

The Detective Smiled



The house was crooked and clearly haunted by the ghosts of the banker and his wife who had once lived there while accumulating a small fortune from their interest in railroads as the westward expansion occurred. Minority shareholders, no Carnegies or Rockefellers, but they made their nestegg and profited. Until a horrible incident occurred that resulted in both their deaths.

And the house still stood.

Inside, it was dark, the windows covered with cobwebs and filth, and the drapes as black as the proverbial tomcat's eye.

The detective went from room to room, and when he was satisfied that he was alone, he began looking for the clues he was sure were there.

In the top drawer of the master dresser, he found a key, and in the pocket of one of the banker's suits, he found the second key.

The trip to the old house was not in vain, he thought.

There was a secret passage that led from the cellar out to the back of the woodshed.

He brightened.

He was in the right place.

Now all he had to do was find the killer.

The garage door opened, and the Bentley rolled out.

The detective smiled. The two keys he had found were to the house and garage.

He followed the Bentley as it drove down the road, through the city, and out of the city limits.

It was easy to follow. The Bentley was easy to spot.

This was his first chance to get a look at the driver who was the same woman who had visited his house on the coast.

She drove the car with a practiced hand, but her face was hidden behind a pair of blue-lensed sunglasses, and her hair was wrapped securely in a red scarf.

He was sure it was the same woman.

She drove like a woman.

Everything about her screamed femininity.

The detective accepted the fact that women could be just as good at crime as men were, but they were so different in so many ways.

Where men were all about the crime, the women were all about the crime and the victim.

He knew he was generalizing, but he was a general kind of guy. He liked the idea of generalizing.

The detective followed the Bentley as it sped up and then slowed down, as if the driver was unsure of the direction she was going.

He had his own map in his pocket, and he could tell from the landmarks and the turns she was making that she was headed for the same cabin he was.

He wondered if he should call his son-in-law and let him know what was going on.

He decided that if he called, the woman might spot him, and he would lose her.

He could call right now and keep her in sight.

But if he called when he was sure where she was going, he might not need to call.

He decided to wait.

He followed the Bentley down the hill and into a town that he thought was the same town where he had been before, but he wasn't sure. All the small towns in the mountains looked alike.

The detective followed the Bentley into a parking space in front of a small, one-story house.

He drove on past, made a U-turn when he was past the house and came back.

He parked on the other side of the street and got out of his car.

He had no idea why he was doing this.

He had the keys to the house, but that might not be the house he was looking for.

He walked across the street and up the short sidewalk to the house.

It was a neat house.

The windows were clean and had shutters.

The steps to the front door were waxed, and the door had a Christmas wreath hanging from a nail.

The detective peered in the window.

The house looked empty.

He tried the door.

It was locked.

He stepped back and peered up at the house.

He was sure he had been here before, but he wasn't sure why.

He turned his attention to the Bentley and the woman who was standing beside it.

She was looking around.

The detective ducked back behind a tree and peered at her.

She was a tall woman, and her body was hidden by an expensive-looking coat. Her head was wrapped in a scarf, and she was wearing a pair of blue-lensed sunglasses.

She was the same woman he had seen at the beach house.

He was certain of that.

What was she doing here?

He was about to cross the street and talk to her when she turned and walked away.

He followed her.

The detective walked swiftly, keeping pace with her.

He wanted to call his son-in-law again, but he was afraid she might hear his phone ring.

Unless he called and lied about being in his car.

He decided that was the way to go.

The detective crossed the street and got into his car.

When his son-in-law answered, he said, "I'm still out here in the mountains. Have you got anything yet?"

"No. We've checked all the old maps, but we haven't found anything yet."

"Don't trust the old maps, they'll only lead you to pain," he said.

He was about to say something else, but he saw a flag on his phone that told him he had a low battery.

"I've got to go," he said, and ended the call.

The detective looked up, but the woman was gone.

The detective got out of his car and looked around, but he couldn't see her anywhere.

The woman had disappeared, and he didn't know where she had gone.

The detective wended his way through the mountains, keeping a sharp eye out for the woman in the Bentley.

He spotted her once, but by the time he caught up with her, she was gone again.

He pulled up to a small cottage that was nestled in a stand of trees.

He got out and looked around.

This was the house, he was sure of it.

He had been here before.

He walked across the small clearing and up the steps.

There was a door knocker on the door, and a nameplate that read "Morrison."

He put his hand on the knocker and lifted it up. The knocker was heavy and made a loud sound against the door.

The door opened and a man standing there looked out at him.

He was a tall, thin man with a lined face and gray hair.

"May I help you?" the man asked.

"I hope so," the detective said. "I'm looking for a woman with a red scarf wrapped around her head. She's wearing blue-lensed sunglasses."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know yet," the detective said.

"Why are you looking for her?"

"I don't know that yet, either."

"You don't know why you're looking for her or who she is?" the man said.

"That's right."

"You should probably start with your name," the man said.

"I'm Detective Jim Henshaw," the detective said.

The man smiled. "My name is Herman Morrison. I'm retired."

"How about that?" the detective said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," the detective said.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm trying to find a woman who's been visiting the coast, and I thought she might have been coming up here."

"What does she look like?"

The detective described the woman, and when he was finished, the man said, "That's my daughter. Her name is Lindsey. She's here with her husband."

"What's his name?"

"His name is Mike. He's a lawyer. They live in the city. They live in Atlanta, actually."

The detective had a feeling that he knew the man.

"How long have they been married?" he asked.

"About a year, I guess," the man said.

"They love each other?"

"They're crazy about each other," the man said.

"Are they happy?"

"They seem to be," the man said.

"Have you looked at them?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"You can tell a lot about people by the way they look at each other. The way they touch each other," the detective said.

"I guess I've never thought about it."

"You should," the detective said. "It's one of the best things I've ever learned."

"That's good to know," the man said. "What else have you learned?"

"I've learned to trust myself," the detective said.

"What does that mean?"

"I used to trust other people's opinions about things," the detective said. "I found out that I couldn't always trust their opinions. They were based on their own experiences,

their own worldviews, their own biases and preconceived notions. I've learned to trust my own opinions."

The man nodded. "That's a smart thing to do," he said.

The detective agreed. "I've learned that people are capable of anything," he said.

"Anything?"

The detective nodded. "Anything," he said.

"That's a depressing thought."

"I don't find it depressing," the detective said. "I find it empowering."

"How so?"

"I know that if I want something, I can make it happen. I don't need anyone's permission, and I don't need anyone's help. I used to think I needed other people's help. I used to think I was incapable of doing things on my own."

The man shook his head. "You're a strange man," he said.

"I know," the detective said. "It's one of my best qualities."

The man laughed. "You're an interesting man," he said.

"Thanks," the detective said.

"You still haven't told me about their relationship," he said, "was it a real thing or a thing that was off and on a true thing, or was it nothing?"

The detective smiled.



"I guess you'll have to ask them that yourself," he said.

"I think I will," the man said.

"I'd like to meet them," the detective said.

"Why?"

"I just would," the detective said.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," the man said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not sure you're who you say you are," the man said.

"I'm a detective," the detective said.

"I don't know that," the man said. "You could be anyone. You could be a killer."

The detective shook his head. "I'm not a killer," he said.

"How do I know that?"

"You don't," the detective said. "You'll just have to trust me."

The man shook his head. "I don't think so," he said.

"I could always come back with a warrant," the detective said.

"What warrant?"

"A warrant for your arrest," the detective said.

"Why would you want to arrest me?"

"I don't want to arrest you," the detective said.

"You just said you were going to arrest me," the man said.

"I was just making a point," the detective said. "I don't want to arrest you. I just want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About your daughter," the detective said.

"What about her?"

"I think she might be in danger," the detective said.

"In danger?"

"Yes," the detective said. "I think someone might be after her."

"Who?"

"I don't know yet," the detective said.

"You're sure she's in danger?"

"Yes," the detective said. "I'm sure."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," the detective said.

"I don't know if I believe you," the man said.

"I don't care if you believe me or not," the detective said. "I'm telling you the truth."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because I'm a detective," the detective said.

"So you keep saying," the man said.

"It's the truth," the detective said.

The man looked at him for a long time, and then he sighed.

"All right," he said. "You can come in. But I'm going to call Mike and tell him you're coming."

"That's a good idea," the detective said.

"I think so," the man said.

The man opened the door and stepped aside.

The detective walked into the small cottage.

It was a cozy little place.

There was a small living room with a fireplace.

There was a small kitchen with a table and chairs.

The detective sat down at the table.

The man went into the other room and came back with a phone.

He dialed a number and waited.

After a moment, he said, "Hello, Mike? This is Herman. I've got someone here who wants to talk to you. He says he's a detective. His name is Jim Henshaw."

There was a pause, and then the man said, "Okay. I'll tell him."

He hung up the phone and looked at the detective.

"Mike says he'll be here in a few minutes," he said.

The detective nodded.

The man sat down at the table and looked at him.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet," the detective said.

"You're not sure?"

"No," the detective said.

"Then why are you here?"

"I have a feeling," the detective said.

"What kind of feeling?"

"A feeling that your daughter is in danger," the detective said.

"Why would you say that?"

"I've been following her," the detective said.

"Why would you follow her?"

"I don't know yet," the detective said.

"You don't know why you followed her, or you don't know why you say she's in danger?"

"Both," the detective said.

"That doesn't make any sense," the man said.

"I know," the detective said.

"You're sure you're a detective?"

"I'm sure," the detective said.

"How can I be sure?"

"You can't," the detective said. "You'll just have to take my word for it."

"I don't think so," the man said.

"I don't care what you think," the detective said.

"You're a strange man," the man said.

"Aren't we all?" the detective asked, with a question in his voice.

The man nodded. "Yes, I guess we are," he said.

The detective sat at the table and waited for Mike to show up.

He was sure that Mike was the man he was looking for.

He just didn't know why.

The man sat across from him, and they didn't speak.

The detective knew that the man was thinking about what he had said.

He was thinking about the danger his daughter was in.

The detective knew that he was right.

The man's daughter was in danger.

He just didn't know from what.

The detective was lost in his own thoughts when he heard a car pull up outside.

He got to his feet and went to the door.

He opened it and stepped out onto the small porch.

The man he assumed was Mike was getting out of his car.

He was a tall man with dark hair and a mustache.

He was wearing a suit, and he had a briefcase in his hand.

He looked like a lawyer, the detective thought.

He walked up the path to the house, and when he got to the top of the steps, he looked at the detective.

"You're the detective?" he asked.

"I'm the detective," the detective said.

"I'm Mike," he said. "Mike Morrison."

"I'm Jim Henshaw," the detective said.

They shook hands.

"Mike, your in-laws died under mysterious circumstances. And your wife drives a Bentley. And she's a beautiful woman, your wife. And she spends a lot of time away from you, in the home of her dead parents, even though that home isn't the home you live in. Do you love your wife, Mike?"

"Of course I do," Mike said. "I love her more than anything."

"Do you think she loves you?" the detective asked.

"Yes," Mike said. "I do."

"Do you think she's cheating on you?" the detective asked.

Mike swallowed.

"I don't know," he said. "I hope not."

The detective nodded.

"Mike, I'm going to level with you," he said. "I think your wife is cheating on you. I think she's been cheating on you for a long time. I think she's been cheating on you with her dead parents."

Mike's face turned white.

"I think she's been cheating on you with her dead parents, and I think they're cheating on you with each other," the detective said.

Mike's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry, Mike," the detective said. "I wish I had better news for you."

"This can't be true!" Mike shouted, "You're a liar."

"Oh it's true, Mike," the detective said, "And one more thing, Mike. I know that you're the killer."

"No!" Mike shouted. "I would never hurt my wife. I love her."

"I don't think you meant to hurt her, Mike," the detective said. "I think you just wanted to hurt her parents. I think you wanted to hurt them for what they were doing to your wife. And I think you wanted to hurt your wife for what she was doing to you."

"No," Mike said, shaking his head. "No, no, no."

"I'm sorry, Mike," the detective said. "But I think you need to come with me."

Mike didn't resist as the detective led him away in handcuffs.

Herman would have watched this scene unfold and slowly shaken his head at his son-in-law's undoing, but Herman was a ghost and a figment. He was never even there.