

George Washington Stepped Here: A Karen Maxwell Mystery (Book One)

By
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Trent and Meg with all my love. (And in case you're wondering, I flipped a coin to determine who would be listed first.)

I'd like to thank my critique partners Lisa Cochrane, Christie Kelley, Kathy Love, Janet Mullany, and Kate Poole; my editors Susan Downs, Candice Speare, and Ellen Tarver; and also Sharon Zarate for sharing her expertise about the business of private investigation. I also owe thanks to my mom, Betty Dolan, and husband, Jim Weidman, for introducing me to some of the best mysteries ever written.

One

“I don’t have time for this,” Dave muttered as he picked up a chocolate chip cookie off my desk.

Setting down the box of new “DS Investigations” stationery that I had just picked up from the printer’s, I reached over to snatch the remaining cookie out of his reach. “That makes two of us. I don’t have time for you taking my lunch, either. And why are you sitting at my desk?”

He shrugged as he leaned back in the swivel chair. “Technically, it’s my desk. I own the firm now, so I own everything in this office.” A smile of satisfaction gradually spread over his face as he gazed around the shabby second-floor apartment of the old house that served as the headquarters for the newly renamed DS Investigations. Rays of afternoon sun shining through the drafty windows illuminated sprays of dust motes in the air, and I made a mental note to have another talk with the landlord about the cleaning service.

After hiding the cookie behind a plant, I picked up the box of stationery again and put it in a drawer. “You really are enjoying having the firm all to yourself now, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he sighed with contentment. “Yes, I am.” The chair groaned alarmingly as Dave turned and leaned farther back.

I reached behind him to grab a tray of invoices before they tipped onto the floor. Then I tried to make my next question sound casual. “Does that mean you’ve changed your mind about taking on a new partner?” I winced at the childish, hopeful sound in my voice. As much as I wanted Dave to let me try some of the real investigative work that had been handled by his former partner, I didn’t want him to see how badly I wanted it. He was, after all, my younger brother. I had guilted him into giving me a job after my divorce, but now, if I wanted him to give me a better job, I was going to have to earn it.

He nodded slowly. “I think I’m ready to fly solo for a while.”

“With a couple of stewardesses to clean up after you.” I threw out an empty paper coffee cup and unfolded a wadded-up receipt he had left in my in-box.

He grinned sheepishly. “Well, yeah. I don’t have time for that paper. . .stuff.”

“You mean the paper stuff that enables you to draw a paycheck?”

“That’s why I hired you and Brittany, sis.”

I leaned back against the file cabinet. “Well, are you going to let me get back to work, or do you intend to handle the Nabco client report yourself?”

He launched himself forward out of the chair, gesturing for me to be seated as if he were a king bestowing favors on a loyal subject. “Oh no, I’ll leave that to you.”

As I sat, he leaned toward me and lowered his voice. “But I was wondering if you might like the chance to take on an investigative assignment.”

Those were the words I’d been waiting to hear for the past five years—ever since I had started working for him. I’d filed papers and typed reports and copied files and done 90 percent of the work that kept the office functioning, but never had I had the chance to do the 10 percent of the work that kept the office alive. Investigation. Just the thought of getting out of the dank, dim old building—even if it was only to go into other often danker and dimmer buildings of Ellicott City—set my heartbeat up a notch.

But if I let him know this was the opportunity I’d been waiting for, he’d press his advantage over me somehow. So I tried to act as if I didn’t really care one way or the other.

"I might be," I allowed.

"Are you doing anything on Saturday?"

My hopes plummeted as I waved toward the desk calendar. "I'm doing everything on Saturday. Evan has a game at nine o'clock, and then I believe he has team pictures at eleven, which should give me approximately fifteen minutes to drive Alicia to her drama class, which is at least twenty minutes away. If I don't hit any traffic lights."

"Is that all?" He grimaced with annoyance as he shoved the last bite of cookie into his mouth and licked a smear of chocolate off his fingers. Since he has no family of his own, he doesn't quite believe how much time kids take up. He thinks I spend my weekends soaking in the tub reading romance novels.

"Well, no." I brushed the cookie crumbs off my Rolodex. "Then I need to take the dog to the vet and get to the store to get something to organize Alicia's closet—oh, and a new rug for the bathroom floor—and then I have to get back in time to meet the termite inspector—"

He waved to cut me off. "But you can do that stuff another day, right?"

I hate it when he interrupts. "No."

Okay, that was not strictly true. Bathroom accessories would no doubt remain available for purchase in the days beyond Saturday. "When else am I going to have time to do this stuff?" I asked.

He nodded toward his office, an enclave of disorganized papers and empty sardine cans that was the only private space in the whole agency. Formerly occupied by the senior partner, Nate, the office had succumbed to Dave's slovenly influences before we'd even finished cleaning up from Nate's retirement party. "I have a job for you on Saturday."

"You promised I wouldn't have to work weekends." I hadn't said no, and he knew it. This was all part of the bargaining process. If he could, he'd get me to take this assignment for free to gain experience. I wasn't that desperate—or at least I didn't think I was.

"This is a special job—you might call it an undercover assignment."

"I don't care. I'm not working on a Saturday," I insisted, although at the same time I was trying to remember where to find the termite company's phone number so I could call to reschedule the inspection.

Dave assumed a singsong voice, as if trying to lure a child to an ice cream truck. "This is real investigative work."

I hesitated. He was going to call my bluff at any moment. "I still don't care."

He sighed and shrugged himself off the door frame. "Well, I guess I'll have to give the assignment to Brittany, then." He turned to go back into his office.

Uh-oh, I'd held out too long. "Doesn't she have finals or something?" I couldn't leave things this way. I couldn't let Dave give an assignment, a real undercover assignment, to a mere college student who mishandled phone messages and misspelled half the words on the reports she typed. "I wouldn't want to take valuable time away from her studies."

Dave turned back and pursed his lips. "She's majoring in criminal justice. Seems like the extra work would help in her studies."

"Are you paying overtime?"

"Comp time."

"Including transportation?"

Dave pursed his lips again, this time adding a twist to the side that gives the impression that he's pondering some deep philosophical question, which is a false impression because he doesn't

have the depth of character to ponder any philosophical questions whatsoever. He had me and he knew it. "One way."

"Okay, I'll do it."

"Great. I'll get you the file." He shuffled back to his office while I contemplated my calendar with a sigh.

Back when Dave offered me work in his investigation agency, I had no illusions about what the job would be like. I would not be tracking down ruthless murderers or underworld jewel thieves. I would not mingle with the rich and famous, looking for clues in the midst of glamorous undercover liaisons. And I would not form an unlikely friendship with a rival police detective who hated my methods but grudgingly admired my results. That was TV. Instead, I would be answering phones, filing papers, and doing background checks on the computer. I could get my work finished in time to pick up the kids from school, help with homework, and get dinner ready before Cub Scouts. And in the first few years after the divorce, that was all I wanted.

But after a while, as my active anger toward my philandering ex-husband faded to a general sense of disgust, I found myself growing tired of the day-to-day sameness of my job. Maybe being a mom wasn't as much fun as it used to be. I could no longer just coast through the day, waiting anxiously to hug Alicia and Evan as they got off the school bus.

They had told me to stop hugging them at the bus stop, for one thing.

And there was no one else to wait for.

So the opportunity to maybe turn my job into a real career was one I simply could not pass up.

A few moments later Dave handed me a folder with a brown drink ring on the corner and the name McGregor scrawled on the front.

When I opened the folder, a lone sheet of scratch paper fluttered to the desk. I looked up at him in disgust. "This is it? Where's the case sheet? Where are the contact forms? Where's the log?"

He scratched his nose. "I figured you could do all that before you go out on Saturday."

"Go? Go where?" I picked up the piece of paper. "Seventeen seventy-six? Is it a hotel room?"

"It's a date, actually."

"Oh, great. Instead of a where, I get a when. So this is a time-travel assignment?"

He grinned. "Yeah, sort of."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

As he headed back toward his office, he beckoned for me to follow. "Look, I do have more information; I just haven't put it all together yet." He added in a low voice, "Because she keeps calling and interrupting me." As he sank into his chair, he pulled a yellow Post-it note off a box of crackers next to his computer monitor. "This is the client. Eileen McGregor."

I followed him into the room reluctantly, hoping the sour smell coming from the bookcase could be traced to something with a lid that might eventually be closed.

He rolled his chair over to me, holding out the adhesive-backed note like an angler trying to lure in a trout. "She's an old lady on the board of the Reisterstown Historical Society. Y' know, the 'hysterical society'? One of those types that wants to keep everything the way it looked in 'the old days.' Anyway, she says the society is missing a valuable artifact. Something having to do with George Washington."

"Has she filed a police report?"

"No."

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “My guess is because the item is worthless and she thinks the police won’t do anything to help recover it. But I’m sure you’ll find out. She’s paid us a nine-hundred-dollar retainer, so I told her we’d start right away.” He fished around in his shirt pocket. “Why don’t you deposit this on your way home?” He handed me a folded check.

I sighed. “No deposit slip, no case number—you didn’t even endorse it.”

“You can sign my name as well as I do.”

“Okay.” I had pretty much given up on getting Dave to keep financial stuff in order. I just should have been grateful that the check wasn’t lost or covered with mustard. I opened the nearly empty McGregor file and placed the check inside. “So what’s with the date?”

He leaned over to squint at the paper. “I was wrong, actually. I mean, it is a date, but it’s also a place. The 1776 House.”

“The 1776 House? Never heard of it. Did Betsy Ross make flags there or something?”

Dave shrugged. “Maybe she knit the Declaration of Independence there. In any case, it’s the place where they kept this missing artifact. Guess it’s probably in Reisterstown somewhere.”

I snapped the file shut. “You didn’t even get an address?”

“I got a check. And I have the lady’s phone number. I figured you or Brittany could manage the details.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

He settled back in what I still thought of as Nate’s big leather chair. “You said you had the kids this weekend, right? Well, take them up there and pretend you’re a mother bringing her kids to learn about history. And then you can ask around—”

“Wait a minute!” I planted my hands on my hips as

I glared at him. “I am a mother. And I do try to take my kids to learn about history. Maybe not as often as—”

He held up his hands as if fending off physical blows from me. “What are you so upset about?”

“This is not an undercover assignment!” I smacked the file against the palm of my hand. “You said it would be an undercover assignment. A soccer mom going undercover as a soccer mom is not much of a challenge!”

“Yes, that’s the whole point. You’ll be convincing.”

“I’ll be bored stiff.”

He shrugged. “Then you’ll be convincingly bored.”

“Dave! This is not how I want to spend my Saturdays.”

“You’re getting paid. Besides, it’s just one Saturday.” I sighed. “Okay. I guess you’re right.” But he wasn’t. For that matter, neither was I.

I didn’t think that Betsy Ross ever lived in Reisterstown, but other than that, I couldn’t really say anything for certain about this 1776 House. So the next day I called Mrs. McGregor for some background, including the address of the site, since the only address I had was the one on her personal check.

“Good morning. This is Karen Maxwell of DS Investigations.”

“Wait while I fix the volume,” a woman’s voice ordered sternly.

Wham!

I surmised that either she dropped the phone or a large object just flattened her house. Various muffled scraping sounds followed before the imperious voice returned. “Hello?” she asked.

“Is this Mrs. McGregor?”

“Yes.”

“I am Karen Maxwell with DS Investigations. I have a few questions to ask, but I will try not to take up too much of your—”

“Well,” she huffed, “I don’t think I have ever talked to you before.”

“No, ma’am. You spoke with my brother, Dave Sarkesian. I need to get some information from you about the case before I—”

“I thought he was handling the case. He told me he would see to it personally.”

I could almost hear her pout through untold miles of fiber-optic phone line.

“This is a matter of some delicacy, you understand,” she continued, “and I do not want it bandied about all over town. That is why I called Mr. Sarkesian instead of the police.”

“I understand, ma’am. Can I get the address of the—”

Her tone grew even haughtier. “Well, I really thought I’d be working with Mr. Sarkesian himself. I’m not sure I should be giving confidential information to you.”

So I wasn’t good enough for her. Fine. Then I would just have to pretend to be Dave, in a way. I put a simpering smile onto my face, hoping the expression would come through in my voice. “Mrs. McGregor, I am Mr. Sarkesian’s secretary. I am simply trying to collect information so that he can devote his mental energy to the science of investigation.”

“Oh. In that case, what do you need to know?”

I took down the address of the site and contact information, and she even offered bank account information to authorize monthly withdrawals from her account should the investigation expenses exceed the initial retainer fee. This woman was serious about finding the missing—

The missing thing. Whatever it was. That was what I had to find out next.

“Now, ma’am, I need information about the missing artifact.”

“Won’t Mr. Sarkesian come to discuss the matter in person?”

Not likely. I think he had already dismissed this one as an open-and-shut case, meaning that she had opened her checkbook and he had shut his wallet with the check inside.

But I came up with an answer for her. “He prefers to be briefed in advance of a meeting so that he has adequate time to think.”

“Oh.”

“So what can you tell me about the missing artifact?”

“Well, no one knows how the thief got it out of the glass case, because only two of us have the key, you know, and I would never steal it, of course, and neither would Ann.” Her words came faster and faster as if she were afraid she would forget a detail. “Ann Bleckenstrauss is the chair of the Exhibits Committee, so this year she has the other key. But she did say she thought we should have an extra copy—of course she also thought we should donate everything to the Daughters of the American Patriots for safekeeping, although I thought if we just put an electronic sensor on the case. . . But when the board discussed the motion, they—although Jimmy Reynolds might have persuaded them to put a sensor on the case if he hadn’t been out for hip surgery that week—”

“What case are you referring to?” Yes, it was rude to interrupt the client, but her zealous rant was already driving me crazy. I had a pretty good idea of why Dave had given this assignment to me.

"The permanent exhibits case," she said pointedly, as if I were a fool not to have already known this. "Well, Ann has keys to all the exhibit cases—"

"But what was in the exhibits case? What was stolen?"

"The Washington notes!" The pitch of her voice rose to an almost painful level. "The Washington notes were taken right from our own locked permanent exhibits case. And that is why I believe it was someone within the society."

"You believe a member of the society stole the. . . Could you explain what the notes are?"

"The Washington notes are exactly what the name implies. They are notes that George Washington penned on a piece of leather. When he spent the night in the house."

I was glad she could not see my skeptical grin. "So George Washington slept there?"

"Oh yes. And ate at least two meals, possibly three. He planned his campaign from the first bedchamber. And that is why the house is so important."

"Where did the notes come from? And why would he write on leather?"

"They were written on a piece of leather most likely cut from the bottom of a chair."

"The father of our country vandalized furniture?"

In the pause that followed, I could just about hear her glare at me for impugning the name of the great man. "It was wartime," she said finally. "He did what he had to do. Now, the notes were found during renovations during the 1920s. They prove Washington's connection to the house. Without the notes, the house is simply another old building." The pitch of her voice had returned to normal levels, but she now sounded as if she were choking back tears. "We must have them back. And no one must know that they're missing, or we will be certain to suffer a reduction in visitors. Everyone comes to see the Washington notes."

I tapped my pen on my notepad. "If the notes are so important to the house, why would someone within the society take them away?"

"There are those members of the board"—she sniffed in derision—"who believe the notes to be fake. They have insisted that we should remove them from display until they can be authenticated. The rest of the board, of course, votes this proposal down every year. But I think she has grown so desperate that she would forcibly remove the notes rather than admit they're wrong."

"She?"

Her voice dropped to a bitter sneer. "Paula Lowell."

I took down the name. "So you think Paula Lowell stole the piece of leather."

"The Washington notes."

I cringed. "Er, yeah, the notes. Or at least you're confident they were stolen by someone in the organization?"

"Paula Lowell is a member of the board, as is her sister, Patty. And we cannot deny that she serves with great dedication. But she does not trust any historical fact unless she herself has discovered it. So her dedication is really most trying." She sighed. "I can only hope that someday she and her sister will find a site more to their liking."

"Do you think if she finds a new site she'll return the piece of—the Washington notes? If she took them?"

Her voice grew strident again. "I am not willing to wait for her to decide on a proper time to return them. I want the notes back in their case straightaway. That is why we hired your brother. At the end of next month, the society will finally have the chance to host a visit from Lucinda Fotheringill, president of the Daughters of the American Patriots. We must have the notes back in place by then, or the 1776 House will be deemed a sham, an unimportant relic."

I was certain now why my brother assigned this “case” to me. The woman sounded nuts. And it sounded as if she worked with people who were equally, if not more, insane. Stealing an old piece of leather. Who would go to such lengths? And why would this woman pay nine hundred dollars to get it back? Dave handed all this craziness to me while he went on to work with more appealing clients.

Before I left that afternoon, I briefed Dave on the conversation.

“You’re doing great.” He layered two anchovies on a cracker and tipped the whole mess into his mouth. “Uf oo oo a oo ob, ah an et oo av or ases.”

“Can we try that again? I’m not very fluent in cracker.”

He swallowed. “If you do a good job with this, I can let you have more cases. Take the lead on them.”

“Great.” I didn’t know whether to believe him. But regardless, I still had to take care of the administrative work, or none of us would have any cases. I dropped a file onto his desk. “You need to sign these, put them in the attached envelopes, and drop them in the mailbox before you leave.”

“Sign, envelopes, mailbox. Got it.”

“See you!” I put on my sunglasses and started for the door.

He opened the folder. “Oh yeah. Hey, thanks for taking that ‘hysterical society’ lady off my hands. I’ve got enough to do with the Petrinelli case.”

“You mean you’d rather spend your time trailing the very attractive Mrs. Petrinelli rather than listening to poor old Mrs. McGregor.”

He grinned. “You’ll have a great time with the kids tomorrow. The old lady told me all about the house and lovely garden. They even demonstrate how to cook over an open fire. I’m sure you’ll pick up some great tips for the kitchen.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, not that he could see with the sunglasses I was wearing. “You owe me, buddy.”

“Just think of this as a test, Karen.”

“And you the teacher. Now that is scary.” But I smiled as I walked out. For all his obnoxious behavior, my brother is a fairly successful investigator, probably because he has a remarkable ability to understand what motivates people. Me, for instance. Just the promise of more interesting work was enough to induce me to give up a weekend afternoon. I knew I could do a good job with this case. In one visit, I would find the thief and get her to confess and cough up the piece of ratty leather before the weekend was out.

All I had to do was convince my kids to go along with it.

Thanks for reading! If you'd like to learn the story behind the story, or see how it turns out, visit <http://katedolan.com/george-washington-stepped-here-by-k-d-hays>