

HARD BOILED

STORY



1189

A Novel by
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The **STRAY**



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Andrew Lloyd

"Good thing I'd left my gun here. The night is so quiet sometimes." he said as he entered the detective agency. The door closed behind him with a resounding slam.

The woman on the other side of the desk, typing out some incomprehensible notebook notes, jumped with a lump that had knotted in her throat without warning. The man walked towards her without lifting the brim of his hat with his index finger to hide his eyes or remove his raincoat.

"Didn't go, boss?"

"That bastard Jimmy's gone rogue. One more time." Mason Stone leaned his elbow wearily on the lamp on the desk of his assistant, April Rosenbaum, a very blonde girl from a good family who, for her age, could have been his little sister.

"He seems to do that when you look for him."

"It's not that it looks like, he does it on purpose!"

James Garfield, one of her informants, was a man who favoured easy joys and cheap vices. When he disappeared, you could be sure he had plucked someone's chickens or left a big hand uncovered in some gambling den.

"When I get my hands on him..." he promised.

"I forgot; you have visitors." April pointed with her eyes to the closed door of Mason's office. The detective turned to look too, as if he could see through the walls.

At first, he grunted, surprised, then, annoyed, asked, "Federal?"

"I don't think so..." replied April, biting her lip at that forgetfulness.

"How is he dressed, like a dandy?"

"He gave me the impression he was a Wall Street guy," she tried to make up for it.

"Even worse then," sighed Mason. He had never taken his eyes off the door.

As he entered his office, the dusty light from the window illuminated his mottled clothes. The hubbub of the door opening awakened the man at the back of the room, who was looking out over the beautiful view from the wall

of the building opposite. His hands were buried in the pockets of his mouse-grey suit. He barely turned his head, as if he did not expect to see anyone enter. For his part, Stone did not say hello. He closed the door behind him, shook out his raincoat, which fell better on him, and walked over to the filing cabinet against the wall. He opened the top drawer and took out a small revolver. He checked that it was loaded, rotated the cylinder and closed it with a flick of his wrist. He put the pistol down and lit a cigarette. He did all this without so much as glancing at the man who, in the meantime, had approached and was standing three steps away from him.«Mr. Stone?»

"Bingo."

Only then did the man extend his hand. To return the gesture, Mason should have moved closer. He didn't.

"If it's for Senator Marlowe's campaign, forget it: I voted for the other candidate."

"No Mr. Stone, I'm not from the committee," the man explained, unable to stifle a nervous giggle.

"Then who is? I've had a bad night and will most likely have a worse day, help me with this transition."

"Andrew Lloyd." he hurried on.

"Good. What can I do for you, Andrew?" the suit was as FBI as he was a prom queen.

"I want you to find out who killed Elizabeth Perkins." he said all in one breath, as if a weight was being lifted from his stomach.

Mason Stone stared at him for a moment, the cigarette between his fingers wearing away uselessly. "Go on."

"Elizabeth used to work for me at Lloyd & Wagon's. She was my secretary."

Mason tucked the cigarette back between his lips and turned his back on the man, reached a hand towards the filing cabinet and picked up the small 6mm. "Yes, the name rings a bell. If I'm not mistaken, though, the department already has its suspect. All you have to do is get your hands on him."

"Exactly."

"Then why hire a private investigator for a case that only needs the word 'finish'? Is your wallet weighing you down?" he said slipping the revolver under his raincoat, behind his back.

"They're not doing enough."

"Really?" Mason turned to look at him, amazed.

"You know the police have bigger problems to deal with these days, too!" Lloyd snapped, as if Mason had just slapped him.

"The fight against smuggling is an invention of the mayor and a press affair, even the walls know it but that's no reason to take your frustration out on me. Do you remember the promise you made to me? I'm going to have a very bad day ahead of me so now you sit there and tell me why Papa Stone has to take this cat into the bag. That's a good boy." Mason patted Lloyd's cheeks a couple of times and pointed to one of the chairs opposite the desk. Now that he had rattled him, the man was ready to talk. Mason treated his clients like the scum he hunted. It served to strip them of the masks they wore. "Would you like a tonic, Andrew? I'd offer you something stronger but these are the times."

Lloyd refused with a wave of his hand. Once he had sat down Mason resumed.

"Why are you convinced that the police aren't doing everything they can in the Elizabeth Perkins murder?" the detective leaned back against the filing cabinet, his fist on his temple lifting the brim of his hat a few inches.

"First of all, I don't think the culprit is her husband, Samuel."

"Do you know him?"

"No, and Elizabeth didn't talk much about his private life but I know they were happy."

"Human nature is as treacherous as a mother-in-law, you should know that. I'd advise you not to put your hand in the fire for anyone, especially a stranger."

"I need you to do what the detectives aren't doing."

"And that would be?"

"Investigate."

"What if they're not overlooking anything? What if they're doing everything in their power to bring justice to the girl?"

"Then I will accept it but I need the evidence, Mr. Stone. I need to know."

"Your bond must have been very strong for her, and not someone from Elizabeth's family, to come to me."

"From what I know she had no one but Samuel."

"That is a very sad thing but nevertheless it does not answer the question."

"It was very important, to us." he said, and his eyes searched the floor beneath his top-of-the-class shoes. "About the office." he then added.

"If you're hiding something from me coming to me won't help you."

Andrew Lloyd raised his head sharply, "Does that mean you accept?"

"I don't like splashing in other children's puddles."

"You'll be handsomely paid," Lloyd promised, rising to his feet.

"Talk it over with my secretary."

"Fine, thank you!"

"Wipe off your sweat before you go that way, or the girl will think I've mistreated you. Save me this trouble."

The precinct

"Stone, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Peterson, get the hell out of here."

"You know what'll happen if Martelli catches you snooping around."

"Oh, so you're here for me? Whatever you say. I'll take my coffee bitter, like life. Thanks."

Mason continued walking down the precinct corridor. Peterson stopped him after ten paces. It didn't seem like five years to the freshman he had mentored: the authority of a whipped dog and the stench of milk still on him. For Mason, those five years seemed like twenty. Time had spared him nothing. For too long he had defied risk and too many times he had managed to fool him.

"Get out of here, Stone."

"Or what? You'll slap me around like a whore?"

"No, man, I'll have to arrest you."

"I got a case."

"Let's not talk about ongoing investigations."

"Elizabeth Perkins."

"Good luck. The case is Matthews'."

"Matthews? He wouldn't even catch a cold, that one."

"Yeah, and he's pissed, so forget it."

"Peterson, how long have you had your balls in your wife's jewellery box?"

"Hand over the gun."

Mason looked at the old partner. Peterson stepped back just enough to let him know he trusted him but that it wasn't convenient to betray him. The private investigator brought a hand to his coat and held out the revolver by the butt end.

"Now let me talk to the coroner."

"No way."

"Can I take a look at the report?"

"If it's okay with Matthews."

"Hey, come on! For old time's sake!"

"You're getting old. They weren't so good."

"Piss off."

"Get out!" with a gentle nudge Peterson pointed the way.

"Don't make me put you to sleep."

"You've always been good with words."

"I punched the mayor in the face, don't think I'd lose any sleep over you."

"You sound frustrated, I understand, but you're picking on the wrong man. Your wife wasn't my type."

Behind Mason's fist, Peterson's face crumpled into a grimace of pain. Stunned, the detective staggered and darted to the side to retreat from a possible double. But Mason did not strike again, picked up his gun, which had escaped from his former partner's hands, and holstered it. He adjusted his hat and watched Peterson spit and wipe his mouth with the back of his hand. He then motioned for the two agents who had come to his aid to escort Mason out of the building. Mason did not resist.

"If I let you go this time, it's only because of Adele," Peterson shouted before the precinct doors slammed shut.

Back when real men didn't still reek of imported tobacco and bloody fish-egg canapés, the likes of Mason got to decide the good and the bad. Now he was just a man on the pavement, the renegade bastard of a town that had purged its sins and disowned its rebellious sons.

Stone adjusted his collar and slipped into the alley, engulfed in the dust of a world everyone thought was dead. The iron groan of an old door tore away the echo of his footsteps.

"Don't kid yourself, old man: I barely heard it." Peterson.

"Your Irish pig face lies but your eyes say you cried like a little girl."

Mason's wife's name was Wendy, not Adele.

And that's what she still calls herself, wherever she wants to take her ambitious ass. Los Angeles? Northern California? A sleazy small-town casino?

Adele's was the old Polish bar next to the district. In fact, in those days it was nothing but a lousy dump full of memories no one wanted. A cop bar when cops weren't supposed to go near a bottle of booze except to get it down the drain.

"Low profile." Peterson beckoned him through the back door from which he was drenched in cologne. He'd be in trouble if Captain Martelli or

Matthews found out he was spilling the details of a case to a first-rate undesirable like himself.

He took him to Dr Tollins, and to Elizabeth.

"When I looked in the mirror this morning, I swore to myself that that would be the last horrible thing of the day. Now I understand why my father never made any promises. Hello, Doc."

"Always a pleasure, Stone."

"Our private detective would like to see someone," Peterson said.

"Do you have an appointment?" Doc acted as their cicerone among the many tables he was working on. Pale silhouettes under white sheets from which nothing but feet and name tags sprouted.

"The lady said she'd wait for him," cop humour.

"Elizabeth Perkins." cut Mason short.

Doc walked over to the table on his left and discovered the bluish body of a young woman, caught in her most beautiful dawn.

"Female, 21 years old. Height five feet seven inches, weighing approximately..."

"Skip the introductions, Doc."

"Arms have obvious bruising."

"Fingers." Mason said aloud.

"She was forcibly restrained," Peterson said.

"Perceptive as usual."

"The location of the bruises tells us that the attacker was facing her," the coroner continued.

"Signs of forced entry?" Mason turned to Peterson.

"None. When they found her she was on the floor. Only her blouse and skirt on. On the table two used glasses."

"Liquor?"

"In one was water or brew, in the other a light tea. Doc has already ruled out possible traces of poison or narcotic."

"The rest of his things?"

"Scattered all over the living room."

"Was she raped?" asked Doc.

"There's nothing to suggest rape."

"An angry lover?" proposed Mason.

"A husband who came home early from work?" suggested Peterson.

"There'd be a body missing," Mason pointed out.

"Maybe the boyfriend, tired of sharing her, decided to come out of the closet and she threatened to leave him."

"The lover in love theory? Peterson, how humiliating!"

"Who can say that?! Everyone seems to be going crazy these days. And without alcohol, there's nothing else to keep human impulses in check."

"You look better since you've been on tonic water, Pete. The 18th Amendment thinks about your health."

"As if Prohibition didn't triple the workload," he complained to himself.

"Are there any witnesses?"

"The body was discovered by the caretaker at 6.45pm. The door of the flat was half-opened. The man saw two men enter the building: the first went up at about 4 p.m. but, as he had been there before, he didn't ask any questions; the second, a notary, asked about the Perkins' interior at about 5.30 p.m."

"Have you identified them yet?"

"They're working on it."

"What about the husband?"

"Samuel Perkins, a Sunshine Cab driver, is..."

"Disappeared, I guess. When was he last seen?"

"What a lovely reunion! Pity he wasn't invited: I would have brought something." Standing in the doorway of the morgue towered the burly homicide detective Matthews. Peterson's hand went immediately to Mason's chest as the newcomer advanced toward them. This was neither the time nor the place to let tempers flare.

"I came to say hello to Doc and tell him a few cheerful stories. Now that he's a father, he needs more constructive anecdotes than the evolutionary cycle of maggots in corpses," Mason improvised, throwing a smile at Doc, who caught it and began to shake his head vigorously.

"Yeah, congratulations Doc. Take care with that creature: one creepy family member is more than enough!" barked Matthews, giving the doctor half a sidelong glance. Mason did not spare an ounce of contempt for Matthews. They were separated by Peterson and the naked body of a poor girl to whom fate had reserved a terrible fate.

Doc frowned in surprise, and Matthews emerged:

"Still playing cop, Stone?"

Mason met Peterson's gaze, convinced that spark would start a fire, and reassured him with a smile. A smile that turned into an amused grin when his eyes landed on an item in the cart next to the girl's body.

"Hey, we're celebrating, Matthews: relax, put on a hat and have a drink."

Matthews' face became a mask of anger, his white fists along his sides, clenched just tight enough to stop the blood. Mason was handing him a pythal.

"Try it, but I'm convinced you'll do just fine," he continued.

Matthews covered the distance in three wide strides. His size, so heavy, was no impediment when his anger took over. The world was full of rabid dogs. Especially the NYPD, when enlisting was a solution to a hot meal and warming hands with some poor guy who had no fault other than being in the wrong part of town. Matthews was a watchdog. He always had been, and he was now that he'd traded in his uniform for a name tag and a desk among dozens of others. Big and stupid enough to be the nightmare of every half-wit in New York.

"Let's be calm!" chimed in Peterson.

"Throw this clown out, Peterson, or Doc will have to make room!" Matthews was foaming with rage. If he had left, Peterson would have barely restrained him.

"Don't worry, I was just leaving. For a morgue the atmosphere is getting a little too hot." Stone walked around Peterson and Matthews, showing no haste in doing so.

"I don't want to see you around here again, is that understood?"

"Explained. Take care Doc." he said raising his arm.

"Next time I catch you snooping around in one of my cases I'll lock you up and throw away the key, understand?"

"Only if you let your parents beat me up a bit - cuddling is important if we want things to last."

"I'll accommodate you." Matthews loosened the knot on his tie and lifted his shirt sleeves, stepping forward.

"Stone, get out of here!" ordered Peterson, stepping between them.

"Matthews feels ready to come to school, Pete, do you want to deny him that pleasure?"

"Get out or I won't be held responsible for what happens."

"Oh yes you will be, Peterson. As soon as I get out of here, I'm going to report to Martelli and tell him how you allow certain individuals to sneak into the precinct. You should choose your friendships better," Matthews threatened.

"Is that how you want to play it?" replied Peterson.

"That's how it works in my neck of the woods. The district first."

"It's fascinating how quickly you can forget. A cop is always a brother, right?"

"Not when it embarrasses the force and betrays the family."

"And who arrogates all rights and leaves all duties to others?"

"What are you implying, you little brat?" Matthews pulled Peterson to himself and spat all his contempt at him. "I'll fix the student and then the master."

"Um..." intervened Doc.

"What is it, Doc?" barked Matthews.

"Stone's gone," he said.

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