

SONG & DANCE



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ONE

He's Gone

My uncle James, my mother's younger brother, barely survived the sixties, but before he dropped down a rabbit hole, he bequeathed me his sound system and extensive record collection. Thus, my musical taste runs a generation behind, so, to no surprise, I was tuned to an oldies station while on my way to meet a prospective client. Also unsurprisingly, I picked up an earworm, and the whole time I sat listening to Elizabeth Taft Gardner run on about her missing husband, the Rascals' *It's a Beautiful Morning* was looping through my brain. Sadly, I wouldn't be on my way, enjoying the brand-new day, till I knew the job was mine. My bank account was running on empty, and I needed the work.

"Have you ever handled a missing person's case before, Mr. Rotten?" my prospective client was asking me, as her friend, Alison Owen, paced behind her in the Gardners' tastefully appointed and relentlessly color-coordinated living room.

"Certainly," I bluffed, though it wasn't an outright lie. One of my first clients had been a deranged cross-dresser who hired me to find his recovering ex-wife—recovering from drug addiction brought on by his abuse. Only he hadn't worn a skirt to our first meeting, and he never mentioned that he was divorced from said "wife," or out on parole, or under a restraining order. And he hadn't mentioned the abuse, only the drugs. Not surprisingly, the case had not ended well. He nearly cut her throat, and I never got paid, but she *had* been lost, and I *had* helped find her. My conscience was clear.

"But even in a city the size of Pittsburgh," I continued, "People like your husband don't disappear every day." Malodorous poor folk, perhaps, but not sweet-smelling, consummately privileged suburbanites. No, this place smelled like money, fussy upper-middle-class money.

Rich money doesn't care what it smells like, and poverty stinks. The Gardners had enough of the green stuff to eliminate odors and design away conflict, but not enough *not* to care what other people thought. Professional decorator, cleaning woman, plant service. Very sober nineties.

"Has your husband ever done anything like this before?" I asked to nudge her from the subject of my credentials. Mister Missing had taken a casino excursion to Atlantic City over the previous weekend but missed the bus back.

"More like, 'How many times,'" said Alison who continued to pace protectively behind her friend.

"Allie, please," said Ms. Liz, sitting stiffly.

My new client was attractive enough, in a mature, soccer-mom sort of way, but her lanky brunette buddy was a true head-turner and proving to be a serious distraction. I had to remind myself that the rent was due and concentrate on the business at hand.

"Billy has taken tours before, to gamble. It's his way of relaxing," the distraught wife said. "But he's always come back. He wouldn't miss school . . ." she added and then trailed off. She tried, but couldn't finish, and spent a moment sniffing. The wayward husband was a teacher at the local elementary school.

"I don't know why you're even looking for the worthless bastard," fumed her friend with brown eyes flashing. "Let him stay lost."

"Alison, go smoke a cigarette," said Elizabeth with an edge in her voice.

Allie frowned, but dutifully departed, and Liz seemed to settle once she was out of the room.

"You two having any money trouble?" I asked after she had wiped her nose.

"Billy and me? No," she said without elaboration.

“Any marital difficulties? Other women? Other men?” I asked as delicately as I could, although I have to admit that delicacy is not my strong suit.

She looked momentarily confused. “No,” she finally said with a trace of annoyance.

“Your husband subject to depression? Under a doctor’s care? Any alcohol or drug dependency?”

“Billy drinks socially, but he doesn’t do drugs,” she said. “He wasn’t too thrilled about turning forty, but there’s nothing unusual about that.”

“No, I suppose not.” *Certainly not for some self-absorbed, yuppie thumb-sucker*, I thought to myself before adding, “How about at work? Any problems with the principal?”

“Billy never talks much about his work, but he’s been at the same school for ten years, so I don’t think he was having any problems,” she said and paused. “I told them he has the flu.”

This woman had a problem. She’d gotten too used to tap dancing around the truth to be of any help in finding her husband. He might be rotting in the basement for all she was willing to admit. I was ready to take up smoking and join the tart-tongued temptress on the porch.

“I appreciate the confidence you have in me,” I said, which was a joke, since she’d let her fingers do the walking and found my name in the phone book, “But this type of investigation is best handled by the police.”

“Unfortunately, the police have been no help at all,” she said. “They have no discretion whatsoever. They won’t do a thing unless I file an official report, and if I do, they’ll march straight into the principal’s office.”

I made a mental note to send a dozen donuts to the local precinct house.

“Ms. Gardner, I gotta level with you,” I said without a trace of shame. “If your husband’s in hiding, he could be difficult to flush out. And if something’s happened to him, the police

would be notified. Hiring me is a long shot. I can poke around, maybe travel down there, but if I don't find a lead in a few days, the police would be in a better position to follow-up." I let that sink in and then finished with, "I'll need a five-hundred-dollar advance."

She nodded her acceptance. What choice did she have? She had enough money to hire somebody better so she must have had her reasons for turning to someone like me. I didn't press further, but I did tell her some background info might help, and she led me to a spare bedroom which Billy Boy had converted to a home office.

"Your husband goes on these bus tours with any of his friends?" I asked as I surveyed the absent man's effects.

She thought a moment. "I guess he doesn't have any real friends, at least that I know of."

Miz Liz seemed uncomfortable in her husband's room, and I got the impression she hadn't come in here that often. She suggested I talk to Phil Cheswick, the guy who ran the bus tours, and she gave me the name of one of Billy's teaching colleagues I could approach without arousing suspicion. Then, mercifully, a phone rang, and she left to answer it. I heard the beginnings of two heated exchanges before a heavy door closed, and I was left alone in the room which Billy Gardner had called his own. This room, at least, had some personality. But whose? The atmosphere was more Late Sixties Dorm Room than Contemporary Professional Study. Regrettably, I'd seen many of this guy's most-prized possessions for sale at flea markets and yard sales, or on those cheesy, late-night TV commercials. Classic rock CD reissues by brain-dead bands of thirty years ago mixed with well-thumbed works by Carlos Castaneda and Hermann Hesse. A tape of James Taylor's performance with the Boston Pops from Public TV sat beside membership info from politically correct organizations like the Sierra Club and Common Cause. A poorly focused photo of Bad Bill with hair to his shoulders sported the caption, "The

times they are a-changin'." Wow. I bet they bought a piece of Clinton's campaign and sat around on election night congratulating themselves for saving the world. Is it safe?

A desk was stacked with papers awaiting grades, but no notes to himself and nothing that looked like a diary or a secret address book. There were books on gambling mixed with borderline New Age philosophy. There were framed photos that appeared to be stills from old black-and-white TV shows, and there were two framed tickets to the first Woodstock music festival. None of which gave me any idea of where this guy might be, although some suggested where he was coming from. Dreams die hard.

"Do you have a stamp?" asked my new boss from the doorway as she presented the slip of paper I'd been waiting for.

"Just make it out to 'Frank Rotten.' I left my stamp at the office," I lied.

Ms. Liz had composed herself, but her blazing cheeks revealed the effort. I wouldn't have minded seeing Allie again, but I wanted to depart before becoming part of the problem. I pocketed my advance, promised daily updates, smiled warmly, and took my leave.