

PETER E. FENTON

MANN HUNT

THE
DECLAN HUNT
MYSTERIES

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Mysteries**

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PETER E. FENTON

Mann Hunt

ISBN # 978-1-83943-298-9

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Cover Art by Erin Dameron-Hill ©Copyright August 2023

Interior text design by Claire Siemaszkiewicz

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Published in 2023 by Pride Publishing, United Kingdom.

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MANN HUNT

Book one in the Declan Hunt Mysteries series

How far would you be willing to go to finish the job?

Declan Hunt is having a bad week. His kidnapping case is showing little progress, his office assistant has left him on short notice and his latest investigation has left him literally battered and bruised. But things change when he hires twenty-four-year-old Charlie Watts to help out at the office. They form an unlikely partnership while trying to solve two seemingly unrelated cases whose threads begin to weave together when the missing person's case turns to murder.

The investigation takes them from the dark alleys, gay bars and bath houses of Calgary to the richest parts of the city during the world-famous Calgary Stampede.

But will they be able to discover who the killer is before another life is lost? And will Declan be able to solve the mystery of his relationship with Charlie, who is clearly attracted to him—especially since it is evident that the attraction is becoming mutual?

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my Calgary friends who have been so supportive of my artistic endeavours.

Trademark Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

Even among the younger generation, at fifty-nine, Ian Mann was considered to be an attractive male. At six feet in height, and a lean one-hundred-and-sixty-five pounds, he exuded an undeniable confidence. His long, well-coiffed sandy-brown hair and manicured nails led certain people to question his sexuality but he didn't care what others thought. In fact, he was devoted to his wife of thirty years. He saw himself as the original metrosexual...but one with an edge. He had something that had always left people uneasy — heterochromia. His left eye was grey-green, his right eye, light blue.

Ian had met his wife, Katherine, when he had been living in London. She'd been an up-and-coming fashion model, he, a promising young photographer. They had fallen in love shortly after meeting during a group photo session, and had been married six weeks later.

In London in the nineties, they had been the couple to be seen with. She was beautiful and he had an irresistible charisma. Life for the couple had been filled with parties,

drinking and dinners until the day Ian's father had passed away. It was assumed that someone of Ian's social standing would inherit a country estate, or a baronetcy, at the very least. To everyone's shock, Katherine's in particular, what he had inherited was a small industrial complex in the far reaches of western Canada. London's dream couple, the fodder of the paparazzi, had to pull up stakes and move to Calgary, Alberta.

Katherine and Ian had not suffered financially with their move to Calgary. Land speculation and development had taken over as the primary business of Mann Holdings. In the boom years, when the oil industry was at its peak, Ian's company had made a fortune. When he divested himself of control in the company in 2013, holding onto a few properties for sentimental reasons, he'd made even more. When the oil business had collapsed the following year, and people couldn't give away office space, Ian and Katherine were sitting pretty...and hated by many who were forced to sell much of what they had left at bargain-basement prices to cover their essential costs.

But Ian knew how quickly a person's fortune could diminish over time. Now, all that was left was their Mount Royal home, a financially strapped AAA hockey team Ian owned and a factory building, a building that someone had offered to buy at a meeting earlier in the day. He had declined, even though the money was much needed.

Ian had decided not to say anything to Katherine about the offer. He went into his office and backed up the files from his phone to the cloud. As an extra precaution, he also saved them onto a USB stick. Then he tipped up his desk lamp and tucked the stick beneath the hollow base. Once the lamp was back in place, Ian headed down

to the front door with his bag and hollered, "Katherine, I'm heading out in a few minutes." It was Ian's night out with the boys. This week was a special celebration and was being held on a Thursday, the night before the Calgary Stampede opened.

"Be right there, darling," Katherine called out. Even after all these years of living in Calgary, her voice still carried the accent of the city in which she had been raised.

Katherine rounded the corner from the living room. Ian admired her appearance. She was tall and slender, with chestnut-brown eyes. Her auburn hair, normally worn long, was twisted into a loose French roll. She wore a cream-coloured dress, accented perfectly by a gold chain with a diamond pendant and exquisite matching earrings.

"Have a wonderful evening," she said, before bending in to kiss him. "Will you be late?"

Ian replied, "I don't think so. No later than usual. You look like you're heading out."

Katherine checked her earrings in the hall mirror. "Last-minute call from Deirdre. A friend of hers is in town and she decided to host a cocktail party for him."

"I hope he's old and ugly, so you won't be tempted," Ian said.

Katherine smiled. "I wouldn't worry. I'd be more concerned by the fact that Michael's back from college."

Michael was Deirdre and Simon Taylor's twenty-year-old son. A handsome athlete, debate team leader and, if rumours were true, in the running for a Rhodes Scholarship. Ian had joked about Michael being just Katherine's type.

Katherine turned to Ian. "Deirdre was sorry that you couldn't make it tonight, but I told her that your boys' nights out are sacred."

"You are a doll," he said as he leaned in to kiss her. "See you later."

With that, he grabbed the handle of his suitcase and wheeled it out to the garage.

* * * *

Ian loved his boys' nights out and tonight's was the perfect antidote to the unpleasant meeting he'd had earlier in the day. At the party Ian observed his usual rituals, saw the usual people and as always, avoided drinking so he was totally in control. When he looked at his watch, he was surprised at the time. It was late and he had to get home. He changed into his street clothes, bade the rest of the party-goers adieu and trundled his suitcase back to the car. He pressed the button on his key fob to open the trunk and was about to stow away his bag when a voice from the shadows said, "You come here often?"

Ian jumped.

"Jesus, what the fuck are you doing here?" Ian snapped.

"Just being curious, I guess. Just wondered what you got up to in your spare time."

"I don't appreciate being stalked. What do you want?"

"You know what I want!"

"We've talked about this before."

The figure pulled a knife out of his coat pocket.

Ian saw the uncertainty in his assailant's eyes. "I can't do anything about this right now, but tomorrow, I'll call you and give you what you want."

The attacker lowered his knife slightly. Ian talked, soft and slow, saying what he knew his attacker wanted to hear. He finished with, "I promise."

"You'd better be telling the truth," the assailant said as he spit his gum out on the drive and disappeared back into the shadows.

Ian started shaking. *I've got to get home. Katherine will be worried.* His trunk was open and his suitcase was still sitting on the ground. He put his bag in the trunk and drove down the driveway, through the gates as they opened and out onto the main access road.

A figure stepped out of the shadows and flagged him down.

What does he want now? he thought. He lowered his window and said, "I'll deal with this tomorrow."

Then Ian realised that something wasn't quite right.

A voice said, "I don't believe you. Give me the keys."
"What?"

"The car keys. Give me your car keys!" the attacker snapped, reaching in the window and grabbing onto Ian's hair. It was then that Ian saw the gun.

His heart pounded as he pulled the keys out of the ignition and handed them over with a shaky hand.

"Out of the car. Now!"

As soon as he stepped out, Ian was grabbed and dragged towards the back of the car. The trunk lid popped open. The man tore off the emergency trunk lid release tab before saying, "Get in."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Get in and you'll find out."

Ian climbed into the trunk and curled himself into a protective ball as the lid slammed shut. He was in total darkness. His suitcase, which contained all of the objects of the beautiful aspect of his life, pressed painfully into

his back. The engine roared and the car reversed, then sped ahead. Every turn, corner, pothole and stop sent him ricocheting around his tight prison cell. As the car bounced on a particularly deep rut, his head hit the hinge of the trunk and blood trickled down his face.

The car came to an abrupt stop and the driver's side door opened, then closed. The trunk lid popped open.

He wasn't sure where he was. It was remote, and in the distance he could hear water running.

"Get out."

Ian's limbs felt heavy and he was having trouble disentangling himself from the suitcase and other items in the trunk.

The man said, "Now, I hope you know I'm serious about this. Are you going to give me what I want?"

Something inside Ian snapped. For once, he wanted things to go his way. He stared directly at his attacker and said, "No, you will not get what you want. And you will pay for this. I'll go to the papers and tell them everything."

Then Ian started to run. He got twenty feet before his left foot caught on a tree root and he fell. He looked back and could see that his assailant was nearly on top of him.

Ian curled his legs beneath him, and with every last ounce of strength, launched himself directly at his attacker, driving his head into the assailant's stomach and knocking the wind out of him. Ian turned around and started to run past his car and along a trail which seemed to head towards a street lamp.

He got no more than fifty feet down the path when the man tackled him from behind. He landed with a crack. Ian looked up into the sky. *So many stars*, he thought. *So many...*

When Ian came to, he felt as if he were floating. His head throbbed and he couldn't see out of his left eye. His brain swam in a sea of confusion. He was naked. None of this made sense. Ian tried to stand up but his legs wouldn't oblige. He was surrounded by water. His brain shouted messages of *danger* and *get to safety*, but his body failed to cooperate. The cold water felt good. It eased the pain. The trees and stars above swirled as he thought, *I used to like swimming*. Then he descended into blackness.

Chapter Two

Declan Hunt glanced down at his coat, frayed at the edges and covered with grime. His toes poked through the ends of his shoes, and as he stumbled along the street, he swerved around the people who walked past him. Occasionally he mumbled an apology. It was around two in the morning and the part of the block he walked down was poorly lit thanks to three burnt-out street lamps.

He leaned up against a lamppost and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, holding it in his shaking left hand. He tried to light it but the match went out before the cigarette was lit. A large man was moving along the street towards him. He was tall—about six-foot-two—and built like a brick wall.

“Hey, buddy—got a light?” Declan asked.

Brick Wall stopped and looked at him, then pulled out a fancy gold lighter, lit it and held it up to the partially smoked cigarette.

“Thanks.”

Brick Wall grunted an acknowledgement then walked farther along the street, entering a building a few doors down.

As soon as the man was out of sight, Declan stubbed out the cigarette and put the butt back into his coat pocket. He didn't normally smoke, and at fifteen bucks a pack, he wasn't going to just throw one away. It might come in handy later.

After a few moments, he headed towards the building where the guy had gone in. It was a two-storey wood-framed structure that looked like an old store that had gone out of business. How this building had escaped the wrecking crew was anybody's guess. On one side of it was a smart little bistro. On the other, a condo was going up. An alleyway separated the old store from the construction site.

How convenient.

Declan hurried around the corner and down the alleyway. The wall of the building was punctuated by a single window, too high to reach. A small dumpster had been pushed up against the wall under the window, right next to a door.

He hoisted himself up, making as little noise as possible, and levered himself high enough to look in.

Inside, Brick Wall was talking to another guy seated at a desk. Declan couldn't see the face of the second man as his back was towards the window. The two of them seemed deep in conversation and the man who was sitting gesticulated wildly with his hands. Brick Wall took him by the shoulder and led him out of view. Declan surveyed the room. It appeared to take up the entire first floor. On a table along the back was a large model of a grand old building. Other than the desk and the table with the model, the space was empty.

Declan leaned a little farther to the left to get a better view. Suddenly the building was moving upward and he was heading down. His body hit the dumpster lid with a sound like a mallet pounding on a giant kettle drum. As the dumpster continued to roll, he blinked to clear his vision, only to see the high-mounted alleyway lights and the face of Brick Wall staring down at him.

"Whadda we got here?" he asked. "A little late to be sightseeing."

Declan rolled himself off the dumpster and hit the pavement. He had intended to run, but before he could get to his feet, Brick Wall had grabbed him by the jacket and hoisted up his one-hundred-and-eighty-five pounds without effort, then slammed him back down on the edge of the steel dumpster. Declan crumpled to the pavement.

"A guy's gotta learn not to poke his nose in another fella's business," Brick Wall said, before sending the toe of his sizeable right shoe crashing into Declan's ribs. Several kicks followed before Declan felt himself being picked up again. He heard the sound of the dumpster lid being opened, then fell into a pile of rotting waste as the lid slammed shut and he was surrounded by darkness.

* * * *

Joan Beckerman unlocked the street-level door of the office, picked up the mail that had come through the slot and began the slow walk up the flight of stairs to the second floor. She wasn't sure which creaked louder – the wooden steps or her sixty-eight-year-old knees. She turned the key in the lock and entered the outer office.

Mrs B, as Joan was known in the office, occupied the only desk in the main reception room, along with a couple of comfortable chairs, a couch and a coffee table

with *up-to-date* magazines to ensure that no one would confuse this with a doctor's office. She loved this space. It was warm and comfortable. Large, mullioned windows let light pour in from the street. The walls were a deep red-brown brick—rare for Calgary where most old structures were wood-framed. And the floors—wide planked wood, worn by the feet of a thousand people over the seventy-year history of this building. It wasn't old by international standards, but here in Calgary, it was a grand old dame.

She dropped the mail on her desk. There were a couple of bills and an envelope, probably containing a payment—she recognised the return address of the elderly man who had hired them to look for his missing brother. They'd found him buried legally in Queen's Park Cemetery.

Before she could deal with any of these matters, coffee had to be made. Without caffeine, her brain didn't function properly.

As she waited for the coffee to finish brewing, Mrs B tidied her desk for the day. She was, undeniably, an organised woman. As the sole employee of Declan Hunt Investigations, aside from Declan, she was responsible for dealing with the clients, maintaining Declan's schedule, billing and whatever else was required to keep the company going. And for that, organisation was the key to success.

The coffee maker gurgled, letting her know that caffeine was mere moments away. She returned to her desk, coffee in hand—black, two sugars—and sorted the contents of the envelopes. The bills went into one pile, the payment from the man in search of his brother in a second stack. The payment also included a note.

Seeing as how you found my brother deceased, and now of no use to me, I see little reason to pay you the full amount demanded. Enclosed you will find a cheque for half your bill.

Mrs B let out a sigh. She had wanted today to go smoothly.

The street door opened, followed by heavy footsteps on the stairs. A man dressed in a long dirty coat entered through the office door. His face was unshaven and grimy. He walked with a limp.

"Good Lord, what the hell happened to you?" Mrs B asked.

Declan paused. "Some people in this city have no respect for the homeless." As Declan straightened his body, he winced and grabbed his side. "Can't take a kick like I used to."

"Did you find Mr Attwal?" she asked.

"Not yet, and I've pretty well run out of leads," he said as he winced again.

She moved towards him. "Here. Let me help you."

Mrs B got him up to his apartment, which occupied the third floor of the building. She helped him take off his coat and shirt. "If it's all right with you, I'll chuck these into the wash," she offered.

"Thanks."

She looked at his strong chest and rippled stomach muscles. While attractive to many, they had no effect on her. The bruising, however... She pursed her lips and inhaled. "Oooo, that's going to hurt tomorrow."

She touched the area. Declan inhaled sharply.

"Oh, come on. I've seen you in worse shape."

"What – no sympathy for the guy who gets beaten up just so *you* can get a paycheque?"

"Stop your whining. Nothing appears to be broken."

"You're a harsh woman, Mrs B."

She walked over to the fridge and took out an ice-pack, which she wrapped in a tea towel and handed to him. "Here. You know what to do."

She went into his bathroom and returned with the first-aid kit.

"Take these," she said, passing him a couple of pills. "Vitamin C might help lessen the bruising which, if I know my beatings, will be spectacular over the next few days. I'll wrap you up to give you some support. But first... You've gotta go shower. You smell like you've spent the night in a dumpster."

"Where do you think they threw me after they did this? It took me an hour to crawl out after I came to."

Declan went into the bathroom and had a shower. By the time he had finished, Mrs B had laid clothes out for him on the bed. She returned with a coffee.

"It has sugar in it. I figured you could use the energy."

He took it from her and had a sip. She stood there, trying to figure out how to break the news to him.

"You're a lifesaver. I don't know what I'd do without you," Declan said, as he eased himself down onto the edge of the bed.

Mrs B paused, then said, "Well, now that you mention it... I guess there's no point in beating around the bush."

"I wouldn't expect you would."

"You remember how I told you my daughter and her friend were going on a three-week trip to South America?"

"Yeah, I think so," Declan replied, taking another sip of his coffee.

"Well, it seems her friend tripped over her cat, and somehow fell out of her window."

Declan choked and hot coffee shot up and out through his nose. "Ow, ow, ow," he cried.

"Luckily she lived on the second floor, so she only broke her leg." Mrs B shook her head.

Declan mopped his face with his towel. Mrs B took it from him and proceeded to use it to clean the floor. As she got up, her legs began to buckle and she steadied herself against a chair.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Anyway, I got a call from my daughter last night, all in tears because of her vacation. Well, it was — look, she asked me to go with her in her friend's place and I said yes."

She stared at him, waiting for a reaction. "Well, I couldn't let her go on her own, could I?"

"And when does this happen?" Declan asked.

"I leave Sunday."

"Sunday? Like this Sunday? Two days from now Sunday?"

"That would be Sunday. So, you'll need to hire a replacement for me for the time I'll be away."

"Well then" — he seemed to be piecing things together — "would you call a temp agency and see what they can do?"

"You're not going to be using one of those companies. They charge an arm and a leg, and the poor temp only sees a fraction of it. Anyway, I've already placed an ad on one of those job-search websites. They'll send you a list of the top ten candidates with interview times starting on Monday."

"Monday?"

"No need to thank me. I'm only doing my job. Now I'd better leave you to rest."

She left Declan, who was staring out of the window with a hurt expression on his face.

He'll get over it, she thought. After all, it's only three weeks.