

DEADLY RUSE

A MAC McCLELLAN MYSTERY

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SEVENTH STREET BOOKS®

AN IMPRINT OF PROMETHEUS BOOKS

59 JOHN GLENN DRIVE • AMHERST, NY 14228

www.seventhstreetbooks.com

Published 2014 by Seventh Street Books®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover design by Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

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18 17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Helms, E. Michael.

Deadly ruse : a Mac McClellan mystery / by E. Michael Helms.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-009-0 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-61614-077-9 (ebook)

1. Retired military personnel—Fiction. 2. Marines—Fiction. 3. Florida Panhandle (Fla.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3608.E4653D434 2014

813'.6—dc23

2014023931

Printed in the United States of America

*For my daughters, Melissa Ellis and Melanie McMillan.
Thank you both for your unconditional love and support.*

CHAPTER 1

I'd never been a big believer in coincidence until the night Kate Bell and I strolled out of O'Malley's Theater after watching *Dead Man Walking*.

O'Malley's shows classics from yesteryear and other oldies, and instead of row after row of conventional seating, tables and chairs occupy most of the auditorium, where couples or small groups can enjoy dinner while viewing the night's offering of cinematic magic.

Not that I considered 1995's *Dead Man Walking* a true oldie, but to the teens and twenty-somethings in the audience I suppose the flick qualified. After all, I'd served with several old salt Vietnam vets during my career with the Marines, and to me the Vietnam War was ancient history, much like World War II and Korea had been to the younger set. It's all relative.

I'm not much of a Sean Penn fan, although I think he's a fine actor. I guess it's his politics that rub me the wrong way. But Kate's a big fan, and any excuse to spend time with her is good enough for me. We enjoyed grilled grouper sandwiches with the trimmings and a pitcher of beer while I suffered through the movie.

When R. Lee Ermey (a career Marine himself), who played the rape/murder victim's father, tossed do-gooder Sister Helen out of his house I almost cheered, while the scene brought Kate to tears. Ugh. And when they finally strapped Matthew Poncellet's no-good lying ass into Gruesome Gertie and fried the bastard, I did let slip a rather loud "Ooraah!" From the look she gave me, I thought Kate was going to slap the taste out of my mouth.

"You just don't get it, Mac," she said, still dabbing at her eyes with a napkin as we left the theater and stepped into the cool, early-spring night air.

“Sure I get it,” I countered as we strolled down the sidewalk toward my Silverado. “He raped that girl and murdered her and her boyfriend. Then they fried his butt. What’s not to get?”

Kate reached over and pinched my arm. “You’re about as sentimental as Godzilla. I don’t know why you even—

“Dang,” she said, interrupting herself, “I forgot my purse.”

Kate turned and rushed back into O’Malley’s, leaving me several steps behind. Just as I stopped under the marquee I sidestepped a tall, dark-haired man and bumped head-on into an attractive redhead clutching his arm. She was wearing a tight black pantsuit that did nothing to hide a knockout figure.

“Sorry,” I muttered, standing aside as they hurried down the sidewalk. I forced my eyes back into their sockets and rushed through the door after Kate. She had stopped dead in her tracks between the concession stand and the doorway leading into the auditorium and was shaking like she’d been poleaxed. I double-timed to her side, hoping she wasn’t having a heretofore-unmentioned epileptic fit or some similar medical malfunction.

“What’s the matter?” I said, quickly wrapping an arm around Kate to steady her. She’d turned as pale as the mound of popcorn in the theater’s popper.

“That man,” she said, just as her legs buckled. I caught her with my other arm and pulled her close. She trembled against my chest, her ragged breath coming in rushes. “That was . . .” and just like that she fainted.



With an usher’s help I managed to get Kate to a chair inside the theater. I sent the young man after Kate’s purse as another usher arrived with a cool, damp cloth. I wiped Kate’s face with the cloth and declined the young lady’s offer to call 911 since Kate’s breathing had calmed and she was beginning to show signs of coming around. Her eyes fluttered several times and then opened. In a few seconds she sat upright and glanced around.

“What in the world?” she said, looking confused.

“You fainted. How’re you feeling?”

“Okay.” She still looked woozy.

“You sure? I can call a doctor.”

“No, I’m fine.” Then her eyes grew wide and she looked around the theater, turning her head this way and that. “That man I passed in the lobby . . . it was Wes!”

Okay, I don’t claim to be the brightest star in the celestials, but in our months together I was pretty damn sure I’d never heard Kate mention any Wes before. Who the hell was this guy Wes? I felt like a contestant on *Jeopardy*. Then the lightbulb flashed on—her late boyfriend, Wes Harrison, who had drowned over a decade ago in a boating accident.

“Kate, listen to me. That couldn’t have been Wes. Wes is dead.” A reasonable enough conclusion, I thought.

“No, no . . . you don’t understand,” Kate said, making about as much sense to me as her feelings of compassion for the killer in the movie we’d just seen. “That really was Wes!”

Kate had a wild look in her eyes, an expression I’d never seen on her face before. For a minute I thought she was going to keel over again. I grabbed her by both shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. She was still milky pale. “Kate, please listen. Wes drowned in a boating accident, remember?”

Kate nodded. “But it was Wes.” She stared at me like I’d just stepped onto Earth from an alien spaceship. “You don’t get it, Mac,” she said, her voice breaking up.

Now where had I heard *that* before? Oh yeah, out on the sidewalk a few minutes earlier heading for my pickup while Kate was informing me what a lousy movie critic I was. “Okay. What don’t I get?”

Kate turned and stared toward the lobby for a long moment and shook her head. “Dang, Mac, Wes is still alive!”

