

THE INNOCENT STRANGER

A Carson Reno Mystery

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I have two associates working with me at the Drake Detective Agency, or maybe a better count would be one and a half.

Joe Richardson is fulltime, and a valuable member of my team. I regard him as an important asset - one that I certainly couldn't do without.

My other associate, Lydia Longstreet operates her own detective business and has her own set of clients, albeit some strange ones. When she's not searching for a missing pet, or a purse left on the city bus, I get her to assist with our investigations. In fact, I've even set her up in an office next to Joe – just to keep her handy. Joe insists I did that so I could keep an eye on her, and he might be right – she's not bad to look at. However, after her sister, Lilly, lost her life working with me on a case I call 'Dead End', I just somehow feel responsible for Lydia's safety. Regardless the reason, Lydia has proven herself and I am glad to have her around.

Lydia Longstreet is a beautiful woman, much like her older sister but in different ways. Lydia is taller, probably by more than an inch, and has a figure that places more emphasis on her breasts – she'd gotten what Lilly had missed. Soft tan skin, piercing dark eyes and coal black hair are always appropriately highlighted by dark clothes – offering the observer a 'sexy, but dangerous' appearance. The little .32 she keeps strapped to her left leg is always threatening, plus handy and nice to have around.

Joe was in Dallas chasing a man named Andrew Hibberly. Mr. Hibberly had walked away from his accounting job at a local investment firm with \$300,000 of their money - and of course, they wanted it back.

While the police did their duty and were actively trying to find the crook and recover the money, the frustrated bonding company came to the Drake Detective Agency to see if we might be of assistance. That bonding company, Black Diamond Insurance, paid all expenses plus a 10% recovery fee. I loved this kind of work, and we jumped on the case immediately.

My contacts at the Starlight Lounge told me that Mr. Hibberly had been often seen in the company of a Ms. Stella Malone. Further investigation discovered that, while she maintained an apartment in Memphis, her real home was in Dallas, Texas.

When her Memphis apartment turned up empty, Joe went to Dallas to sit on that address and wait on Stella and/or Andrew Hibberly to show up. My guess was that it wouldn't take very long.

Joe's latest update reported that Stella Malone had arrived back at her Dallas home, but there had been no sign of Andrew Hibberly. He would continue to watch and wait. I was confident that Mr. Hibberly would appear...eventually.

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Lydia was in the office today, and I was contemplating taking her to lunch at the Rendezvous when my phone rang – it was Marcie.

“Carson, you have a man here in the lobby who says it's urgent that he speak with you. He seems quite excited and nervous. Are you available?”

“Well...I was going to lunch, but - a client is a client. What's his name? Did he mention the urgency or say why he needed to speak with me?”

“His name is Harrison Boring, and no he didn’t explain his reasons or the urgency. Do you want me to ask?”

“So he’s a lawyer,” I said hurriedly.

“How...how did you know that? I didn’t say anything about him being a lawyer. Do you know Mr. Boring?”

“Don’t know him and never met the man – but with a handle like Boring, what other kind of job would he have.”

There was silence for a moment. I knew she wanted to say something about my comment, but with him standing in front of her she couldn’t.

“Carson, will you be able to see Mr. Boring or not? I can ask him to schedule an appointment if you want.”

“No, I’ll see him. And ask Lydia to join us, if she’s still in her office and isn’t busy.”

I hung up the phone, walked to my office door and opened it just in time for a man to rush by me, then stop when he reached my desk. I assumed this intrusion to be Mr. Harrison Boring, and I easily understood what Marcie meant by ‘excited and nervous’.

He was short, fat and appeared to be out of breath when he finally turned to face me. My new visitor was dressed in a wrinkled brown suit, wrinkled white shirt, narrow dark tie (loosened), scuffed shoes and an equally wrinkled hat. Under his left arm was a small briefcase, and he was holding a paper cup in his right hand. Based upon the label, I assumed the cup contained coffee from the Peabody Coffee Shop. Or hopefully something stronger, I’m not sure this fellow needed any more caffeine.

I knew the temperature outside this hotel to be somewhere close to freezing, yet Mr. Harrison Boring was sweating out of every pore – large drops running down his cheeks onto the collar of his wrinkled shirt before finally reaching the lapel of his wrinkled jacket.

The loosened tie offered some relief to an oversized neck, which was already pushing the limits of a shirt that seemed to be several sizes too small. The shirt, along with everything else he was wearing, had become soaked with sweat – giving the look that he just might have taken a shower while wearing his clothes.

He hurriedly sat down in one of my office chairs, placed the cup on the corner of my desk, removed his hat (revealing a very bald head), and then began to fan himself with the hat.

“Whew,” he mumbled after sitting down.

With all the commotion Carson, Joe’s English bulldog, slowly raised his head from his sleeping spot on my couch, looked at our visitor, then glanced at me. Detecting no danger - he went back to sleep.

“Mr. Boring, are you okay? I see you have some coffee, but would you like some water or perhaps something stronger? I can have room service deliver whatever you need.”

“No...no, I’m fine,” he huffed. “I’ve...I’ve just been rushing around...thank you for seeing me without an appointment Mr. Reno. I really appreciate it.”

I walked around my desk, sat down and looked at my visitor. “Perhaps I should have them turn the heat down in the hotel. I didn’t realize it was that warm in here.”

“No...no, I’m fine,” he repeated, while still fanning himself with his hat.

Before I could respond my inside office door opened and Lydia Longstreet walked in. He stood up, I remained seated.

“Mr. Boring, this is Miss Lydia Longstreet. She’s an associate of the Drake Detective Agency and I’ve asked her to join us. Lydia, this is Mr. Harrison Boring. He has come to see us about...well I’m not sure what he’s come to see us about, but I expect he is going to tell us.”

"Nice to meet you Miss Longstreet," he nodded, before returning to his chair and resuming his fanning.

Carson, the English bulldog woke up again and grunted his dissatisfaction at the continued disturbance. Harrison Boring turned toward the noise.

"Oh my...oh my, you have a dog." He was looking at Carson, but still fanning himself with his hat. "And he is certainly a big one."

"Yes he is, but quite harmless." I offered a reassuring smile.

"I don't...I don't like dogs...I don't think." He returned his attention back to me.

"I assure you that Carson is harmless. He's just big, and he can't help that – it just means he eats well, or so the vet tells me." I continued to offer my reassuring smile.

"Carson...did you say his name was Carson? Isn't your name Carson also? You ARE Carson Reno...right?"

"Yes, and I know that can be confusing. But please, let's get down to business. Tell me how the Drake Detective Agency can help you?" My frustration with Harrison Boring was beginning to show.

Lydia sat down on the couch and gave me a funny look.

Harrison Boring stopped fanning and gave Carson a serious stare before dropping his wrinkled hat on the floor next to his chair. Perhaps he was looking for some assurance that the dog wouldn't eat his hat for dessert.

Perspiration continued to run down his cheeks and onto his shirt collar, before depositing itself on his suit. I needed to get this meeting over before his sweat stained my carpet!

With a slight grunt, he placed the briefcase on his lap and opened it before speaking.

“Have you been following the newspaper story about the man who disappeared while duck hunting? It happened several weeks ago and several miles from here...near a place called Humboldt.”

Lydia gave me another funny look. Obviously Mr. Harrison Boring had no idea that I didn't read the papers – other than the funnies and sometimes the sports. I didn't care for all the phony news and one sided reporting. In the past that bad habit of mine had proved to be a problem. I guess we were going down that path again.

“I seemed to recall something,” I lied. “But I'm sorry – I'm just not up to date on the story. Is that what you want to see me about?”

He closed his briefcase. “I was told that you were from that area of Tennessee, the Humboldt, Tennessee area, and would be most interested in the situation - considering that it happened so close to your home – or former home.”

“Mr. Boring, I didn't say that I wasn't interested – I just said that I wasn't up to date on the latest information. But, who told you I was from that area and might have an interest in your...your 'situation' – whatever that 'situation' may be?”

He glanced at Lydia and then returned his attention to me. “I was given your name by the sheriff of that county – a Mister Leroy Epsee. Was I misinformed?”

I paused for a moment. “Look Mr. Boring, let's start all over again. I do know Sheriff Epsee. We are old friends and I appreciate him giving you my name. However, I'm not familiar with what you're talking about...I'm not familiar with your 'situation'. But if you'll tell me why you're sitting in my office, I'll try to determine if the Drake Detective Agency can be of assistance. Can we do that?”

Once again he glanced at Lydia before returning his attention to me. His breathing had slowed to a more normal pace, and he seemed a little more relaxed – but the sweating continued. He reopened his briefcase, removed a file and then closed it again. Both the briefcase and file remained in his lap.

“Eight weeks ago Mr. Russell Maxwell left his Memphis home to go duck hunting. His destination was an area of flooded woods and farm land near Humboldt, Tennessee. According to what we know he planned on hunting on or near the Forked Deer River. And also according to what we know, he actually made it to that destination. His abandoned car and boat trailer were found close to the river on a rural road. Also the boat he was using was found floating several hundred yards from his car and trailer.”

“I see,” I said for no reason.

“Anyway, when he didn’t return home as scheduled, the local authorities were contacted and a search began.”

“By local authorities, I assume you mean Sheriff Epsee?”

“Yes...yes, Sheriff Epsee and his department were contacted and given the details.”

“Did the family...the family of Russell Maxwell contact Sheriff Epsee directly?”

“No...no not directly. Mrs. Maxwell...Mrs. Arlene Maxwell contacted the local Memphis Police who forwarded the information to Sheriff Epsee and his department.”

“Okay, that makes sense. What happened next?”

“Well Mr. Reno...that’s where things get a little strange and confused.”

“In what way?”

"It seems that when Sheriff Epsee was contacted by the Memphis Police about Russell Maxwell, he was ALREADY searching the same area for ANOTHER missing duck hunter."

"Who was the other missing hunter?"

"I don't recall, but that's not important. What is important is that when they located the other missing hunter he was...well, he was dead."

"Interesting. Was his death the result of a hunting accident or from some other cause?"

"I don't think they know or at least if they do know, they're not saying anything about it. The name of the other victim or the circumstances surrounding his death hasn't been made public."

That sounded just like Leroy, and my money was on the fact that he knew exactly how that hunter died. And with him not saying anything, meant that it was probably not an accident.

"Okay Mr. Boring, this is all great information. But why are you in my office and why would Sheriff Epsee have sent you to me?"

He laid the file on the corner of my desk, put his briefcase on the floor, picked up his coffee cup and took a sip. "I've been hired by the Century Life Insurance Company to resolve the death claim benefits for Mr. Maxwell. Officially he is still listed as missing, but the family – Mrs. Arlene Maxwell has filed a petition with the First District Court of Tennessee to have him declared dead so death benefits can be paid. Evidently the family believes they need the money...although I can't imagine why."

That was certainly a strange thing for him to say.

"Why can't you imagine that the family needs the money? What did Russell Maxwell do for a living?"

“He was an independent truck driver, driving semi-trucks pulling trailers across the country delivering...well, delivering whatever cargo he was carrying. He owned his own trucking equipment; however, the family’s living style is not what I imagined for a truck driver.”

“What does that mean? You’re talking in circles.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Russell Maxwell own a big home in Germantown along with several nice cars – in addition to his trucking equipment. If you ask me...well, if you ask me all that seems above the pay grade I would expect for a truck driver.”

His conversation was irritating, but I was trying to keep my cool.

“I’m sure I don’t know about independent truck driver’s pay grade and what they earn for what they do. But, you still haven’t told me why you’re here. What do you want the Drake Detective Agency to do?”

He wiped the growing sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his wrinkled jacket, picked up his hat from the floor and put it back on his bald head. “The authorities in Humboldt are not helping. They found Mr. Maxwell’s boat floating in the flooded river near the car and boat trailer. It contained his hunting equipment, including shotgun, shells and a few other items. The car was locked and no other personal items have been recovered. According to Sheriff Epsee, until they find a body – there is nothing else they can do.”

“Please Mr. Boring; tell me why you are here and how I can help. You’re giving me a lot of information, but not telling me what you want me to do.”

“I want you to investigate and give me information that I can take to Century Life Insurance Company. They need something other than an empty boat and locked car to present to the court when this thing comes to trial, and that is going to happen soon...real soon – within the next two weeks I believe.”

“Okay, so let me get this straight. The insurance company needs a professional investigation of the incident before making a decision about the life insurance claim. Am I right?”

“Yes, that is correct. The local authorities in Humboldt are not giving me anything. When I expressed my needs and concerns to Sheriff Epsee, he suggested that I contact you.”

“If you’d said that in the first place we could have avoided a lot of this meaningless conversation.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be confusing. What I need is a professional investigation and a report for the life insurance company. Without it this situation could drag through the courts for months...perhaps years. I mean...it’s obvious that something has happened to Russell Maxwell, we just don’t know what that something is.”

“I see,” I said again.

“Mr. Reno, don’t misunderstand. My client very much wants to pay on this death claim. But, we are talking about a large...a very large settlement, and they need to be sure before writing that check.”

“Meaning that if he died of natural causes, and it wasn’t the result of an accident, then the settlement would be much less.” I glanced at Lydia.

“Or perhaps he’s just gotten himself lost and...and well perhaps Russell Maxwell isn’t dead at all.” Realizing what he had just said, he turned and smiled at Lydia before returning his attention back to me.

“In which case there would be no claim, and thus no settlement.”

“Exactly,” he nodded and smiled. “And I’m prepared to pay you your normal fee plus expenses for such an investigation.”

He was still sweating, so I let him continue while I stared without speaking. The silence was deafening.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat to calm his nervousness. "Just what are...are your fees Mr. Reno? I'm afraid I forgot to ask."

I didn't answer his question. "Mr. Boring, how much life insurance are we talking about?"

"Ahem...," he cleared his throat again. "Well...actually there are two policies – one for \$500,000 and another for \$250,000. Both payable to his wife, as surviving spouse."

"Why two policies?"

"I believe one was a personal policy and the other an occupational policy for his trucking business. However, both are payable to his wife – as I said before."

"And unless a body is found, I presume the cause of death would ultimately be determined as accidental...am I correct?"

"Yes...yes, that would be the case."

"Double Indemnity, am I right?"

"Yes Mr. Reno that is the way the policies were written."

"So your client is facing a potential claim of \$1.5 million dollars in life insurance...correct?"

"Ahem...," he cleared his throat again. "Yes...yes we are talking about a lot of money. And certainly a lot of money for a case that has no body, and no real proof of death or cause of death."

I rubbed my chin and watched him sweat.

"Mr. Boring, how are you being paid? Are you charging hourly rates plus expenses, as you've offered me, or do you have a percentage agreement with the life insurance company – a percentage of that \$1.5 million if you cut their loss?"

“Well...well you see,” he stuttered. “Our arrangement is much more complicated than that.”

“Explain it to me – I’ll try not to get confused.”

“Well...well you see,” he continued to stutter. “My fee is based upon recovery outside of a total loss. If they must pay the \$1.5 million, then my fee would only be hourly charges plus expenses. But anything less than that...that \$1.5 million I would get ten percent of the difference.”

I continued to stare and watch him sweat.

“Okay, you got a deal,” I finally said.

“We do...I mean...we do?” he was all smiles. “Thank you Mr. Reno I really appreciate your help.”

“I’ll take the same deal you have with the insurance company, ten percent of any monies recovered plus daily fees and expenses. I can ask my secretary draw up the necessary paperwork and have it ready for your signature within the hour.”

“Wait...wait...no...that’s not what I mean. I mean, that’s not what I came here to do. I came here to hire you at your normal rates.”

“Then have a nice day.” I stood up. “I’m not interested in working a case to make you a rich man. We have other business at the Drake Detective Agency, and thus no time for your offer. Thank you for coming by.”

“But...but, I was told you were the person we needed to resolve this problem – one way or another.”

“I’m not responsible for what you were told. But if you want me to handle this case, then I’ve already told you my terms. Take them or leave them. Now, if you don’t mind, I have other clients waiting,” I lied.

“Okay,” he paused for a moment. “Okay, let me talk to the insurance company and see what they say. Can I get you an answer tomorrow?”

“Call my secretary tomorrow before ten o’clock with your decision, then come by to sign the agreement. I look forward to handling your case if you want my services. If not...well, then it has been interesting.”

He stood, put his briefcase under his arm and walked to the door before turning around. “Mr. Reno, you...you are not what I expected.”

“My apology, sometimes I affect people that way,” I smiled. “But, I’m really not sure what you were expecting – sorry if I disappointed or didn’t meet your expectations.”

“Well I just...I just...”

“However Mr. Boring, you will be pleased to know that you ARE exactly what I expected.”

“Humph,” he snorted before opening the door.

“And leave your case file with my secretary when you drop by tomorrow to sign the agreement. I’ll need that information to begin my investigation.”

“Humph,” he snorted again before stepping into the hallway and closing the door behind him.

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And

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