

19. THE LION'S DEN

She knew that she was meeting a cold-blooded type when she agreed to see Jack. It wasn't entirely her doing. She had accidentally given the business card to Lenny. Her husband reasonably tossed the card in the trash to be forgotten permanently. She tried to keep out of the jurisdiction of Cordelia. But Jack tracked her down. He even called her on her cell.

"Where did you get my number?"

"I'm a cop. It's my job to know things?"

"I ought to report you to your superior."

"You're trying to sound all high and mighty."

So she agreed to get together for a drink at the infamous Roadhouse.

"Don't tell me that you've never been here before."

"Jack, there isn't much that I can tell you that you don't already know."

Actually what he didn't know would surely fill volumes. In some ways that was better.

"So you have little problem."

"I have a life. And you want a piece of it."

"No, I mean you have a little problem. Otherwise, you wouldn't be sneaking around with Dale Simon."

This was getting more than a little out of hand. She could smell blackmail.

"What do you want from me?"

She was not going to sleep with the creep. And she couldn't see handing over any of her cash to the leech.

"I can take care of your problem."

"How's that?"

"Your husband. He could have an accident. Don't think I don't know what Dale and you are up to."

"Dale couldn't hurt a fly if he wanted to. And murder is not something that would be worthy my while."

"I know that you have a problem."

She interrupted him, "Problem, problem, so what?"

"I'm just saying that I'm good at cleaning up things."

She had never faced down a sociopath before. But this was as close as she wanted to come.

"I may be many things. I may hate my husband. I may be catting around with Dale Simon. But if you think that I'm going to pay you to knock off Lenny, you're one crazy SOB."

She stood up to excuse herself. He pulled her down.

"I didn't get you here for no fun and games. Look it, lady. I know what you're made of. You're one cold-hearted bitch. You wouldn't have met if you weren't thinking what I'm thinking. I knew that from that night that I stopped you."

He still hadn't let go of her. "You contacted me. I didn't contact you. Now take your hands off me. There's a few guys in here who would love to have an honest go at you. Besides, this time you're not in uniform."

He let go of her, but his tone became gruffer to make up for his release. "I'm not shitting

you. You have a job to do. You won't admit that it has to get done. I'm going to take care of it."

"Our business is finished," she was abrupt. She stood up and left.

In her car, she breathed a sigh of relief. This guy really was a psychopath. She didn't want to give him the wrong idea. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her makeup looked great, but she was white as a sheet

As she drove home her hands were shaking. It was about a week before she saw Dale again. She related the story.

"He's one mother of a nut case."

Dale was sympathetic. "Everyone tried to stay away from him. I think the sheriff wanted him suspended permanently. But he has seniority or something like that."

"I can't warn Lenny. Jack has his number. I can tell."

She realized that she had Dale's loyalty. At this point, she needed it. She had no idea what was going to happen next.

Lenny seemed more of a loose canon than ever. He was getting angry over the least thing.

"Where is my shirt? The beige one."

"You had it sent out to the cleaners."

He was yelling back at her, "Ask me before you send my stuff out."

"It was dirty and smelly. You would have been mad at me if I had left it in your room."

His business with Ray was taking a turn for the worse. He didn't know how to get out of it. He feared losing all his money. Ray was going to take him down to save his own skin.

"Someone out to put a bullet in that scum-bag's head."

He made a shooting motion with his fingers. At this point, she wondered if Jack was secretly working for Ray. That would make even more sense. But did he even have the intelligence for that sort of thing.

The next day, Lenny had some story about almost being run off the road.

She offered her advice, "Maybe you should stay closer to home."

"I'm trying salvage something from this mess. Maybe you could act more like a wife."

She tried to imagine the man that she had once loved. A little older, she now doubted that feelings. He had fallen in love with his dreams. Now she relished his money.

"You know he'd be worth more dead than alive."

Dale was getting up from the bed.

"You sound like that cop Jack."

"He has his reasons."

"He's a miserable cuss. He ought to be in his own jail—permanently."

"Mrs. Kennedy, your husband is becoming a liability."

"Quit calling me that.!"

She smiled at him. He was naked.

"Come back to bed."

"I've got nothing left for you."

"I want you to hold me."

"Now, you're going tender on me."

“I just want you to want me more.”

He tried to analyze her, “You just want me to hunger for you so that you can ultimately deny him.”

“You know my secrets better than me.”

“Mrs. Kennedy, you are transparent.”

“I could be Mrs. Smith, and it would all be the same.”

Dale Simon knew better.

She didn't want to give in to her instincts. She wanted something more. She wondered what she would have to do to reconcile with Lenny. She could put her wayward ways behind her. She could help him shore up his finances. She could live the life that she had committed to him. It would only be a first step. But it would be better than running around hotel rooms with Dale Simon. The worst thing that could happen was if he left his wife and tried to make a life with her.

When she made it home, Lenny wasn't around. She had really lost track of time and was barely sure if it was morning or evening. She took a long shower. She wanted to wash Dale Simon out of her life. She knew it was impossible. But she wanted to try. She looked at the clock. She had been out all night with Dale. She was tired. A nap might help.

Around mid afternoon she heard a knock on the door. It was the Canton police. Two uniformed officers.

“We have some terrible news for you. Your husband was shot in a convenience store robbery near Austell.”

She wondered what he was doing over there. She was shocked.

“You're going to have to identify the body. It's being held at the morgue in Marietta.”

“Did they find out who did it?”

“They've been reviewing the tapes. But they really have nothing to work with yet.”

None of it made any sense. She hadn't wanted it like this at all. Sure she wasn't getting along with him. But that was no reason for him to die. She blamed her bad life for causing all of this to happen.

She dressed and got in her car. The drive didn't take that long but it seemed like forever. She was actually afraid of the police station. She thought that she had done something wrong. All they needed was evidence to put her away. But she put up the perfect front. Her husband's death had been a total surprise to her. A complete surprise.

She kept telling herself what she needed to say. They took her down to the morgue and his body was on a Gurney. There were two gaping holes in his chest. It was hideous. She now felt more guilty than ever.

She stared at him for a few minutes. She wanted to say something to him. She wanted him to answer her back.

“Yes, that's my husband Leonard.”

She couldn't call on Dale. She didn't want to see any family friends. She felt as if she had no one to turn to. She knew a bar on Delk Road where she could have a quiet drink. She huddled in the corner and closed her eyes.

She needed to get on the same page as Dale. She didn't want him saying anything that would make things worse for her.

The next morning Dale showed up at her door. She was about to question his poor judgement when she realized that he had brought a colleague with him. He acted as if he didn't know her. After making the proper introductions, he expressed his grief to the widow.

"Sorry to hear about the death of your husband."

His assistant chimed in, "After a tragedy, we never know where to turn."

Ron Piper was very curt and business-like. His demeanor contrasted with Dale's casual style.

"Ron will go over the details of your husband's policy."

They were sitting in the living room. He had the policy open on the coffee table.

"On conditions of death, the policy pays out two point five million dollars. Since your husband died under conditions of foul play, the double indemnity clause is in effect."

All this only added to her shock.

"What does that mean?"

"The policy now pays you the amount of five million dollars."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"Five million!"

Ron continued to spell out the details, "This will all depend on verification by our central office. They will have all the details of the policy verified."

Dale described the circumstances of Lenny's policy, "Your husband was doing a lot of work near Cordelia. He had sought a business policy with us. At that point, I asked him to examine his life insurance policy. I was able to offer him an attractive package. I'm not sure that he talked to you about it."

"He had mentioned something."

All these details were overwhelming. It was too much to think about at this time. She wanted to ask Dale about the policy. What was he doing? What had he done? It seemed to confusing.

Ron worked to reassure her, "We'll be in contact with you."

Dale added his condolences, "We knew that it would be a difficult time for you. We felt by showing up in person that we might make you breathe easier about your future."

When she closed the door on both of them she wasn't sure if she should let out a sigh of relief. Five million dollars. This was her money that had nothing to do with the state of his business. If he had no outstanding debts, she'd be sitting pretty.

The shock was starting to wear off. She figured that Dale might want a cut for his part in all of this. But he was too weak to make many demands on her. If he had engineered Lenny's death, then he was a danger to be reckoned with. But he hardly seemed that clever. Who could touch her now?

Her answer came in the form of a rude awakening.

"Hello, Mam, did you like my work?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The landscaping. I did a good job, didn't I?"

She still didn't recognize the voice.

"Don't you know me. It's your old friend Jack. You told me that you had the weeds problem. And I took them out of the way."

“What are you talking about?”

“Your check didn’t clear. I’m going to need your payment.”

“Of course my check cleared.”

“Actually, the bank returned it to me. Insufficient funds. I’m going to need a cash payment.”

“I didn’t have any weed problem.”

“I don’t want to get all legal with you. Maybe if you’d sit down with me, I could go over the details.”

“I don’t want you calling me here. This is my home.”

“I needed to reach you.”

He was persistent. She felt forced to meet him. It was a bar half way between Cordelia and Canton. He was sitting at a table with a beer. She was visibly angry. He was his cool crazy self.

“I didn’t do this as a favor to you. You told me that you had a problem, and I took care of it. Now you can take care of me.”

“I never asked you to do anything. You were on your own.”

“I did it on my own. It was your problem. You can deal with me.”

“Deal how?”

“A hundred thousand dollars sounds nice. A donation to the widows’ and orphans’ fund.”

“I never told you to do anything. I don’t owe you a cent.”

“Your husband was killed by a convenience store robber. Such a tragedy. I just hate such calamities.”

“I don’t want you threatening me. There is no record of me promising you anything. I told you already that I had planned to talk to your supervisor.”

“Let’s just say that you better listen to me. I can do a lot of damage if someone gets in my way. And it’s all legal.”

“Are you also the person who tried to run my husband off the road.”

“The double indemnity clause works a lot nicer in your favor. How much more money is that?”

He knew too much for his own good. She needed to take care of him some how. She realized that things were getting too hot in Canton. She took some money out of the bank and rented an apartment in Adairsville. No one knew her over there. She couldn’t be traced. He couldn’t blackmail her if he didn’t know where to find her.

She also called Dale. She wanted to see him. She found an out of the way place in the city of Atlanta. It was just off of I-285.

“Why did you make me come all the way down here? It takes out almost half my day just to get down here and back.”

“I’m afraid that someone is following me. It could be one of your friends.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. First, I’m hanging out with you. Then my husband turns up dead. I just want to add it all up.”

“I was just as surprised as you were.”

“That crazy cop wants money.”

“How much?”

“One hundred thousand.”

“Pay him and be done with him.”

“I’m not going to pay him. He won’t stop until he sucks me dry. I know his type. That’s why he’s the law.”

“What are you going to do? Shoot him. You could get the death penalty for shooting a cop.”

“He doesn’t deserve to wear the badge. He’s a blot on the profession.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem.”

“We have to stop seeing each other for the time being. We can’t be seen together. A while. A couple of months. Maybe even a half a year. We need to wait for things to die down.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to sell all his assets. Find some good investments. Just disappear.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Just sit tight.”

He actually felt on the verge of his dream. He hadn’t thought of it like this before. But he could cash in on her good fortunes. He’d have to eat humble pie for a couple of months. He’d serve his time with Edna and the kids, and then he’d just disappear with her.

Was she actually giving him hope? She found him scattered and weak. But she had no other clear ally at this moment. He could serve his purpose.

She needed to spend some time at the house. There was so much to take care of. She planned a small funeral for her husband. Just the immediate family. Lenny’s parents were coming in from Cleveland. She needed to meet with Lenny’s financial adviser. He could take care of the details of the serious transactions.

She wanted to stay clear of Ray Worth. He only had his own interest at heart. She assumed that he probably had swindled her husband out of some money. She had to stop the hemorrhaging. It was better if she handled all that through a third party. She knew that she couldn’t get it all back. But she could put the fear of the lord in this cretinous confidence man.

Jack was a different story. She would need a clever plan to deal with him.