

TWINS AND THE MISSING CORD

A Lydia James Mystery

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By F. Haywood Glenn

It had been almost two years since I quit my job at the law firm. My colleagues thought I was crazy, but I felt good about my decision. I had already taken the necessary classes but I needed to have at least three years of experience in a private detective agency before I could sit for the PI Exam. Luckily, Carl knew an agency that he thought would be perfect for me. Hines Investigations was a small agency located in Delaware County. Its owner was, Jeffrey Hines, an ex-police detective.

Carl invited Mr. Hines to join us for dinner one evening. He thought it might be a good idea for us to meet before I actually applied for the job. He arranged for us to dine at a familiar steakhouse. Mr. Hines was a kindly, aging white man with an easy smile and shaded blue eyes. He talked a lot about the job he held as a detective before his age forced him into retirement. He and Carl had been partners at one time. I had already heard many of these stories from Carl. I wanted to know more about his detective agency. I forced myself to be patient while the two men went on and on about city politics and how it affected the police departments of both counties. Finally, he said, "So what gives, Carl?"

"Excuse me?" Carl acted truly surprised.

"Why this sudden dinner invitation after two years of complete silence? We've known each other a long time and I know that you have an angle. What is this about?"

With a sheepish look on his face, Carl let out a long sigh and lifted his head to look into the eyes of his old friend. "All right. I wanted you to meet Lydia. I thought that an informal setting would allow you to get to know her a little before she actually applied for a job at your agency. I thought she would have a better chance if you were able to speak with her casually."

"Ah," Mr. Hines sighed as he leaned back in his chair and eyed Lydia suspiciously. "I'm happy to meet you,

Miss James." He smiled and Lydia smiled back hoping that she was giving off an air of confidence. Dinner was served and Carl and Mr. Hines continued to reminisce about old cases they had solved together. Later, Mr. Hines ordered another bottle of wine and he and Carl chatted for a few minutes more before he turned his attention back to me.

"Miss James," he said as his eyes seemed to take in every inch of my face. "I'm a little curious why a young lawyer with a bright future in law, would want to be a private investigator?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Tell me," he took a long sip of his wine. "What do you know of my agency?"

He looked as if he expected his question to have caught me off guard, but I was prepared. I expected this and how could I prove that I could be a good detective if I let this investigation

slip by me. I smiled and glanced at Carl who quickly winked as if to say, 'you've got this,' Lydia.

"Well, Mr. Hines," I began. "I know that it was your agency that found the culprits who stole the priceless Monet paintings from the Campbell Estate and replaced them with fakes. Your agency was also credited with finding the Fairchild girl kidnapped from her school and held for ransom in upstate New York. I could go on but I think it is obvious that I've done my homework."

As Lydia spoke his smile broadened. "Very good Miss James, I'm impressed. Now tell me why you want to work for me. Don't give me an answer that you've read in a book. Give me the truth!"

"All right. I don't really want to work for anyone. My goal is to have my own investigation agency but that can't happen without a PI license. I am trying to get a PI license and I need three years of experience in a reputable agency before I can take the LP License exam."

"Ah," he said shaking his head. "Well, I'm getting up in age. I will soon be seventy-five years old and I am not as agile as I once was, as you can probably guess. I've been thinking about taking on an apprentice or two who could take over the agency in a couple of years." Lydia could hardly contain her excitement. "It won't be that easy though, Miss James. There is another candidate and it will take some time before you both can get the experience necessary." He took another sip from his wine and peered at me over the rim of his glasses. "Do you have any experience in investigations?"

"No, but I have a law degree and I have worked for a few years as a junior lawyer. I'm curious by nature and I love to research. I just think that I would make a good investigator."

"I see," he said thoughtfully, "well, we will see how it goes, no promises."

"Whatever you need, Mr. Hines. I'm just grateful for the opportunity."

"Be at my office at 9:00 a.m. on Monday morning."

I was elated. This was my chance and I couldn't ask for a better setup. I spent the entire weekend obsessing about our Monday morning meeting. I needed to wear the right clothes. I was looking for something comfortable but not too informal. Of course, I could not wear heels. I needed to be able to move around. Carl was absolutely no help in this regard. He kept saying, "It's all right, babe. Just be yourself. It will all work out."

He was right. I showed up at Mr. Hines's office ready to learn and work. My competition and co-worker was a young white man named Ken Driscoll. Apparently, Ken had flunked out of the police academy and this was the next best thing. He wore a cheerful smile and had slow gray eyes that looked as if he could fall asleep at any moment. He extended his sweaty hand in greeting and shook my hand timidly. You know, the kind of handshake that only touches your fingers and not your palm.

Mr. Hines gave us the particulars of the current case. The Hines Agency was hired to locate a vintage 1937 Cord Roadster which had been stolen from the garage of Charles Whittler, a wealthy philanthropist in Marion County. It had been almost a month since the theft was reported and the local police had no idea of the automobile's whereabouts or the thieves who

had stolen the car. Ken spent the morning researching the car. I watched him make notes on the front and back of a large legal pad. He didn't offer to share anything and I didn't ask. When he finally stopped writing, he decided to check with the police and see just how far their investigation had gone. I didn't think he would get too far with the police. I knew from experience that the police didn't care for outside investigators interfering in their cases.

I chose to search out sales of vintage cars and car parts. I found a couple of companies that dealt exclusively with vintage car parts. I also found that selling vintage cars on the black market was a real thing. However, most inquiries regarding the car did not produce solid leads. I thought it best to check out the family so, I called Mr. Whittler and requested to meet with him regarding the theft of his car and he agreed.

The Whittlers lived on a tree-lined street with old-fashioned street lamps. It was a large estate with a stone mansion. Visitors were expected to announce themselves through an intercom at the front gate. Once inside the gate, I drove around the perfectly manicured lawn to the front of the house. Beech trees lined the road to the estate and there was also a stone fountain in the middle of the lawn. Everything about the place screamed old money.

I was meant at the front door by a stout, aging white woman, complete with a light gray uniform and a crisply starched white apron. "Good morning," I said as cheerfully as I could. "I am Miss James and Mr. Whittler is expecting me,"

Her response was little more than a grunt. "Follow me," she muttered before leading the way through a spacious foyer and into a sitting room. Mr. and Mrs. Whittler sat in two Queen Anne armchairs. "Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Whittler," I said as I extended my hand to the husband. He took my hand firmly and shook it with strength.

"I don't know what more I can tell you, Miss James. I've told the police all that I know."

"I'm sure, Mr. Whittler, but I just have a few more questions." He looked annoyed but said nothing. "Has anyone new shown interest in the car?"

"Well, of course, Miss James. It is a vintage car, for God's sake. This car is shown in car shows all over the country. There is always someone interested in the car."

"Has anyone contacted you personally, here at the house?"

"NO," he said shortly. At that moment, I saw a young girl just outside the room. She took a peep into the room and moved on down the corridor. I guessed that must be their daughter. "Will that be all, Miss James?"

"Did your security cameras catch the car leaving the property?"

"Yes, but it was about two in the morning and although the drive is well-lit at night, it was still too dark to make out the driver."

"Well, that is all the questions that I have for you at this time but I would like to take a look at the garage where the car was kept."

A servant came to escort me to this pristine garage. The garage was so clean, it hardly looked as if a car had ever been there. This was a wasted trip, I thought and I was just about to leave when

something caught my eye. Caught on a wire from the garage track was a little piece of fabric. I snatched the fabric down and stuffed it into my pocket.

“Will that be all Miss James?” The Whittler manservant asked as he gave me a strained smile.

“Yes.”

“I will have your car brought around to the front of the house,” He pointed to a brick path and I thanked him and moved quickly down the path, By the time I got to the front of the house, my car was there idling and ready for my departure.

It was late afternoon by the time I got back to the office. My intention was to just touch base with Mr. Hines and Ken before heading home. The office was quiet and Mr. Hines had already gone home for the day. However, I did meet our receptionist, Lucy. She was a chubby little woman in her late twenties, I guessed. She wore jeans and a bright red v-neck pullover that was about two sizes too small. Her ample white bosoms pushed through the top of her shirt begging to be noticed while Ken was doing all he could to act as if he hadn't noticed.

“Anything to report?” I asked Ken.

“Not really,” he said. “It's like that car just vanished off the face of the earth. The cops didn't have anything. If they did, they weren't sharing. One of the cops even told me that I was wasting his time. They'd rather work on cases that they could solve easily.” I chuckled, not a bit surprised. “What about you, did you find out anything?”

“Nothing concrete but I do have an angle I'd like to pursue.”

“Care to share?”

“Not until I know if my hunch is going to turn into a real lead.” I went to my desk and began to gather my things. I noticed that Lucy was also getting ready to leave for the day. She retrieved her purse from her bottom desk drawer and Ken nearly fell out of his chair looking at her tight jeans. I purposely slammed my drawer shut and they both jumped at the sound, swiveling their heads around toward the noise. “Goodnight,” I said. “See you both tomorrow.” I smiled at Lucy as I went by her but she just looked confused. Ken looked even more confused than Lucy.

I no longer had an apartment in Center City Philadelphia. Carl and I were living together in an apartment on the Mainline. On this day I got home before Carl. I kicked off my shoes and poured myself a glass of white wine before getting comfortable on the sofa in front of the television. I pulled the swatch of fabric that I found in the Whittler's garage from my pocket. It was wool, probably washable wool. You could see that it came from a plaid, gray with red and white stripes. This was something that I needed to explore. I went to my computer to search the school uniforms for every private and catholic school near the Whittler's house.

We ate Chinese take-out for dinner and Carl's head began to nod and his eyelids became heavy no sooner than we finished dinner. I wanted to tell him everything I knew about the case but it was obvious that he was just too tired.

I went to bed shortly after Carl but I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the piece of cloth that I found in the Whittler's garage. I got up at about three in the morning and pulled my laptop onto my lap. I just needed to dig a little further into the Whittler family. I remembered when Mr.

Hines told us about the case, he mentioned that the Whittlers had an adult son and a teenage daughter. However, my research indicated that the Whittlers had twin seventeen-year-old daughters, Mercedes and Marcella. Now, I am very interested to know where was the daughter that Mr. Hines did not know about. It wasn't hard to find the school and uniform that matched the swatch that I found in the garage. Marcella was the only Whittler daughter enrolled in school and that daughter had to know something about the missing car. Even so, I needed to know what happened to the other daughter.

I spent the next few days researching public records. Mercedes Whittler disappeared from the Whittler family two and a half years ago. She would have been about fourteen. Alcohol and drug addiction forced her parents to have her committed to a very exclusive rehab facility in upstate New York. She was released from that facility after a year but no one has seen her since. For some unknown reason, her parents did not welcome her back into the family or she chose not to reunite with her family.

I shared all of this with Carl who warned me that I was being sucked down a rabbit hole. The Whittler's missing daughter likely did not have anything to do with the missing vintage car. I didn't agree. I was intrigued by the missing daughter though she possibly did not have anything to do with the case at hand. I felt strongly that I needed to speak with Marcella Whittler, preferably without her parents in attendance.

Back at the office, Ron was continuing his investigation from his chair. Lucy's dress was even more provocative than it was the last time I saw her. It was quite obvious that her dress and flirtations kept Ron clued to his desk. All he could tell me and Mr. Hines was that Germany was the largest consumer of antique auto parts. This bit of information did not move the investigation one way or the other.

I informed Mr. Hines of all that I knew to that point and suggested that I go to meet Marcella Whittler outside her school at dismissal. He agreed.

Marcella was very tall and slender. She had dark almond-shaped eyes and long dark hair. Apparently, she was a popular student as she exited the school with an entourage of girls. I stood at the curb waiting for her to descend the steps. "Marcella," I called.

She whipped her head around with hair flying. "Hello," she said questioningly. "Do I know you?"

"No, my name is Lydia James, I am an investigator," I said as I extended my hand. She ignored my hand. "Your parents have hired my agency to find their missing vintage car."

I didn't miss the eye twitch and the slight blush of her cheeks. "I saw you meeting with my parents the other day but what has that got to do with me?"

"Well, I don't know. I thought you could tell me."

"I don't know anything about the missing car."

"I know that you were in the garage right before the car went missing."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"A small piece of fabric from your uniform was found on the track of the garage door." Her face and neck began to show a deeper blush. Her friends snickered and she quickly waved them off.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Sure you do. I am also sure that you don't want your parents to know that you know. That's why I came to see you first. I need you to tell me why you were in the garage and who was with you when the car was stolen."

She walked close to me. Standing a full head above me, she bent from the waist. "It wasn't me," she whispered.

"Then who was it? If you were forced into something illegal, I may be able to help but you need to talk to me now."

"That is all I can tell you," she said as she turned to walk away.

"Can you tell me what happened to your sister, Mercedes?" She stopped dead and swung around to face me. Anger registered on her face but was quickly replaced by a look of fear.

"You can't mention my sister to my parents. Mercedes is a drug addict and she has done some horrible things to my parents."

"You mean like stealing daddy's vintage car?"

"Please don't go to them with that story. You don't know if that is what happened."

"All right but, if I find out that you lied to me, I will tell your parents what I've found." She looked terrified but shook her head as if she understood. I left her standing there on the sidewalk looking stricken.

I pulled my car onto a side street near the school where I could watch Marcella. She hurried away, waving friends off as she climbed into her car. As I expected, she made a call on her cell. I could see her head moving back and forth in agitation as she spoke. Finally, she started the car and moved slowly down the street. I followed. A couple of blocks later, she pulled over and picked up a man.

This man appeared to be much older than Marcella. He was poorly dressed with a pock-marked face, scraggly blond beard, and hair. He jumped into her car and I could tell that they were arguing as she drove. Her voice got louder and I heard her call him Greg. It appeared that she was heading for the highway. Soon, she pulled into the parking lot of a motel. The man got out and pounded on the door of one of the rooms. Room 24, I noted. I couldn't see the person that admitted the man inside the room but as soon as he was allowed entry, Marcella made a turn and raced out of the parking lot.

Once again, the missing twin sister was at the forefront of my mind. I was sure she had something to do with the theft but I needed to prove it. I sat there for a moment contemplating whether I should continue to follow Marcella or wait to see who emerged from the motel room. I headed back to the office to discuss my suspicions with Mr. Hines. Not only did Mr. Hines agree with me, but he also suggested that we stake out the motel that night.

I went home to prepare for my first stakeout. While waiting for the appropriate time, I decided to do some more digging online. I searched for the twins' names in the public records for Philadelphia and surrounding counties and found nothing. Then I searched the public records around the rehab facility where Mercedes was a patient. What I found shocked me. Apparently, at twelve years old she was not only addicted to drugs but she was pregnant. The child was born in a nearby hospital and was quickly put up for adoption. The records were sealed and I could not see who signed the adoption papers but I had my suspicions.

Mr. Hines picked me up from my apartment just after seven that evening. He parked his steel gray SUV at the back of the parking lot outside of the motel. Mr. Hines had done this many times in his career and was very prepared. There was a cooler in the back seat, stocked with ice, cold drinks, sandwiches, and other snacks. He had a large thermos full of strong black coffee. "I see that you've done this before," I said jokingly.

"Yep, I've learned to be prepared," he said with a smile.

We sat outside that motel for a couple of hours, sipping the worst coffee in the world and munching on stale donuts. Mr. Hines chatted about everything from old cases to his childhood pet. "You never talk about your family." I offered. "Are you married, Mr. Hines?"

There was a marked period of silence before he answered. "I was married," he said flatly. "It didn't last." He paused and appeared to be weighing if he should disclose more of his personal life. "After two years, she decided that she didn't want to be married to a cop. She left and I understood. I missed her but I never thought about marriage again."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. I have no regrets."

I told Mr. Hines what I learned about the missing Whittler daughter. He sat stone-faced for a couple of silent moments. "So, you think Whittler might be guilty of getting his fourteen-year-old daughter pregnant?"

"Yes, I do."

"What has that to do with this case?"

"It may have nothing to do with the case, or maybe everything. What if Mercedes wants revenge for the life stolen from her at such a young age? Of course, I have no proof, just a hunch."

We continued to wait. Mr. Hines dozed but I kept my eyes on the door of the motel. At about four in the morning, I started to get sleepy. I was doing everything I could to stay awake when movement in the front of the motel caught my eye. It looked like Marcella. This was obviously Mercedes, the missing twin. I watched her as she got a cup of ice from the ice machine and then hurried back into the motel room. I nudged Mr. Hines. "That's Mercedes," I said. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," he said. "It won't be long now."

“Do you mind if I take a walk to that convenience store up the road? I need to use the restroom and get some fresh coffee.”

He nodded. I got out of the car and stretched my legs and back a little. I pulled my jacket on and started walking toward the road. The store was empty so I was able to get back quickly. Just as I neared the end of the driveway, a white vintage Maserati pulled into the parking lot. This was more than curious. Owners of vintage Maseratis didn't book rooms in such a low-class motel. I got back into the car. Mr. Hines was still dozing. “Hey,” I said loudly.

He jerked his head up. We watched as two well-dressed young men approached the motel door. They banged on the door and Marcella's scraggly friend opened the door. We couldn't hear them clearly at first but they got louder. They pushed the white boy toward the car and moments later Mercedes appeared. She looked older than her twin and obviously less fortunate.

We followed that white Maserati to a warehouse near the Philadelphia docks in South Philly. They drove the car inside the warehouse and closed the door. Once they were inside, I left the car and crept over to the warehouse. There was a rusty fire escape along the West side of the building and I crept up the stairs as carefully and quietly as I could. The steel door was barred from the inside but there was another door further along the iron walkway that was wedged open with a piece of pipe. I only needed to get close enough to hear the conversation that went on inside.

“Where is our money, Tyler?” Greg said. “We delivered the car just like you asked. Why haven't we been paid?”

“Complications,” one of the men said.

“That isn't our fault,” offered Mercedes. “We need that money.”

The man that Greg called Tyler smirked at Mercedes. He flashed a cruel knowing smile at her and winked. “What the hell does that mean?” Mercedes wanted to know.

“It means, poor little rich girl, that we are waiting for your daddy to pay up.”

Mercedes gasped and took a step back. “What are you talking about? You and your partner here said that you would pay us five grand if we delivered the car. My father doesn't know anything about this. He reported the theft to the police so why do you expect anything from my father?”

“Your father set this whole thing up. He wanted you to have a good reason to leave town once and for all, and the money to go wherever you wanted to go.”

“What?” She glanced at Greg whom she could see was in need of his next fix. He was fidgeting and sweating profusely. “Does my sister know about this?” She asked. The man shook his head. “Why didn't my father just give me the money?” She screamed.

“You will have to ask your daddy about that but until he pays us, we can't pay you.”

“Take us back to the motel,” she said turning on her heels. She knew that Greg was going to be sick, but no one was listening to her.

“No,” the other man said. “We are going to wait right here for your father.”

Mr. Hines, not content to just sit in the car and wait, began to look around the perimeter of the yard outside the warehouse. It wasn't long before he found a garage at the back of the warehouse where the vintage car had been stored. The door was easily pried open and there it was a red 1937 Cord Roadster. "Beautiful!" he whispered then he immediately put in a call to the Philadelphia Police.

Minutes later a BMW sped into the warehouse yard. Mr. Whittler jumped from the driver's seat visibly angry. "What the hell is this? Why is my daughter here?"

"So this is your way of getting rid of me?" Mercedes screeched. "I don't understand. Why not just give me the money and send me on my way? I don't want to be here anymore than you want me here!"

"Pay up, old man!" Tyler said.

"What exactly will I be paying you for? You idiots botched the whole thing. I don't owe you a damn thing."

Sirens blaring and lights flashing, several police squad cars serged into the yard. The two culprits looked for an escape but police were entering the warehouse from every direction. "Hands up!" One of the policemen shouted. "Get down on your knees!" The two men were cuffed and led to waiting squad cars.

I joined Mr. Hines and we spoke with the police captain on the scene. We stood silently as Mr. Whittler explained to the police detective that it was all a big misunderstanding and he did not want to press charges against the two men who had taken his car. The police apparently bought his feeble explanation which let everyone involved off the hook.

As soon as the police detective took a step back, Mercedes confronted her father again. "If you wanted me gone so bad, why didn't you just give me the money to leave?" She demanded.

"Because I knew that it would likely go right into your vein or the veins of that scoundrel that is always hanging around you."

Then, to everyone's surprise, another car pulled into the yard. Marcella and Mrs. Whittler jumped out of the car. Marcella went directly to her sister and threw her arms around Mercedes' neck. The twins embraced and cried openly.

Mrs. Whittler confronted her husband. "How could you, Charles? Marcella has told me the entire sordid story."

"Don't say anything, Jill. This is a private matter. This is a family matter and we can work it out in private."

"No," Mrs. Whittler said. "I believed the things you said about our daughter. You lied. Now you have your precious car back and my daughters and I will have each other. This time you've gone too far. I will never forgive you for what you've done to our daughters."

Mrs. Whittler and her daughters left the scene.

"I will expect your check in the mail, Mr. Whittler," Mr. Hines said.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"I expect Mrs. Whittler will file for divorce and all his wrongdoing will come out in court."

"But, we didn't really solve the case."

"Sure we did. You found the missing car and that's is what we were hired to do and that is what we did."

"What about the incest, the child abuse that happened?"

"We don't really know what happened. We suspect but the only people that actually know are Marvin and Mercedes Whittler. She can file a civil law suite against her father until she is thirty years old. Let us just hope she gets the help she needs to move on from this."

We were both silent for most of the ride home. "Breakfast?" Mr. Hines asked. "I know a great diner not far from here. Solving a case always makes me hungry."

I smiled. "Sure, why not?"

Pancakes, bacon, sausage, fluffy eggs, and strong coffee, we laughed, ate, and talked. "I think this is gonna work out just fine, Miss James."

"Lydia," I said.

"Your hunch was right. I think that you have an investigative instinct and I am happy to work with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Hines."

"Jeff," he said.

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THE END