets and surf stuff. Instead, it was more what I'd call Italian-grandmother décor: Mediterranean landscapes, family photos from various decades, and enough religious knick-knacks to make weaker souls repent.

Dick sat on a chair in the corner, smoking and reading a paper. The woman wasn't around. Actually, that's not right. I'm sure she was around—she was just staying out of sight.

Mr. Dino was sipping the Tom Collins. It took all my willpower to keep the jealousy off my face and to lose my money with a smile.

When I got up around an hour into the game to refresh my whiskey, Mr. Dino joined me in the dining room.

"Dick tells me you know Amanda," he said.

That wasn't the name I knew.

"I don't think so, Mr. Dino."

"Phil, you've always been honest with me."

"I was just checking her out. Apologies for that. She reminded me of someone, that's all."

"Who?"

"Just a girl who worked at a club in Philly."

He laughed softly and patted my back. "Nah, couldn't be her, then. Amanda's not from around here."

Yeah, I knew that.

Mr. Dino's beach house was on Virginia Avenue, a short hop from the boardwalk. When I got the invitation to join him for a poker game, I decided to make a little vacation of it. I had spent the afternoon swimming and getting some sun, and had a surfing lesson the next day. The poker game wrapped up at around ten—one of the old guys cleaned up—and Mr. Dino was pretty drunk and sleepy by then. He didn't give me a hard time about "Amanda" when I said goodbye—didn't even mention her. Same thing with Dick—he said there was a new girl in his life, and he might drop by my store sometime to buy her something. And Amanda, well I had been hoping all night for another glimpse of her, but it never came.

That is, not until I was walking down First Street in the direction of Rehoboth Avenue—and she poked a gun in my side.

"I'd like to have a chat," she said. "Where you gonna be tonight?"

"Nice to see you," I said.

"I don't have time for this. Just tell me."

"I'll be at the Frogg Pond, and then my motel room." No need to draw my gun. Besides, I was dying of curiosity. And I didn't think she'd kill me. At least I hoped she wouldn't.

"Which motel?"

"Crosswinds. Room two twenty-three. What are your plans for the evening, Helen?"

"Don't screw with me, Phil." She headed down a side street and disappeared.

The Frogg Pond is this great little hangout just off Rehoboth Avenue on First Street. It's the best place for karaoke among all the beach bars in southern Delaware. At least, in my opinion. I was sitting at the bar, nursing a Dogfish Head Namaste, thinking about Helen, and watching a group of women do a more than passable job of "Country Roads." When they finished, the DJ—a short, beautiful, bouncy brunette—said that the next singer up was

“Amanda.” And then, there was Helen, taking the microphone, as the opening strains of Alanis Morissette’s “You Oughta Know” came through.

I had no idea she was there with me. She’s always been like that—it’s part of why she’s so good at what she does.

She killed it on the Alanis song. The crowd loved her.

When the song ended, she walked away to a ton of applause and joined me at the bar. She asked the bartender for a tumbler of Wild Turkey whiskey, neat, and a water on the side.

She got her drinks and we sat quietly for a minute, while this young guy belted out “When Doves Cry.” It seemed like every woman in the place except Helen got up to dance. Prince does it every time.

“I’d love to catch up,” Helen said. “But we have to talk business.”

I took a sip of beer. “Go ahead.”

She tasted her Wild Turkey. “Dick Henderson killed my brother. Six years ago.”

I could feel my eyebrows rising. “Was he…”

“He wasn’t innocent, no,” she said, interrupting. “He was part of a gambling ring in New Jersey. His boss ran afoul of your man Dino. But Dick executed seven other guys who happened to be in his place of business at the time. Including Chuck.”

I wasn’t going to offer an opinion. I didn’t really have one.

“I’m not naïve,” she said. “Fair is fair. I just happen to think that what I’m going to give Dick is fair, too.”

“So you worked your way into the inside for the chance to smoke him. Why tell me all this?”

She took another sip of her Wild Turkey, but this time half the liquid disappeared. “Dick isn’t an easy guy to find. Getting involved with Mr. Dino was the only way I saw to get close to him. I don’t want to talk about the things I’ve had to do. But tonight it should all be over. The easiest thing to do would be for me to kill Dick and then run. Not look back. But then I saw you, you saw me. What if tomorrow, Mr. Dino suspects you were in on it? You could be in serious trouble. I couldn’t take that chance.”

“Why? You ran out on me once. You could’ve done it again.”

“No, I couldn’t. That’s why I’m telling you this. Fair warning.”

I reached under my shirt for my gun, and then I poked Helen in the side with it. “I’m sorry, Helen. You can try for Dick another time. We’re going to leave now, and you’re going to drive out of Delaware.”

“Put that gun away,” she hissed quietly. “I’m not going anywhere. You know why I left, back when we were in Boston?”

“Doesn’t really matter now.”

“I was engaged. Spoken for. When you and me got together, it was like nothing I had ever felt before. But I couldn’t just run out. I was in too deep. I was trying to protect you.”

It was my turn to drink her Wild Turkey. “How’d it work out for you guys?”

“We’re divorced.”

“Yeah, me too.”

There was a new singer up now, a woman rocking out to “Separate Ways.”

Helen pushed my gun away. “Don’t you see? We’ve got a second chance, Phil. I know coming after Dick, doing everything I had to do—it was right, because it led me back to you. I can feel it. When I disappear, you can disappear with me.”