

CAROLYN HART

SKULDUGGERY

CAROLYN HART CLASSICS

*With a
New
Introduction
by the
Author*



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INTRODUCTION

In a mystery, the protagonist follows clues to reveal why a crime occurred. The resolution achieves justice and celebrates goodness and decency. In a suspense novel, the question is whether a hero or heroine will outwit the opponent in time to save a lover, prevent outbreak of war, rescue a child, deliver the lifesaving serum . . .

Both kinds of books are quite wonderful. I feel fortunate over the course of a long career to have written traditional mysteries, suspense, and romantic suspense. In recent years, my focus has been the traditional mystery but I recall writing scenes of derring-do with great pleasure. The traditional mystery celebrates goodness; the suspense novel celebrates courage.

What affords suspense? Tales of war, adventure, and, always dear to me, the hunt for treasure. I have always been fascinated by the idea of treasure. Treasure figures in a number of my books. A very particular kind of missing treasure inspired *Skulduggery*, the long lost Peking Man bones that disappeared in the early years of WWII and may have reappeared briefly in New York in the 1970s.

I had read quite a bit about the missing Peking Man bones as well as other lost treasures, including the Treasure of Troy found by the famed archeologist Herman Schliemann and his wife Sophia. That treasure was stolen by Russian soldiers and finally reappeared in a Russian museum. When I wrote about the Treasure of Troy, it was still missing, and the heroine comes tantalizing close. My lively redheaded ghost Bailey Ruth Raeburn may—or may not—be seeking a legendary treasure of Belle Starr in *Hijacked Ghost*, which will be published in 2013.

There is still a search underway for the Peking Man bones. Perhaps they too may someday be found, but until then, I hope you will enjoy following the adventure of Ellen Christie in *Skulduggery* when she too comes tantalizing close to an important piece of history.

Ellen's challenge occurs in the San Francisco Chinatown of the early 1980s, evoking a part of the past of American Chinese, whose families came to this country as immigrants, as so many of our forebears did, and stayed to become a part of the rich and varied tapestry that makes America truly a land created by those who dare.

Carolyn Hart

ONE

He may have followed me right from the moment I left the office. Or he may have waited for me in the shadows of the huge old pines that bordered the museum parking lot.

I paid no attention to the dark shadows of the pines, didn't listen for footsteps behind me. I was absorbed in my own thoughts, trying to remember if I'd bought lemons the last time I shopped. The avocados were just right for guacamole, but, of course, I had to have a lemon. I wanted this to be an especially nice dinner.

I unlocked the car door, slipped behind the wheel. An especially nice dinner. What a revealing thought. As I backed out of my parking slot, turned toward the street, my sense of well-being eroded. Did I want to show Richard how well I cooked? Did I judge that was what really mattered to Richard, a well-cooked meal, a comfortable household?

The car picked up speed. How silly to probe and test and weigh a vagrant thought. There was certainly nothing abnormal about liking comfort.

But did I want to be comfortable?

It is so easy to slide into something. So difficult to get out.

I braked at the corner, waited for the light to change. The red of the stoplight was dim and soft, insubstantial in the fog, that wraithlike fog that can slip up and down San Francisco's hills in winter.

When the light changed, I accelerated rapidly, impatient with myself. I had started home, hurrying, happy, looking forward to a pleasant evening.

Pleasant. What an unremarkable word.

Don't be spiteful, Ellen, I told myself sharply.

So I was involved in my own thoughts, driving automatically, paying no attention to the traffic behind me. We are all the centers of our own existence. I knew as I changed gears, stopped, started, turned, that a hungry child cried in Mexico City, an old woman died in Cartagena, lovers kissed in London, but none of it was real to me. I was caught up in my own world, my own life, busy, intent, heading down a predetermined path, not really interested in what was happening to others.

But, sometimes, the unexpected happens, snatching us out of our routine, flinging us into someone else's life. It can be enough to turn our world around.

I caught mostly green lights so it only took fifteen minutes or so to get home, to the steep streets of Russian Hill. I parked, turning the wheels into the curb, and hurried up the fog slick sidewalk to my apartment house. It stands, narrow and haughty, midway up the Hill. It had been, of course, converted from an old private residence which resulted in some peculiar wiring and odd placement of closets, but the bay windows that jutted out over the street and the shiny golden real oak floors more than compensated. It was several miles from the museum, but, in the six months I had lived there, I had found every drive a new experience. Sometimes the sky was the soft blue of faded denim and a tangy sea-wet breeze rustled the pepper and eucalyptus trees. Sometimes a cloying fog hid gabled roofs, clung to street lamps, softened every outline into an impressionist vision.

I liked San Francisco, liked her many faces, liked her better every day I stayed.

Was I going to stay always?

I was climbing the narrow steps to the front door. I slowed.

Always is a long time. Was I ready for always?

I unlocked the door, stepped inside. And I don't suppose I checked to be sure the door pulled shut behind me. I was grappling with a heavy word.

Always.

One flight of steps, two, then the third floor and my apartment to

the right. I was happy here in San Francisco. I loved my job. Loved it and was damn lucky to have it because there are lots of anthropologists and not nearly enough jobs to go around.

I unlocked my door, stepped inside, turned on the light. Closing the door, I slipped off my coat, hung it on the tree, but made no move toward the kitchen.

I looked around my living room, saw it for that instant from a stranger's eyes, the truly lovely small Persian rug, silver and blue, in front of the fireplace; the bookcases lining two walls, full of good, bad, indifferent books, most of them culled from secondhand shops, all of them read, some read often; the fist-sized walrus so delicately carved from driftwood by Maki, a hunter at the sealing camp in Alaska where I had spent last summer, compiling data on blood group genes. Every time I saw the carving, it brought the summer back so vividly, the endless day, the whirring swarms of mosquitoes, vagrant dogs, laughing children.

My room, echoes of my life.

In my mind, I saw Richard's apartment. Neater than mine, the books tidily arranged, Andrew Wyeth prints, a Muslim prayer rug, a Tiffany glass lamp hanging over the Edwardian pool table.

Compatible rooms.

Slowly I slipped off my gloves, dropped them and my purse on the end table.

Well, what the hell did I want?

Richard and I shared the same interests, the same background. We could build a future together. But was it altogether too much sameness?

I walked toward the narrow kitchen with its old-fashioned gas range and white wooden cabinets and deep porcelain sink. I didn't have time to think, not if I hoped to fix dinner, bathe and dress before Richard came.

The shrimp must be cleaned, the batter made. Then I would cook the rice for the broccoli, cheese and rice casserole. It needed at least half-an-hour to bake, sometimes longer, depending upon the oven's mood. I would bathe and dress, make the guacamole the last thing.

Richard liked to eat promptly at seven-thirty.

I liked to eat when I was hungry. Even if it meant sardines and cream cheese at two in the morning. I opened the small refrigerator, lifted out the plastic bag of fresh shrimp, dumped them on the drainboard and began to peel off the shells and lift out the gritty intestine.

Richard was thoughtful and kind and, moreover, a very attractive man. I liked his mouth, liked the way he touched me, liked the intent look in his dark blue eyes when he reached out to pull me close.

Yes. But, even so, would the two of us together, pleasant, compatible, well-adjusted, would we ultimately be just a teeny bit . . . boring?

What did I think I wanted?

Scooping up the shrimp shells, I stuffed them into the plastic bag then twisted its neck into a knot (to keep the odor in) and dropped it in the garbage pail. Now I needed egg, milk, a dash of salt, crackers.

I wasn't a schoolgirl. I knew that romance was its own creation. So what did I want?

Unbidden, I remembered Bill. The rolling pin stopped, the stack of crackers half crumbled. So long ago. Warm Arkansas summers, swimming in the lake, drive-in movies, high school sweethearts. Rowdy, exuberant, dictatorial, unpredictable Bill. Dead at twenty in the ugliness of Vietnam.

I moved the rolling pin jerkily, scattering crumbs along the counter top. I was brushing them back onto the waxed paper when I heard a knock at the front door.

Startled, I glanced up at the electric kitchen clock. No, it couldn't be Richard. Not yet. It wasn't even six yet.

I rinsed my hands, dried them and hurried to open the door.

He was half-turned, looking over his shoulder. He jerked around to face me. Emotion is communicable without any words. It doesn't take ESP to know if someone is angry or grieved—or excited.

He spoke my name so quickly I almost couldn't understand it.

"Dr. Christie?"

I hesitated. I wasn't in the telephone book. I hadn't lived here long enough yet. And I didn't know him.

"Dr. Christie?" His voice was sharp now, edged with impatience.

He was younger than I, slightly built, very handsome with black eyes, straight thick black eyebrows, skin the color of dark summer honey, broad high cheekbones, a low-bridged nose. A classic Chinese face.

And, somehow, vaguely familiar.

"Yes," I said finally, warily, "I'm Dr. Christie. What do you want?"

He looked over his shoulder again, quickly, tensely.

I, too, looked beyond him, down the flight of stairs.

A door shut downstairs and he flinched. Turning back to me, he said urgently, "Can I talk to you? Please?"

I don't know what he saw in my face, uneasiness rejection, withdrawal.

"You'll be glad you did," he said unexpectedly.

Why in the world . . .

"You are the bone lady. Aren't you?"

I stepped back to let him come in. As I did, I knew I was gambling. San Francisco is beautiful, exciting, glamorous and, as all big cities, dangerous as hell if you don't use your head.

I could imagine Richard's expression. Fastidious distaste. Letting in a roughly-dressed stranger, he would be appalled.

He hadn't thought the bone lady story funny at all. I had. Perhaps I lack the proper dignity. But, I don't think that's it. I just can't take anybody too seriously, much less myself. So the story hadn't bothered me.

I closed the door behind my unscheduled visitor and nodded toward the couch. He sat down stiffly, both feet flat on the floor, his hands in his lap. With the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he rubbed nervously on his left wrist.

I remembered that gesture. This afternoon, late in the afternoon, I had led a tour through the Early Man section of the museum. It was the usual pick-me-up crowd; students, lonely old men, children on a field trip, a sprinkling of affluent tourists. On the edge of the group, a young Chinese in a black-and-red checked flannel shirt had watched and listened and constantly rubbed that wrist.

“Who are you?” I asked sharply.

He shook his head at that. “It doesn’t matter.” He stared at me for a long moment and I wondered what he looked for. He saw a woman in her mid-twenties, crisply curling black hair, Irish blue eyes and what my mother called an aristocratic nose. My father called it ‘damn noticeable’.

“You are Dr. Christie?” he asked insistently. “Dr. Ellen Christie?”

I nodded impatiently.

“I read about you in the newspaper, Dr. Christie. You know all about bones.”

I shrugged. “No one knows all about anything.”

“But you are the bone lady?”

The bone lady.

My co-workers had loved the story, but I didn’t mind their laughter. The reporter was young and he meant well. In my view that excused a lot.

It was an interesting story. Human bones fascinate everyone. These particular bones turned up during excavations for a new sewer line off the Embarcadero near Pacific. The workmen were shoveling, the bulldozer idled because a gas line ran through the area. Suddenly, one of them yelled out, “Hey, you guys, look at this!”

Digging stopped. The police came. The medical examiner was notified. Finally, after the bones were carefully excavated from the compacted sand, the Medical Examiner’s office called the museum. Our department chairman often aided the police by studying odd skeletons that turned up. But the call came just before the Thanksgiving holiday and Dr. Fernandez was out of town. I was the other physical anthropologist on the staff and I was happy to help out.

I spent an interesting afternoon reconstructing the skeleton, studying the size of the long bones, the dentition of the teeth—and the gaping hole in the top rear of the cranium.

It was murder, all right. But the murderer had long since met Judgment. Long since. I estimated the age of the burial at about seventy-five years ago and found I’d shorted it when I talked to the police lieu-

tenant. Several loose brass buttons, a brass belt buckle and four coins were found beneath the bones. The coins were an 1856 one-dollar U.S. gold piece, an 1859 silver half-dime and two bronze two-cent pieces dated 1865 and 1867, so the bones had likely laid there nearer a hundred years.

The lieutenant told me something about the history of that section of San Francisco. It was infamous in the 1860s and 1870s for the abduction of seamen who were rounded up, drugged and hauled out to ships where they awoke at sea to find themselves treated as slave labor and bound for Shanghai.

I told him something of this victim, that he was a Caucasian male about nineteen years old, that his skull was unusually thin, that he had been slightly built, weighing perhaps one hundred and twenty to thirty pounds and standing five inches over five feet, that he had as a child broken his left leg and must have walked with a noticeable limp, and, that shortly before his untimely death he had suffered an impacted wisdom tooth which must have been very painful.

“Goddam,” the lieutenant laughed, “what color eyes did he have?”

And that was all there was to it. An interesting experience but unimportant in the scheme of my life. When the telephone at my office rang the next day and it was a reporter, a friend of the lieutenant’s, I thought the same.

Someone dropped a clipping of the reporter’s story on my desk several days later. I had missed it in the paper. I will say that the reporter had an interesting style. The story began:

“San Francisco’s bone lady divines the past, not with tarot cards or crystal balls, but with broken clumps of bone rudely shaken from a century-old grave. And finds nothing the least unusual in doing so. Dr. Ellen Christie, a physical anthropologist, responded to a call from the police department for help in identifying bones discovered Wednesday by a street crew excavating on the Embarcadero near Pacific. As Dr. Christie explains, ‘It is possible to reconstruct . . .’”

Someone at the museum with a gleeful sense of humor snapped my picture and put the developed snapshot on the department bulletin board with a bone neatly sketched in my mouth.

It was the subject of a good deal of ribald comment for a while. But, all things pass, and, eventually, no one mentioned the story any more. Or called me bone lady.

Until tonight. Now this tense excited young man wanted to know, it was important for him to know, whether I was the bone lady.