

The Ravencamp case had a stink about it from the very beginning, and it wasn't Rita Ravencamp's perfume.

She was all right, at least she looked it. Too tall maybe, and nervous and jittery. You could see it in her eyes, the way they darted around my shabby office as if tracking the flight of a frenetic fly. Which was certainly possible, but not likely. There was no buzzing. And you could see her nervousness in her fingers, the way her pointy painted nails drummed against the sides of the pricey reptilian handbag she clutched in her lap.

I gave her a good looking-over, not too obviously, I hope, while she sat very upright in the uncomfortable client's chair across the desk from me. The wavy red hair, multiple curves and sweetly undersized nose were okay. She took a cigarette from a slim gold case, and I suavely lit it with a wooden kitchen match, then watched her smoke it while she told me her improbable story. She had a silken voice, but with a rusty edge to it.

"Well, Mr. Hatchett, I guess I better tell you the whole tale, right?"

"My name's Axe, to you and my friends. Just tell me the parts you think I need to know. Time is money, Mrs. Ravencamp. Your money."

"Rita. Please. I was happily married until my husband disappeared. That was in '53, so...two years ago, a little over. Perhaps you read about it in the papers. He was driving to one of his weekend golf tournaments. Roscoe was an avid golfer.

"He was on the river road between here and Wavering Haze. It was raining that day. He swerved going around a curve, maybe to avoid hitting a deer or something crossing the road, and his car slid off the embankment and into the river.

"I know this because another motorist was behind Roscoe and saw the whole thing. He stopped and wanted to help, but what could he do? The river wasn't deep at that point, but it was running fast. Roscoe's Packard was up to its roof in water. It had landed on some submerged rocks."

"And there was no sign of your husband in the river, swimming or drowning or whatever?" I asked this just to get my oar in.

"No, nothing but water. The man who witnessed the accident walked up and down the riverbank, but he couldn't find any sign of Roscoe. He finally drove to the closest house, somebody's summer cabin, and used their phone to call the Quartz Quarry police. They took care of the rest.

"The witness, I think his name was Chad Lomax, drove back to the accident site. He waited until the rescuers arrived. A police cruiser, an ambulance, a fire truck and a tow truck. There was also somebody from the newspaper, the *Gladiator*. I'm surprised you didn't read about it."

"I wasn't here two years ago. Go on with your story."

"Some brave fireman tied a rope around his waist and swam out to the car. The driver's door window was rolled down, but there was nobody in the car. The keys were

still in the ignition.”

“I would think so. Was your husband a good swimmer? Or was he a sinker, like me?”

“Roscoe was a natural athlete, though he didn’t care for most sports. His older brother, Alvin, who you’ll hear about in a minute, doesn’t believe that Roscoe would have drowned. Not unless he hit his head on a rock or something.”

“But he never showed up, huh? They never found his waterlogged corpse? I mean, the unfortunate man’s remains were never recovered?”

“No, never. He just disappeared.”

She crossed her legs, uncrossed them, crossed them again. It was quite a show for a country boy like me. She fished out another cigarette and waited for me to light it.

“They searched for days,” she continued, “checking the riverbank for miles. They even went out in a boat and looked for pockets or pools where his body might have ended up. No luck. By that time I was hysterical, and Alvin was drinking hard. That’s what he does when he’s upset. I believe it took two tow trucks to haul Roscoe’s Packard to dry land. It was pretty well ruined.

“I thought I’d at least get a decent life insurance settlement. But...since they never found his body, they can’t prove he’s dead. The life insurance company hasn’t given me a dime. But you know what? Alvin never gave up hope. That’s just the kind of guy he is. He’s still convinced that his brother will show up again. Somewhere, somehow.”

I leaned back in my squeaky swivel chair, made a steeple of my hands, pursed my lips, and frowned at the ceiling. I do this sometimes when I don’t know what else to do.

“Mrs. Ravencamp, Rita, I’m a bit confused. I’ve been hired for missing persons cases before, but nothing quite like this. Why would you wait two years to come to me, or any private investigator? I have to disagree with your brother-in-law. Roscoe Ravencamp isn’t going to show up again, ever. They might find his bones someday. Listen. I’ll look into the matter for you, but I think you’re wasting your time and money.”

She put a crafty smile on her face and twinkled her green eyes at me.

“That’s what the police believe. Just what you said. But they’re wrong and I want you to prove it.”

END OF EXCERPT