

FATAL FUGUE

A Scott Drayco Mystery

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Chapter 1

Sunday, January 9

Sheriff Ernie Baylor frowned as he stood over the body, which was lying in a pool of crimson liquid. He reached down to pick up a knife and handed it to Deputy Nellie Skyler, who thrust the weapon into her pocket. Baylor then knelt to touch a black smudge on the victim's face and declared, "It's obvious this wasn't a suicide. We're talking cold-blooded murder."

Deputy Skyler put her hands on her hips. "Are you sure?"

"Dead sure," Baylor replied, tipping up the brim of his olive-colored hat.

In a back corner of the room, Scott Drayco leaned toward his companion to whisper, "This is ludicrous. They're doing it all wrong."

Reece Wable whispered back, "That's showbiz for you."

"Cut! No, no, no." The expression on director Rada Bluestone's face was as dark as her all-black pantsuit, and even the necklace she wore featuring a mysterious symbol seemed to tremble in annoyance. Her voice shot garish Pepto-pink spikes into Drayco's brain, sending his synesthesia into overdrive. It was almost painful.

He tensed, worried he'd blown it via his whispered exchange with Reece despite the camera not being turned on for the scene rehearsal. But when the director started ranting about the lighting being a mess, Drayco began to relax.

Bluestone pointed at a crew member who looked ready to cry and said, "Reset this, and then we'll go live with the scene from the top." As a low droning sound cranked up outside, she growled, "And that awful engine noise is back. Can somebody kill that?"

While another crew member scrambled out of the building, Reece asked Drayco in a more normal voice, "Okay, so what was wrong with what the actors did?"

"Not checking to see if the victim is even dead. The 'sheriff' not wearing nitrile gloves, and the 'deputy' with only a single pair, meaning her prints or other evidence could transfer to the knife. The deputy putting the weapon in her pocket, not an evidence bag. The sheriff kneeling

down and getting blood on his clothes and contaminating the crime scene with fabric threads or other trace evidence. Making an instant and unfounded declaration it's not suicide."

Drayco took a deep breath and tried not to do any growling of his own. "Do you want more?"

"I get the point." Reece removed his monocle briefly to clean it. "But you seem a little cranky today."

Drayco replayed his behavior that morning in a mental stream which made him wince. Okay, *maybe* he was a bit short with Maida Jepson at the Lazy Crab B&B where he was staying. And *possibly* he drove too fast down Route 13, and *perhaps* he'd switched from Bach to Black Sabbath on his car's stereo.

He ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry, Reece. Guess I've been stuck in a dark-mood rut."

"Any particular reason?"

"I suppose it started at the end of my last case."

"You have a lot of difficult ones. What was so rough about that?"

"Everything."

"Getting kidnapped not to your liking?"

"That was the easy part. The outcome of the case was the real punch to the gut. Plus, if there's anything I hate, it's wasted potential. Feels like that's the theme of most of my cases lately."

Reece studied Drayco through his non-glass eye. "Then I give you permission to go on being cranky."

Eager to change the subject, Drayco took advantage of the lull in action to study the cast and crew. The actor playing the sheriff had deep-set eyes set off by a trendy chin stubble. The woman playing the deputy was likewise attractive and reminded him of a real deputy in the county, Nelia Tyler, down to the blonde hair fashioned into a braid—though Drayco was fairly certain he'd never seen Tyler wear high heels on the job.

He asked Reece, "The title of this movie is *Fatal Fugue*? Whatever for? I don't see any music involved."

"Oh, it's the psychological term."

"Someone in a dream-like state not remembering their actions afterward?"

"That's the one."

"I think I need to get a copy of the script so this can make more sense."

While the lighting drama continued to play out, Drayco studied the pristine Victorian house. The wood ceilings were architecturally interesting, with tray insets matching the paneling, and a nearby door sported jewel-colored ruby, amethyst, and emerald stained glass. He said, "They're doing all the filming in this house, Reece?"

"Mostly. It's one of those claustrophobic plots. There's a wrap party following a play, a murder happens, and nobody can leave the premises. Creative, huh?"

"Then why use the Eastern Shore at all? Why not a Hollywood set?"

"The crew *is* filming in other places around these parts. I suppose they thought this area was a bargain. Cheap water views and cheap charm."

Drayco couldn't argue with that. He had a pretty good idea of the giant chasm between housing costs—even rentals—in Hollywood versus Cape Unity. Easily an order of magnitude greater.

Reece added, "You should see all the local businesses vying for their moment of fame."

"I'll bet. Did the crew ask to shoot any footage at the Historical Society?"

"Sadly, no, but they borrowed a few items from our files. As my consolation prize, I get to observe the action."

"I hope they're also paying you actual money for your assistance."

"A pittance. We could have used extra moolah for the coffers."

As the temporary break continued, various personnel milled around touching up makeup, rearranging props, and double-checking the unfortunate actor playing the victim who couldn't move yet, thanks to the "blood." Drayco spied crew members Reece had identified to him earlier, including the First Assistant Director, Chrystina Valentine, and her brother, Hoyt, the Production Designer, sporting an unlit cigar dangling out of one corner of his mouth. The remaining actors Drayco had caught in action in previous takes, with most looking to be under forty.

He counted the heads on the set. Other than the director, the Valentine brother-sister duo, and the lighting guy, he saw one other technical crew member plus six or so actors. He noted, "A small number of people. I expected more...well...everything."

"Oh, this film is an indie. I think they call it a 'contained' project." Reece used his fingers for air quotes. "Small budget. Rada, the director and a control freak, is doubling as cinematographer. Guess it's easy for her since that's her background. Plus, they have all these handheld cameras now. Phone videos, even."

"I did notice some of that."

Reece nodded. "Everybody's doubling up. Chrystina is 1st AD and also production coordinator. One actress, Jaxine Gordon, is also serving as makeup guru, although I don't see her right now. Sachio Spafford, the poor fellow dressed down by the director, is both gaffer and grip. And get this—most of the actors are playing at least two roles. Including our corpse over there."

"Ah. *Very* low budget."

"The sole person with one and only one job is Isaac Batey," Reece pointed at a man wearing headphones and adjusting a shotgun microphone. "The sound engineer."

"If the budget is that micro, any townspeople expecting riches will be disappointed."

"Money is money. They'll take what they can get."

The director continued to yell commands at the lighting guy—otherwise known as gaffer-grip, Sachio Spafford—about tweaking the console settings and booms. It was unclear how long such a process was supposed to take or even what the director was unhappy about. To Drayco's eye, the changes she demanded made little difference.

Just then, a low creaking grew louder as a lighting boom began swaying back and forth. Like a scene more out of a dark comedy than a crime drama, the boom toppled into another, taking both down and crashing into a nearby wall. A cloud of dust and plaster spread through the air, and people started to cough and sneeze.

Drayco caught a whiff of a slight acrid smell he could almost taste. Sulfur? Maybe bacteria or mold? Or perhaps the old plaster had tinges of Victorian-era “distemper,” made from boiled horses’ hooves.

Rada Bluestone cursed, and Sachio Spafford’s eyes were wide with horror for good reason—a gaping hole now lay in the center of the wall, exposing wood beams. But something else caught Drayco’s attention. In the open cavity, he saw a yellowish-white heap of what looked like bones.

Chrystina Valentine slapped her forehead. “This wasn’t in the script. All right, who planted the fake skeleton? Funny, haha.”

Drayco maneuvered around the fallen lighting gear to take a closer look. The remains included a human-sized skull wedged into the opening, along with bits of a faded dress still clinging to the bone pile. Definitely not an animal. Traces of a white powder also littered the floor underneath the bones.

Drayco turned to Chrystina. “I don’t believe this is fake.”

She and the director both stared at him, dumbfounded. Chrystina said, “How would you possibly know that?”

Reece pointed at Drayco. “Former FBI agent.”

One of the supporting actors moaned and sank into a chair. Frazier Prentiss, the actor playing the sheriff, uttered words that would ordinarily make Drayco laugh. “Should...should I do something?”

Drayco whipped out his cellphone to call a familiar number as he replied, “Why don’t we leave that to an actual sheriff.”

A voice in the background muttered, “Oh my god, this production really is cursed.”

After Drayco made the call to Sheriff Sailor and waited for the forensics team to arrive, he mused about that “cursed” comment. What did the person mean? Were there other literal skeletons hiding in literal closets here?

But more importantly, what was a skeleton doing entombed in the wall of a century-old house? And when and why was it placed there? Murderous life imitating murderous art, it seemed. But this was one body that wouldn’t hop up and go home at the end of the day.

Drayco’s mood got even darker as he conjured up possible motives behind the skeleton’s entombment. He wasn’t about to jump to conclusions like the actor-sheriff. But it was hard to imagine a scenario where a person intentionally crawled into a wall and waited patiently while being sealed up and left to die. One thing was sure—Sheriff Sailor’s forensic team wouldn’t make the same unprofessional mistakes the actors’ characters did, not by a long shot.

Since he didn’t see any official law types nearby, not even one lone security guard, Drayco parked himself in front of the hole in the wall and made sure everyone stayed back. Then he settled in for what was likely to be one marathon of a day.

Chapter 2

It took fifteen minutes for the genuine Sheriff Ernest Sailor—as well as Deputy Nelia Tyler, and a few other deputies and members of the Prince of Wales County forensics team—to make their entrance. They might not be the best-funded outfit in the state of Virginia, but they were among the finest, in Drayco’s experience.

As Sailor supervised, Tyler and her colleagues went about photographing, measuring, and cataloging the skeleton and its wall tomb, while an ambulance waited outside to whisk the skeletal remains away to the medical examiner in Norfolk. The actors playing Sheriff Baylor and Deputy Skyler watched closely, as if fascinated.

Drayco said to them, “That’s how you do it.”

In a voice that wasn’t as deep and raspy as when saying his lines, “Sheriff” Frazier Prentiss said, “Would make terrible action on the screen. Too tedious. I mean, do they have to do all of that? Is some of it for show?”

Drayco had a pretty good idea of what the real-life Deputy Nelia Tyler would do to Frazier if she overheard that remark. Drayco replied calmly, “If they gave out Academy Awards for forensics, Sheriff Sailor’s team would be in the running.”

Frazier just yawned and called out to Chrystina, who was off to one side, “We’re out of sparkling water, Chrys. You know I can’t drink plain water.” She made a face, and he wandered off, presumably in search of something carbonated.

The other cast and crew had drifted off to take vaping breaks or to raid the refrigerator in the kitchen. But one man, with wavy dark hair and a ready smile, strolled over to Drayco and joined him in watching the sheriff’s team as they went through their tasks. This was the actor playing the “corpse,” and he still had traces of red movie-blood on his white sweater.

He asked Drayco. “This is totally rad, isn’t it? Howdja know it was a real skeleton? Are you really ex-FBI, or was that a joke?”

“I’m a private consultant now. And I’ve seen skeletons before, both real and fake.”

A beam of light through a window reflected off a gold dolphin pin the man wore on his collar, making Drayco turn away to avoid being blinded. Part of the actor’s costume, no doubt, seeing as how the setting was near the shore.

Drayco said, “I haven’t caught a scene you’re in yet. That is, where you’re not playing a corpse.”

"I only have a few lines. That's why they call us 'extras.' It's okay, though. If you have even a single word to say, you get a pay bump. Better than rhubarb."

"Rhubarb?"

"Gibberish dialog, which an AD can ask for. So they don't have to pay actors. Like they would for scripted dialogue."

"Ah, I see."

"So, a skeleton, huh? How long ya think it's been there?" The man blinked his eyes several times like a flashing caution light.

"Hard to say. But judging by the clothing and desiccation, it could be years. Maybe decades. This house is a century old."

"Once the body goes off to the examiner, does it take days or months before you get answers?" More eye blinking.

"Again, hard to say. If this isn't a recent case, contemporary victims move to the head of the line. Plus, it's tricky to extract evidence from old bones. The latest technologies are good, but it depends upon how degraded the materials are."

"That's too bad. It's a much more interesting mystery than this lame movie plot."

Drayco smiled at him. "Why are you so interested?"

The other man hesitated before replying. "I've got family members in law enforcement. Can't wait to tell them about this." He blinked several more times before adding, "You really think the skeleton is that old? As old as this house?"

"It sure looks that way."

The "extra" stuck out his hand. "Oh, the name's Mark William Smith. But folks call me Ellery."

"Ellery? Are you a mystery fan, à la Ellery Queen?"

"More a history buff. But Mark's an ordinary name. In Hollywood, you need a spicier handle, right? Kinda rad? Besides, SAG-AFTRA doesn't let working actors use identical screen names. Mark Smith was taken."

Ashleigh Salinger, the "deputy," marched up and linked arms with Drayco. "You're monopolizing the gentleman's time, Ellery. I just learned this man is a real detective. Mr. Drayco, you simply must give me tips." Ashleigh's voice wasn't at all like Nelia's coppery shimmer but more a fog of lavender polka dots, the equivalent of a synesthesia watercolor.

Ellery shrugged and wandered back to the kitchen, pausing to take quick cellphone photos of the hole in the wall. As Ashleigh pulled Drayco off to the side, he had to remind himself this wasn't Nelia Tyler, even though she *was* a little taller—maybe her high heels made her a few inches shorter than his six-four? When he turned to face her, he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of the real Nelia watching them.

Ashleigh said, "You must tell me where the best eateries are around here. I've exhausted the obvious ones." She looked him up and down and added, "I mean, it's so hard to find good meat locally."

Drayco cleared his throat. "I, um, I'm sure I could give you a few tips."

A woman Drayco hadn't seen before, with short blonde hair topped with a yellow headband, stormed past them as she headed toward the director for a heated discussion. Ashleigh

explained to Drayco, “Genna Ransford. She’s afraid the production will be shut down. It’s her house. They’re paying her a pretty hefty sum to use it.”

Drayco asked, “Aren’t you worried it will be shut down?”

“You tell me. You know these police types. I mean, isn’t that what they do?”

“It all depends.”

Frazier Prentiss called out to Ashleigh, and she gritted her teeth. “That man takes this sheriff-deputy relationship way too far. It’s like I’m his underling in real life.” She released Drayco’s arm. “Don’t forget those restaurant recommendations. And I was serious about wanting to pick your brain about police procedure stuff.”

As she headed toward Frazier, Drayco spotted the still-fuming homeowner, Genna Ransford. She was by herself this time, slouched down on a chair that matched her hair and gold sweater dress, making her all but disappear into a golden cloak of invisibility.

He approached her and introduced himself. “How are you doing, Ms. Ransford?”

“Like I need a bucket of cawfee with a vodka chaser. It’s not only because this production could be clipped.” Her voice had an Eastern Shore drawl but also hints of a New York accent, an odd combination. “I mean, that’s bad enough. But they’ll think I had something to do with that thing over there,” she pointed toward the skeleton. “It being my house and all.”

“Not if the bones are as old as I suspect.”

The woman’s tone changed. “Old? How old?”

“We won’t know for sure until the M.E. investigates further. But possibly decades.”

She got quiet, which made him curious. He said, “I would imagine you’d be happy. This could prove you weren’t involved.”

Genna’s eyes glistened with tears. “I don’t want to discuss it any further right now.” When she excused herself and vanished into the rear of the house, he stood there staring after her. First, she’s angry she might be blamed, and then she’s in tears when she realizes she won’t?

Drayco didn’t have a chance to mull it over because Chrystina Valentine, the 1st AD, approached him. He almost laughed at his sudden “popularity.” Chrystina asked point-blank, “I saw you chatting with Genna Ransford. And I can’t get one word out of Rada. Tell it to me straight—are we getting shut down or not?”

“I wish I had an answer.”

Chrystina tapped her foot on the floor. “Don’t know whether to start looking for another gig. I can’t afford the downtime.” She kept glancing down at a cellphone in her hand, which she checked every couple of minutes.

He said, “When the sheriff’s crew finishes their work, you’ll find out then. But I have a question for you, too. Earlier, someone said the production was cursed. What did they mean?”

She winced. “Superstitious Hollywood bunk. More of those woo-woo crystals and psychics and all. Just because some weird crap happens, they think there’s a curse.”

“What kind of ‘weird crap’?”

“An actor breaking his leg before production starts and having to replace him with Frazier Prentiss at the last minute. Things like that.” She put her cellphone in her pocket and pulled out a tube of gloss with scents of vanilla and oranges that she applied to her lips. Drayco had a sudden craving for a Creamsicle soda.

He said, “Makes it even more curious there aren’t security guards around. If people believe the production is cursed.”

Chrystina stopped her lip-glazing to laugh. “This production isn’t just on a shoestring budget. Hairstring, maybe? We’re paying one guy to drive by at night and keep an eye on the place.”

“Isn’t that taking a risk?”

“We were told this was a safe area.”

The man Reece had identified as Chrystina’s brother, Hoyt, sidled up to them, still chewing on an unlit cigar. “You find out if we’ve got jobs or not, Chrys?”

“Not a word.” She thrust the lip gloss back into her pocket and turned pleading eyes to Drayco. “Could you ask the sheriff? It’s really important to us.”

Drayco looked over at the deputies. “I’ll see what I can learn.”

He crept closer to Nelia and the forensic team, careful to stay out of their way, and watched them work. Nelia removed an item from the pocket of the dress on the body, and it appeared to be a paper, yellowed and faded. She looked up and locked eyes with his, her gaze saying volumes without having to spell it out. The find could be a huge discovery. With luck, even ID the victim and offer a time frame for the death.

There were times Drayco missed his FBI days when he had official—and often first—access to such finds. Still, he was close enough to see the paper in Nelia’s hand and a few words on the outside fold. He couldn’t quite make them out, but it looked like Spanish.

He also got an even better peek into the wall-tomb and glimpsed more of the white powder. Lime? Or it could be calcium carbonate, building material, degraded lead, or just products of decomposition.

Not wanting to hinder the deputies’ progress, he didn’t press Nelia about the movie being shut down and left her to her work. He shrugged apologetically toward Chrystina and Hoyt. Sure, it would be difficult for the cast and crew if the production shuttered permanently, and he wasn’t unsympathetic. But that was real life, not Hollywood life.

He retreated to a corner where he could observe everything. Ellery Smith, the extra so interested in the skeleton, chatted with a fellow bit player he referred to as “Trent,” who was munching on a chocolate bar. Drayco looked around for Reece, but the historian had disappeared, likely outside to get fresher air. The dust from the wall left a fine layer over much of the furniture and wouldn’t help Reece’s on-again, off-again asthma.

Genna Ransford also hadn’t reappeared after her tearful exit. Through a window, Drayco saw Frazier Prentiss and Ashleigh Salinger out on the lawn in a heated discussion. But when Ashleigh looked up and spied him watching, her expression brightened as she smiled and waved. Nice that someone seemed happy to see him.

Feeling at loose ends, Drayco chatted with the crew he hadn’t met. Isaac Batey, the sound engineer, and Sachio Spafford, the gaffer-grip, filled him in more on that indie budget Reece mentioned. They both lived in Virginia Beach and commuted the two-hour round trip daily, saving the production some money for housing.

The men looked like polar opposites. Sachio stood around five-eight with short hair, wearing a purple scarf and sporting a purple fedora with a red feather. Isaac was tall and thin with long hair under his backwards baseball cap and a wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. But

they both agreed on one thing—even if the project survived the unforeseen wrinkle of a skeleton found in the wall, it would fall behind schedule. And being behind schedule meant going over budget.

Sachio sighed, adding, “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” prompting Isaac to retort, “Man, you need to dump the clichés. I’m gonna buy you a shock collar that goes off whenever you use one.”

Sachio said, “What, not a shot in the arm?” In reply, Isaac punched him in the shoulder.

As the two men drifted outside, the EMTs and forensic team transferred the newly uncovered bones to a body bag with care. Considering Eastern Shore history predated the seventeenth century, it was hardly surprising there’d be interesting archaeological finds. But it seemed Drayco had been handed more than his fair share—his Opera House bequest, the pirate skeleton from a previous case, and now this. Some might say the movie wasn’t cursed, it was Drayco. Or a predestined fate of his.

A lot of philosophers had a lot of ideas about fate. But the way Drayco saw it, it wasn’t predetermination or bad luck but rather how you choose to put yourself out in the world. *Faber est suae quisque fortunae*. Every man is the crafter of his own fortune. Or, as with sadder endings like this, a crafter of their own misfortune.

An old skeleton entombed in a wall, a dress, a yellowed paper, and a few Spanish words—not much to go on. It made him uneasy, but not due to any curse. Maybe the thought of being buried in a wall had kicked his claustrophobia into high gear. He didn’t think so, but he had absolutely no idea what else it might be.

Chapter 3

As Drayco suspected, the movie-set investigation took all day, which is why he trudged into the Lazy Crab well after six. A couple of other guests were staying at the B&B, and Drayco waited until they'd finished their supper before he joined the inn's proprietors, Maida and Major Jepson, at the kitchen table for one of Maida's famously "potent" toddies.

When she handed Drayco a tall glass mug, he held it up in the air. "It's very...red. And what are those starry things floating around?"

"Star anise. The red is cranberry. Matches my hair, don't you think?" She grinned. "There are a few other goodies in there, too."

"Definitely festive." Drayco took a sip and coughed. "Bourbon?"

"And cranberry liqueur. Too much?"

He took another sip, and this time let the warm tingling from the drink attack his dark mood, forcing him to relax whether he wanted to or not. "I like it."

"The liqueur is left over from Christmas. Why should cranberry only be for holidays?"

Drayco leaned back in the lighthouse-shaped chair. "Did you have more traffic during the holiday season?"

"Quite a few guests. Cape Unity has a big Christmas shindig now. A parade, fireworks, flying drone displays, and lighted boats on the water. I was hoping you could join us."

"Things got too busy, alas." He took another sip of the toddy, taking pains to avoid chewing on the star anise—were they even edible? He added, "I saw public works staffers removing decorations on Main Street."

"Kind of sad to see them go. I liked the lighted wreaths the town purchased."

"I also noticed brand-new light fixtures. And they finally filled in that giant pothole in front of Tallent's Antiques."

"Movie money."

"Movie money?"

"The production company got tax breaks, but they've bought supplies locally. Plus, there's catering and hotel room rentals and the like."

That was a little perplexing, but "small budget" by Hollywood standards could mean "big budget" to Cape Unity. He replied, "I'm surprised no staff are staying here."

“We don’t give out house keys to all guests willy-nilly. Just trusted ones like you. Plus, the movie people tend to stay out late partying.”

“And they needed a place where they can come and go at will.”

“Exactly. We had a couple of location scouts bunk here. A few months ago.”

“Is Lucy Harston still doing catering? It’s not like she has to now, does she, with the inheritance?”

“She enjoys having something creative to do. You’ll see her on set again with her famous pastries. If the production doesn’t close up shop, that is.”

Drayco gave the odds of that around fifty-fifty. “If the show goes on, I don’t suppose your lovely B&B is going to have a cameo?”

“If they’d asked, I would have said no. Too many legal problems. And notoriety. Honestly, I was afraid they’d trash the place.”

Drayco appreciated her principles, but bits of the inn’s interior paint and furniture still looked faded. At least the B&B had fixed the Lazy Crab sign, with the “R” returned to its rightful slot. No more “Lazy C ab.” He’d hoped to pass along leftover funds after fixing up the Opera House, but he was already battling cost overruns.

He stopped himself from groaning aloud. Always a touchy subject, his inherited Opera House. But he didn’t want to negate the good mood from Maida’s drink, so he pushed aside thoughts of his Opera Albatross and drained his glass of Cranberry Comfort.

Maida got up to get Drayco a refill. “Did you see Virginia Harston or Barry Farland on the set? They drop by now and then.”

“No, thankfully. They’re both mature young people, but I’m very grateful they didn’t witness the skeleton surprise.” He took a sip of the refill, even heavier on the alcohol than before. “Is there a special reason they’ve been hanging around the production?”

“Barry is friends with one of the temp crew hired from Cape Unity. And Lucy thought it would be a great homeschool project for Virginia. Reece arranged it.”

“I guess it has educational value. Skeletons notwithstanding.”

“I’d say it’s a textbook study of human psychology. Everybody’s going nuts. Some are starry-eyed and want to be in the movie, while others are grumbling about crime, traffic, uppity actors, and so forth.”

Drayco grunted. “Like the old days when the circus came to town.”

Maida nodded. “Folks may grumble, but I think secretly everyone wants to be an actor.”

“Not everyone.”

“Not you, you mean?” She grinned.

“It’s not high on my list, no. Although you could say everyone’s an actor, adapting their behavior to suit any occasion. Social chameleons.”

“Making it hard to know who people really are. Which is why detectives like you exist.”

Drayco lifted his glass in salute.

Maida slid into a chair. “A skeleton? For real?”

“Yes, but how did you hear about it?”

“Gretta at my hair salon.”

“News travels fast, as usual.”

“Nowadays, it’s all texting instead of the old-fashioned phone call of my day.”

Drayco eyed a container of peanut butter fudge on the counter and fought the urge to grab it. He was surprisingly ravenous. "I suspect the skeleton will turn out to be an old case."

"Because of where it was found? In the wall?"

"That, and a paper with the body, yellowed and faded. Plus clothing that looked mid-century."

Maida tilted her head. "Paper?"

"Nelia Tyler will have to conduct a forensic analysis to see what it is. The paper was folded up, and she'll need to be careful lest it disintegrate, but I noted a few words on the outside of the fold. In Spanish."

Major Jepson, who'd been half-dozing, sat up straight, stroking his braided beard. "Spanish, eh? You mean Spain or the Americas?"

"Nelia's analysis should be able to pin that down."

"Well, now, we've had seasonal workers from the Americas. Mexican folk mostly, who help out with the fishermen during crabbing season. But that's a newer thing. Don't recall hearing about such workers long ago." Major let out a belch. "This makes two skeletons found on your watch. You're a skeleton magnet."

Drayco sighed. "I'm sure Sheriff Sailor will blame me for this somehow. He wasn't all that happy getting a call-out to a crime scene on a Sunday." Drayco had learned the movie crew was on a seven-day schedule, but the sheriff's office *tried* to take a day off.

Maida tapped her foot on the floor. "It's new fodder for him to chew on, unlike drug arrests. We've had issues with that, but it's ramped up lately."

"Since the movie production came to town?"

Maida hesitated. "I hate to point fingers."

"That's why I respect you so much, Maida. You think things through logically and never jump to conclusions."

He got a whiff of something fishy and fried. The reason became apparent as she hopped up to grab a plate of blue crab fritters she set in front of him, explaining, "So the alcohol won't give you heartburn. They may look odd, but they'll get the job done."

He immediately wolfed a few down. Yep, ravenous. Recalling his "odd" encounter with the movie-house homeowner, Drayco asked, "Do either of you know Genna Ransford, who owns the house where they're filming? I met her briefly."

"Only that she inherited the place from her father." Maida put a dish of garlicky sauce in front of Drayco. "We never saw much of him or Genna. Before that, it belonged to her grandfather."

Major added, "I remember her grandfather. Duff Ransford. A decent man, but a prankster. Fun to talk to. He liked swapping stories about his father's days in the Army during WWII. And my father's stint in the RAF. I didn't know his son so well."

Drayco mulled that over. "So Duff Ransford was the original owner of the house?" If that was indeed the case, and the skeletal victim died decades ago, then it would have happened while Major's friend owned it. Drayco didn't like the ethical drop-off where that train of thought seemed headed.

"Original owner?" Major replied. "I'm not sure. It's possible."

“Since we’re on the subject of old buildings,” Maida took a quick nibble of a fritter. “How are the Opera House renovations coming along?”

Drayco sucked air through his teeth. He couldn’t avoid the topic, it seemed. “Probably looking at an opening date in late spring.”

“And you’ll be the headliner, naturally.”

“I’m not sure anyone would pay to hear me play these days. My piano career was so long ago.”

Maida looked disappointed. “You *must* be part of it. You’re the reason the Opera House was saved from the wrecking ball.”

“We’ll see. But I can’t make any promises.”

Maida patted him on the shoulder. “You haven’t touched our Chickering piano yet, and I had it tuned just for you. I won’t let you leave until you do.”

Drayco gave a small smile and a nod. A recital for one devoted fan—he could do that.

She added, “And I want to hear some of your own pieces. I understand you’re a composer now.”

“It’s nothing. A stress reliever.” He had a good idea of who told the Jepsens about that—Nelia. So, she had no problems discussing him behind his back, just not to his face? The ever-astute Maida got the hint, so she didn’t press further.

Not a fan of indulging in self-flagellation, Drayco focused on the image of the skeletal remains from the movie-set house. Not much was left of the poor unnamed victim. Once real, once alive, likely with her own hopes and dreams. That is, he guessed the victim was female, considering the dress.

He hated naming such victims with the customary “Jane Doe,” so in his mind, he was calling her “Elise,” after Beethoven’s famous piano bagatelle. He’d done that with his first anonymous-victim cold case in his FBI academy courses, dubbing her Alma Perdida, or “lost soul” in Spanish. Even after all these years, he kept a copy of a facial reconstruction sketch from the young woman’s skull as a reminder. *Never forget.*

Drayco picked at the fritters, trying not to dwell on all the lost souls never identified, if found at all. Yet, it was as if some force in the universe wanted this skeleton to be discovered. If the movie production hadn’t chosen that house for filming, and if the lighting hadn’t crashed through that particular wall, the skeletal remains could have remained hidden for decades more.

But did it ultimately matter? As he’d told Ellery Smith, cold cases often sat on the back burner. And as busy as the sheriff’s department was, “Elise” could easily stay anonymous forever.