

## **If the Key Fits**

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If you look in the Northern Virginia Yellow Pages, you may find a tiny listing for Dreher Investigative Services. I answer the phone when I'm in; when I'm out, there's an answering machine. I don't get much business that way anyway. Most of my business comes from referrals.

A few weeks back, a lawyer we'll call Mr. V. Deal called me. His client, whom we'll call Mr. I. Ellez, was charged with Grand Larceny. A valuable piece of jewelry was stolen from a jewelry store. Ellez claimed to be innocent, and the police's evidence seemed highly circumstantial. Could I uncover some points to poke holes in their case?

Parking was scarce at the boxy-looking Reston townhouse where Ellez lived. I located his door and rapped on it. The chain was on when the door opened, and a frightened-looking Hispanic woman with curly black hair looked out.

"Yes?"

"My name is Dreher. I'm here to see Mr. Ellez. I was sent by Mr. Deal."

"Please wait a minute." The woman left the door. There was a hushed discussion in Spanish, which unfortunately I can't understand. After a couple of minutes, a man came to the door. He left the chain on.

"Mr. Deal sent you?"

"Yes, Mr. Ellez. I'm a private investigator. I find facts for those who need them." I slid a card through the opening.

"You will find the truth about this -- this thing?"

"The truth is always the best thing to find." There's no point in being philosophical when faced with a door-chain. Apparently that was the right answer, too, because the chain came off, and Ellez came out.

As we shook hands, he asked, "You are not from the police?"

"No, Mr. Ellez, I am working for Mr. Deal, and for you." He smiled, but a little hesitantly, and beckoned me inside. It was dark in the townhouse. He

turned off the TV, and three little children and his wife vanished in a matter of seconds. I sat on a big green sofa, and Ellez sat on a big yellow chair. I got out a small notebook and pen, crossed my legs and asked, "Please tell me the story from the beginning."

I'll spare you the play-by-play. He had gone to a well-known suburban shopping mall to buy an inexpensive bookcase and a few other items, a box and a few small bags. He put them in the back seat of his inexpensive import automobile, and drove home. The kids unloaded the car. One of the bags contained something he hadn't bought: a very expensive-looking necklace. Feeling it his Christian duty to do so, he took the necklace to the police. They looked at it and asked him to wait around for a few minutes. Perhaps there would be a reward, he felt.

What a surprise he got when they charged him with stealing it! They kept hammering at him about who his accomplice was. It'd taken him hours to get released on personal recognizance. Mr. Deal was a court-appointed attorney.

"Do you still have the bag the necklace was in?"

"No, I gave it to the police."

"Did it look unusual?"

"No. I didn't ask who brought the bag in. All the bags were in the car."

"May I examine the car, then?" He hesitated a moment, and we went outside.

It was, as I mentioned, an inexpensive import sedan, similar to my own, except that it was red. It was clean, no stickers other than the legally-mandated ones. There were no other bags I could find in the car. I opened the glove compartment and started going through the contents. There were the usual sunglasses, manual, and some registration and inspection documents. Oddly, the registration was not to Mr. Ellez; it was to a Mr. C. Hale, we'll say, who lived in Springfield.

"Is this your car, or is this Mr. Hale a friend of yours?" I asked Ellez, who was examining the sunglasses.

"I don't know any Mr. Hale. This is very strange." He leaned into the car and started looking through the contents of the glove compartment. After a

moment, he ran around to the trunk, unlocked it, and stared at it in amazement. "This is not my car! What is going on here?"

Pocketing the registration, I walked around to the trunk. "What's wrong with the car?"

"This is not my car! Maria y Jose, this is not my car. Last year, I spilled oil in the trunk. There is no oil. There is no jumper cables. There is no toolbox. There is no sticker!"

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. Certainly, if this was a dodge, it was one that would be easily shown up. "Mr. Ellez, do you have an extra key to the car?"

One of the kids was peeking out the door at us. He called in Spanish to the child, who disappeared and then reappeared with a keychain with a few keys on it.

"Here is my wife's key. Please don't lose it."

I thanked him, and told him I had a few other calls to make, then drove to a quiet spot near Lake Anne. I had to call Deal. It took a few minutes of expensive airtime to get him on the line. Next time, I told myself, I'll use a payphone.

"So you've spoken to Ellez?", he asked as he got on.

"Yes. I've gotten his story, which will bear some checking. What's the story on this necklace?"

"It belongs to a foreign diplomat, who left it at a jeweler's in the mall for cleaning and repair, replacement of side stones or something like that. It contains a nearly flawless 11-carat diamond. The jeweler noticed it was missing and nearly had a heart attack. They called in everybody but the National Guard. The D.C. police are involved too. All of a sudden, my client turns up with the goods. They figure he had a change of heart and turned himself in. He was at the mall where the jeweler is located, when the piece was missed, and they say he acted suspiciously, wanting a reward. Is it possible the real thief stashed it in his car?"

"That depends on the antecedent of 'his', I suppose," I surmised aloud. "Who is the detective working on the case?"

After a moment's delay, he responded. "I have a police contact named Lt. K. Ashe." Names are changed, you know.

"Thanks, Deal. I take it the court's paying for my time?"

"I have to bundle it with my legal fees. Don't go overboard."

I said goodbye to Deal and decided to pay a call on Mr. Hale, to see if he happened to have a red import sedan in his driveway. It was a bit of a drive from Reston to Springfield. The sun was going down, and traffic was fairly heavy. I was sitting at a light when the cellphone made its ticking ring. "Dreher", I answered.

"This is Lt. Ashe of the Fairfax County Police Department. I've just had a chat with a Mr. Deal, who is defending a Mr. Ellez on a charge of Grand Larceny, and he suggested I might give you a few pointers as to how you can advance the cause of Justice here."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, we private investigators are always appreciative of any advice and assistance we receive from law enforcement professionals."

"You're certainly welcome, Dreher." He paused. "Now this necklace was not laying around on a counter. It was locked in a safe which, as far as we know, only a few employees had a combination for. So our assumption is that it was an inside job."

"That sounds right. What was the name of the store?"

"Um, ah... well it's called L. I. Sylph, and the manager there is a D. Abner. We've talked to him already."

"Good, so who did he say are the employees who know the combination?"

"Well, we have all that, Mr. Dreher, so we don't need you to look into that. What we need to know is this. Ellez had to be working with someone inside the store. If he would tell us who that person is, it'd make life a lot easier for him. Maybe you can persuade him to come clean, he seems like a Catholic or something like that, maybe you can appeal to his Christian conscience."

"Lieutenant, has it occurred to you that he might be telling the truth? After all, the course of action you describe - receiving a hot piece of jewelry, worth

thousands of dollars, then bringing it in to the police and wanting a reward - does that make any sense?"

"It was too hot to fence. Nobody on the Eastern seaboard would've given a dime for that necklace. Whaddaya think, we're stupid? Work with us on this one, Dreher. You may want our help sometime. Ellez admits the piece was in his car. Someone put it there, and Ellez knows who it was. Unless you've got some other explanation as to how it got it in his car?"

That got me thinking about antecedents again. "You may be right, Lieutenant. That person may have put it in his car," I said, carefully. "Let me follow that angle, and I'll get back to you."

We said chilly goodbyes, and I continued on my way to Springfield. I was hoping to see a red import in the driveway, but there wasn't one there. I hopped out and knocked at the door. A woman with a big head of hair answered. "Yeah?"

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I understand you own a red import sedan," and I named the make and year.

"Yeah, I reported it stolen. My husband didn't want to, but it's really my car. He's not home yet. He drove the truck. You investigating the theft?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm investigating the theft," I said, honestly. "We may have found the car already."

"Oh good!", she said, then frowned. "It's not, like, stripped, or anything, is it?"

"Oh no, it's in fine shape. You say your husband, that would be Mr. Hale, is not home from work yet? I wonder if I might ask you a few questions. Would that be all right?"

"Oh sure. You're an investigator or something, right?"

"Yes," I said, happy I could answer honestly again. "Your husband, Mr. Hale, where is it that he works?"

"He works for a jewelry store in the mall. It's called L. I. Sylph. They have some really gorgeous rings. You have a wife or a girlfriend, Mr. ..."

"Dreher. No, I'm unattached at the moment. However, I always appreciate a good tip for when I need one." I nodded to her. She smiled graciously. "Now, Mrs. Hale, was your husband at work when he found the car missing?"

"Yes," she said, turning her head as a pickup truck pulled into the driveway. I was thankful I'd parked on the street. Never let yourself get boxed in. "Here he is, you can talk to him."

Mr. C. Hale got out of his pickup truck and looked at me suspiciously. His wife turned without a word and went back up to the house.

"Hello, Mr. Hale," I said, walking over to him, "I believe we've found your car, and it and its contents are completely intact." I emphasized the word 'contents', and Hale went ghostly pale.

"Are you sure? I'd heard... I mean... Who are you?"

"My name is Dreher." I handed him a card. "I'm a private investigator. There seems to be a minor confusion regarding your car, and I hope we can clear it up."

"Mr. Dreher, you're going to have to excuse me," he said, stiffening as though he were a statue, "but we have had a major theft at my company, this was one of the biggest jobs we've had in years, and it seems like the stolen property has been recovered, and I am just too stressed to think right now." He was rigid, pale, and sweating profusely.

"I can understand that, Mr. Hale," I said in my most soothing voice, "Really. I'm a private investigator. If you need my services investigating the theft, you have my card. We'll bring your wife's car back, and you can examine it when you feel up to it. Try to relax and have a pleasant evening." He was still standing there as I drove off.

It was getting dark now, and I doubted that L. I. Sylph would still be open, but it was worth a try. There were still lots of cars in the lot, but I found a pretty good space. The store was still open, but it was completely deserted except for a very pretty girl at the counter.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked. Her name tag read "Y. Lime."

"Thank you, Miss Lime. I was hoping to acquire an 11-carat diamond necklace."

"Eleven carats?" She smiled broadly. "Do you mean the stone or the gold? In gold, a karat, spelled with a K, is a unit of purity, with 24 karat being pure gold. In diamonds, a carat, with a C, is a unit of weight. An eleven-carat diamond would be extremely valuable. Now we have a very nice necklace here with stones totalling three carats in weight, with a one-half carat center stone. The chain and setting are 18-karat gold. It's a contemporary design--"

"I'm sorry, Miss Lime, I seem to have made a false impression." I noticed an older man watching us from the back of the store. "Actually, I was wondering if I might have a word with the manager concerning some recent events."

She put the necklace back in the case, and her smile never dimmed. "Mr. Abner will be happy to speak with you." She beckoned, and he came, somewhat hesitantly.

"Thank you, Miss Lime. May I say, you adorn the name of your establishment admirably." She smiled and moved off.

"I've already told all I know to the police," Mr. Abner said, quietly. "Who might you be?" Sweat was beading on his bald head.

"Dreher," I said, giving him a card. I spoke quickly and quietly. "I'm with the defense. I was wondering if you could give me those names of the employees with access to the safe?"

"The defense?" He looked at my card, then shrugged and went on. "No harm, I suppose. It's just myself, Mr. H. Tyka, the jeweller, and Mr. C. Hale."

"Hm. Now I'm sure you're happy that the item has been recovered --"

"Very, very grateful, Mr. Dreher. You don't know how I worried. This was a real opportunity for our little establishment, and it almost came off very, very badly."

"I'm sure we're all hoping for an amicable, and quiet, settlement of the whole affair." As I emphasized the word 'settlement', Mr. Abner's eyes sharpened, but his whole manner became suddenly more relaxed. I hated to break that mood, but it had to be done. "The theory of the police is that this was an inside job. I'm sure you realize what that means. Either yourself, Mr. Tyka, or Mr. Hale, must have conspired with Mr. Ellez to spirit the jewels

out of the store. That would be a severe breach of professional ethics, to say the least."

"I don't know Mr. Ellez, but I know Tyka and Hale, and I don't see how they could have... have..."

"Agreed. For them to work with someone like Ellez is nonsensical. The case as the police have it is embarrassing and unprovable."

"But, Mr. Dreher, we can hardly simply forget about it. This is, after all, a major theft. The necklace is worth well over fifty thousand dollars."

"Absolutely right, Mr. Abner. It's quite clear that there are some very serious questions we still need the answers to. I'm very happy to make your acquaintance, and I'm hoping I can help in the solution of this mystery." I extended a hand, he shook it, and I walked out.

As I strode through the mall, which was beginning to fill up with evening shoppers, movie goers, and teenagers, my cellphone made its clicking ring. I sought out a quiet corner before answering, "Dreher."

"Mr. Dreher, this is Detective Chris Hansen of the D.C. Police Department," said a charming feminine voice. "I understand you're looking into a case in which we have an interest."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Ms. Hansen," I replied. I avoid the use of first names wherever possible. "Perhaps our interests in this case might coincide."

"I doubt it, Mr. Dreher. Our interest is to close this case as quickly and quietly as possible. You know an international incident could occur."

"My interest is to ascertain the truth."

"The truth, Mr. Dreher? Which truth is that? The truth that benefits your client? Or the best truth for all parties involved?"

"As Pilate said, what is truth?"

"This case is more important than you think, Dreher. It's not a joking matter." She hung up.

I headed for the nearest exit and, in so doing, went out by a different door than I'd come in through. Realizing that I didn't remember where I'd parked my car, I began a systematic pass through the acres of automobiles in the parking lot.

That's when I spotted it: a red import sedan of the same make and year as Mr. Ellez's. It had a sticker on the bumper, saying "El Senor es mi Pastor". I walked over and got out Ellez's spare key. It fit, it turned, it opened the door. I got in, opened the glove compartment and looked at the papers. "I. Ellez."

I started the motor and started driving to Ellez's home back in Reston. While stopped at a red light, I paged back through the Caller ID for Ashe's number and hit Send. "Fairfax County Police, Lt. Ashe speaking," he said.

"Lieutenant, this is Dreher. I have something very interesting to show you. Could you meet me at Mr. Ellez's home?"

"I don't have time for games, Dreher. Are you working with me on this one?"

"Lieutenant, sir, you are going to have your case sewed up as soon as I get there and meet you."

He agreed, and I drove as fast as I could. When I pulled up to the house, an unmarked cruiser sat in the driveway behind the other red sedan, and Ellez and his whole family were in the small yard. I could see their mouths open as the second red sedan pulled up.

"Whose car is that?", Ashe demanded.

"Mr. Ellez's, of course," I said, handing Ellez his keys. "And here's the registration for that car."

Ashe wasn't stupid. I didn't have to explain more than once how the same keys fit both cars, and how Hale had taken the necklace and put it in his car, and how Ellez had taken the wrong car home, and how Hale must have panicked when he saw the car was gone...