

PETER E. FENTON

THE
DECLAN HUNT
MYSTERIES

HOODOO HOUSE

How far would you be willing to go to keep a secret?

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**The Declan Hunt
Mysteries**

HOODOO HOUSE

PETER E. FENTON

Hoodoo House
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HOODOO HOUSE

Book two in the Declan Hunt Mysteries series

How far would you be willing to go to keep a secret?

When writer Malcolm Tull is discovered dead at his writing desk, all signs point to suicide. But Malcolm's editor isn't so sure. There's the matter of the man's missing computer, a mislaid manuscript and the fact that he didn't seem the type to take his own life.

Declan Hunt and Charlie Watts are called into action and make their way to the mysterious Hoodoo House nestled on the edge of the Badlands of Alberta. Soon they are embroiled in a case involving blackmail, gay tricks and possibly even murder.

As the secrets of Hoodoo House come to light, Charlie discovers that his boss has been keeping a few secrets of his own, secrets that could impact their romantic relationship outside of the office. And before this investigation is done, Charlie will have to get to the truth, even if it means this might be his final case for Declan Hunt Investigations.

Dedication

For my sister, Carol

Trademark Acknowledgements

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Gmail: Google LLC

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Cadillac Coupe de Ville: General Motors Company

Miss Marple: Agatha Christie

Prologue

Mrs Cameron stood at the kitchen sink, considering the dishes created by her morning baking. She stared at the boarded-up kitchen window, the result of a strong dust devil that had hit the north side of the house and torn off a section of the roof a week ago. A sheet of plywood shielded the glass from the repair work above on the decaying one-hundred-and five-year-old wood-framed house.

With the light from the outside cut off, the windowpane became a dim mirror reflecting the activity and inhabitants of the kitchen. Mrs Cameron looked at her reflection and saw a woman with a jowly countenance and hair that had gone completely white. She hadn't turned full-on apple doll yet, but it was inevitable – unless, of course, death took her first.

When did you become so old?

Her thoughts were interrupted.

“What’s this symbol called?” Henry asked, holding up a piece of paper and pointing to an indiscernible

character. He was surrounded by the remains of his math homework spread all over the table.

"Well, you're gonna have to bring it here. My eyes aren't telescopes."

Henry scooted the chair back, brought her the paper and held it up to her milky blue eyes. She pulled her reading glasses out of the pocket of her apron and held them in front of her, like a jeweller would hold their loupe while examining a rare gem.

"It's a pi," she said.

"I like pie," he said with a smile.

She raised an eyebrow. "Now how long have you been waiting to tell that joke?"

"It's not so much a joke as witty wordplay," he said, heading back to his chair.

This from a thirteen-year-old, she thought, shaking her head. Henry often seemed wiser than a boy of his age. Although he was only her ward, she thought of him as the child she'd never had and due to their age difference, he had taken to calling her Gramma Carol.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Now, clear up your mess and set the table. Then you can go and tell Mr Tull breakfast is ready."

Henry quickly did as he was told.

Mrs Cameron smiled as she looked around. The kitchen was her domain and nobody in Hoodoo House would dare to question anything she did here or, frankly, anywhere else on the property. She was the housekeeper, cook, scullery maid and holder of just about every other staff position one could imagine. She was as permanent a fixture in the building as the ancient stove or the kitchen's large wooden prep table and she loved every scrap of wood and broken-down fixture in it...almost as much as she loved young Henry.

Writer Malcolm Tull, however...

An acrid smell hit her nostrils.

"Damn."

She ran towards the oven. A cloud of smoke filled the air as she pulled out the tray of burnt baking.

"You damned fool," she muttered to herself as she removed the biscuits and placed them on a cooling rack. She could scrape the char off the best ones and they'd be fine. The others she'd save for crumbling up for the chickens, or perhaps the centres could be used for stuffing. Either way, they would end up inside a chicken.

She checked the coffee perking in the pot and dabbed the fat off the freshly cooked bacon. She turned back towards the kitchen table and was startled to see Henry standing at the door, his eyes wide, his mouth open. It took him a moment to speak.

"There's something wrong with Mr Tull."

"Well, what's wrong?" she asked.

"He's asleep on his desk and he's lying in his own sick."

Mrs Cameron hurried to the writing room. Henry followed. She went to the desk and examined the prone man. She'd been around long enough to know when something wasn't alive, but to be certain, she checked for a pulse – nothing.

"Henry, leave the room and don't touch anything. And don't come back in here."

She scurried past the boy and headed back to the kitchen where she called the doctor...and the police.

* * * *

Sergeant Kaci Bowen from the Drumheller, Alberta RCMP detachment was in her late fifties and moved like she'd walked too many miles in cheap shoes. She trudged

into the writing room. It was a large space with bookshelves on three walls and a sizeable casement window in the fourth which faced the roadway and the distant fields of prairie grass beyond. As had been reported, the body of writer Malcolm Tull, forty-five years old, was seated in a leather chair behind an expansive oak desk. His torso, head and arms lay across the desk. His face lay in a pool of vomit, which had formed a ring around a blue ceramic coffee mug just beyond reach of Tull's right hand. On the left side of the desk was a prescription bottle one-third full of round white tablets.

Sergeant Bowen walked behind the desk and craned her head over the rigid body, noting that the pill bottle's label identified the contents as primidone, prescribed to Malcolm Tull.

"Is he dead?" a voice asked from the doorway.

Sergeant Bowen looked up and saw a teen-aged boy with tousled mouse-brown hair. She guessed he was a hundred and fifty-six, maybe fifty-seven centimetres tall, and forty-five kilos, tops. She was good at guessing heights and weights. When she retired, maybe she'd join a sideshow.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said.

She walked the boy out into the hallway. *No point in him spending any more time than necessary around the dead body.* The officer looked more closely at the teen. He wore a long-sleeved plaid shirt, jeans and high-top runners. If it wasn't for the shoes, the kid could have been a farm hand. There were plenty just like him all across Wheatland County.

"Henry, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am. Henry Quill," he answered, bowing his head and avoiding eye contact.

She wasn't sure if the boy was simple or just shy.

"Nice to meet you, Henry. My name is Sergeant Bowen, but you can call me Kaci if you like. I'm with the RCMP. I suppose you know why I'm here?"

"You came to look after Mr Tull," Henry said, shuffling his feet and peering around her trying to get a look inside the room.

"Yes. That's right," she replied.

Henry looked directly at her and asked again, "Is he really dead?"

"Yes. He's dead."

Henry nodded his head as he processed the information. He had a serious look on his face, but didn't seem upset. Sergeant Bowen wasn't overly surprised by this. Young people in farm country were raised knowing death was as natural as birth and were often able to handle it better than some adults she knew.

"Do you know what happened to him?" the boy asked.

"Not yet, but I'm sure we'll figure it out. And you might be able to help."

"How? I just found him, that's all," Henry said.

"Did you happen to hear or see anything unusual this morning?"

Henry considered her question for a moment.

She continued, "If I understand it right, you went to get him for breakfast."

Henry nodded again. "Gramma Carol asked me to let him know it was ready. That was one of my usual morning jobs."

"Do you have other jobs you do in the morning?" she asked.

"I do my math homework first thing before breakfast. Gramma Carol says my brain is sharpest then."

Sergeant Bowen pulled out her notepad and pencil. "Do you mind if I take a few notes?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, that would be fine," Henry answered.

"My mind isn't as good at remembering as it used to be," she joked. "When was the last time you saw Mr Tull, other than this morning?"

"Last night, before bed."

"And where did you see him?"

"In there," Henry said, pointing to the writing room. "I took him his evening tonic."

"Tonic?"

Henry smiled. "That's what Gramma Carol calls it. It's a gross thing he likes to drink before bed. I wouldn't drink it if you paid me."

"Do you know what's in this tonic?"

"I think there's brandy, but you have to ask Gramma Carol."

"And you usually bring it to Mr Tull before bed?" Sergeant Bowen asked.

"No. Gramma Carol does. I'm usually in bed before ten and that's when Mr Tull has it. At ten p.m. sharp, but I was up late looking at the stars, so I said I could take it to him."

Sergeant Bowen carefully noted the time.

"You said ten p.m. sharp. So, I gather Mr Tull is strict about schedules?"

"Yes ma'am. He's strict—I mean, he *was* strict—about a lot of things."

"What sorts of things?"

"When I didn't bring his afternoon coffee at two p.m., he would yell 'Discipline is the only thing that stops us from sliding back to the stone age.'"

Sergeant Bowen smiled. Her inspector had said something similar that very morning.

"And last night when you brought him his tonic, were you on time?" she continued.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you didn't wait to see if he drank his tonic?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. Mr. Tull told me to leave him alone."

A low growl sounded from Henry's stomach.

Sergeant Bowen closed her notebook. "I won't keep you and your stomach much longer. Was there anything at all that you can think of that was...different this morning?"

Henry smiled. "I got Gramma Carol real good with a math joke. I told her I like pi."

"Good one," Sergeant Bowen said, pretending she got the joke. "Okay, anything else you remember from last night or this morning?"

"No, ma'am. Not that I can think of right now."

"Thank you, Henry. You've been very helpful. Would you get your Gramma Carol for me?"

"Sure," Henry said, then disappeared out of sight.

Sergeant Bowen walked back into the writing room and looked out through the window to see if there was any sign of the coroner or forensics team. Behind her, someone cleared their throat and Sergeant Bowen turned and saw the woman who had let her into the house earlier...Mrs Cameron.

Sergeant Bowen studied her for a moment. Mrs Cameron was old, mid-eighties the sergeant guessed, around one-hundred-and-seventy centimetres with a weight of seventy kilograms. Mrs Cameron dressed the part of a housekeeper with a loose-fitting dress that came down to her ankles, a white apron and comfortable black

running shoes. Her white hair was unevenly cut short and parted on the left side. She had probably cut it herself.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Mrs Cameron, do you know if Mr Tull had any medical issues?"

"All I know is he took pills every night with his tonic. I'm not sure what they were for since he bragged about how healthy he was. He went running every morning at dawn, at least in the summer months. In the winter he'd bundle up and head out for a brisk walk." She folded her arms. "He had the nerve to say that if Mr Pritchard had taken better care of himself, he wouldn't have dropped dead like he did."

"Mr Pritchard?" Sergeant Bowen asked

"That was the previous writer-in-residence at Hoodoo House," Mrs Cameron replied.

"And exactly what did Mr Pritchard die of?" Sergeant Bowen asked.

Mrs Cameron scowled. "Old age."

Sergeant Bowen looked down at her notes. "Henry said that you prepare Mr. Tull's evening tonic. What precisely does it contain?"

"It's *kumis*, a drink made from fermented mare's milk. He claimed it was the fountain of youth. He makes it himself. I just serve it up to him with a shot of brandy. I told him to forget the yogourty glop and stick to the brandy. It would probably do the same thing for him."

Sergeant Bowen made a note, then pushed ahead. "And how long have you known Mr Tull?"

Mrs Cameron paused. "A little over fifteen years, I guess. He started out as Mr Pritchard's editor before taking over the position of writer-in-residence."

"Is that normal? An editor becoming a writer?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes it happens the other way around."

Bowen turned the page on her notepad. "What exactly does a writer-in-residence do?"

"Here, the writer-in-residence is a fully supported position. They get a place to stay, meals, a monthly stipend and a place far away from distraction to create whatever they want."

"And who pays for all of this?"

"The Heart's Shadow Foundation," Mrs Cameron said, "and before you ask, they get their money from the proceeds of Marjorie Ellis' *The Heart's Shadow* book series."

Sergeant Bowen frowned. "*The Heart's Shadow*, huh? I've never heard of it. It must be a profitable book series to support all this."

"It is. You obviously aren't from around here, are you?" Mrs Cameron said.

"Brandon, Manitoba, actually. I transferred here two months ago."

Sergeant Bowen glanced around the writing room before continuing, "Running this place must cost a lot of money. These writers, they must be good." She hoped to placate her.

"Mr Pritchard was," Mrs Cameron sharply replied.

"And Mr Tull?"

"He was...competent."

Mrs Cameron started to fuss with something in her apron pocket. "May I?" she asked as she entered the room and walked towards the desk, pulling out a cleaning rag.

"Mrs Cameron, please don't touch anything," the sergeant said, stepping between her and the desk.

“Look, I’ve already been in here once today. I’ll just clean up the vomit.”

“Mrs Cameron, I’m afraid I can’t let you touch it.”

“But the desk is a valuable piece of furniture. The stomach acid could damage it!”

“It might also hold evidence as to what happened here.”

“But...that’s the very desk Marjorie Ellis wrote *The Ragtag Crew* at...”

Sergeant Bowen took her by the arm. “Mrs Cameron, what would help me most is if you would leave everything just as it is until forensics has been through.”

The housekeeper took one more glance at the desk and shook her head. “Fine,” she said then marched out of the room.

* * * *

Forensics arrived and inspected the body. They removed the hard evidence, including the *kumis* mug, the pill bottle and a large sample of the vomit from the desk. The coroner examined Tull’s body then took it away for further inspection. The room almost looked like nothing had happened, except for the yellow police tape which blocked the entrance to the writing room.

Sergeant Bowen went outside onto the veranda, took out a pack of cigarettes and extracted a smoke. As she lit it up, she looked out at the prairie before her. It was harvest-time. There was a combination of yellows, golds, clay browns and endless blue sky. The world was filled with the sound of buzzing insects. It had life and colour, unlike the house which was in desperate need of repairs and a fresh coat of paint. A twenty-foot-tall narrow stack of fake reddish-brown rocks with a stone plate on top stood on guard near the entrance of the house. It looked

like it was made of coloured concrete and chicken wire. To the side of it was a sign that read "The Spirit of the Hoodoo".

An insult to the hoodoos, if you ask me.

This place gave her the creeps. It would give the Bates house from *Psycho* a run for its money.

Bowen took a final drag on her cigarette, flicked the stub onto the ground then crushed it with her heel.

If I had to live in this house, I might consider taking my own life, she mused, then walked back to her car and drove away.

* * * *

For a long time after the police had left, Henry sat on the swinging bench on the south porch. There was a freedom in swinging. The gentle motion helped to calm him. And there was always a gentle breeze blowing over the hill to the west. Whenever he needed peace and quiet when the weather was pleasant, this was where he went.

He rifled through the comic books that he'd brought with him and pulled out one from the series *Momrath and The Slithe*. The Slithe was his favourite superhero. He was powerful, even if he was a slim guy in a shiny skin-tight black costume. Few dared to bother him, but if they did, The Slithe could deal with them. And The Slithe believed in justice.

Henry was reading the current issue for the fourth time when he heard the deep rumble of a motorcycle engine. A familiar bike made its way up the long drive from the concession road. It moved slowly towards the house, then the driver killed the engine so the only noise was the crunching of rubber tires on gravel. As the bike came to a halt, the rider dropped the kickstand and dismounted. He took off his helmet and hung it from the

handlebars. Henry recognized the man. He was one of Mr Tull's visitors. The man looked fit and not that old, not like Mr Tull. Not even as old as Mr Yamada, the editor.

"Hey kid."

"Hey."

The biker started to walk towards the house.

"Mr Tull's not there," Henry said. "He's dead."

For the first time, Henry noticed how much the rider looked like The Slithe. He wore heavy leather clothes, but he doubted the biker's motorcycle was made of pure diamond like The Slithe's was.

There was a long silence before the rider asked, "You okay?"

"I guess," Henry said. "I'd never seen a dead body before."

"Sorry you had to see that."

The rider looked at the window at the front of the house—the window which belonged to the writer's office. He stared at it for a long time, while he chewed on his lower lip.

"Look, kid, I left something here with Mr Tull. I was hoping to pick it up today. I think it's in his office. Mind if I go in and check?"

Henry was about to answer when the front door of the house swung open. Gramma Carol came striding out onto the porch. She had her rolling pin in her hand.

"I don't know what you're doing, but you've got no business here. Now get off this property before I call the cops."

Henry smiled. Gramma Carol was a lot like a superhero. She always used reason before she resorted to using a weapon, in this case her rolling pin.

The man shrugged and headed back to his bike. He got on slowly. Henry grinned.

He doesn't want Gramma Carol to see that she won.

But Henry also suspected that he didn't want to be on the receiving end of that piece of smooth rounded maple. The man started up his bike and motored back down the drive.

"What did he want?" she asked Henry.

"He said he forgot something here."

"His decency, I'll bet."

She shook her head and returned into the house.

Henry thought that Gramma Carol deserved to have her own comic book. The villains wouldn't have a chance.

Chapter One

Charlie's stomach grumbled. He was hungry and though Declan had picked him up a latte, he hadn't brought him a pastry. When Charlie went to the café he always bought treats, but Declan had made it a personal rule never to buy them. Whenever Charlie came upstairs with sweets, Declan acted like a five-year-old who was told that he had to eat Brussels sprouts. He'd say that he was afraid they'd go right to his waist. Charlie found his mind drifting above Declan's waist to his beautifully sculpted abs. It would take a lot of pastries to undo that physique.

Charlie shook his head and made his way to Declan's office. "I just have to pop out for a sec. Be right back."

"Don't go bringing cookies into this place," Declan said without looking up. Charlie smiled.

On his way down to the café, he thought about the decision he'd recently made regarding his relationship with Declan. He was convinced he'd made the right choice. *I'm here to keep things running efficiently – and that's*

it. It wouldn't make sense to mix business with pleasure. But a little voice in the back of his head kept asking, How are you going to feel if Declan finds someone else? Charlie knew how sick he'd felt when Declan had fallen for that cop Luke while working on the Ian Mann case a few months ago. Sure, that hadn't worked out, but if Charlie didn't make a move soon...

Charlie exited onto the street. Loud voices were coming from the café. The words were muffled. He couldn't make out their meaning, but the intention was clear. Someone was giving the owner Gwen a hard time. Charlie rushed through the door and saw that Gwen was going head-to-head with a very large cop who was waving a parking ticket in her face.

"So you're telling me you can't fix this for me?" she hollered, poking the cop in the shoulder. "I've parked there ever since I opened this place and no one's complained about it before!"

"I'm just saying the cop that issued this ticket was right," he yelled back. "They changed the rules and now you have to pay for street parking from nine a.m. to four p.m."

Charlie recognized the voice.

"Good morning, Sergeant Hunt," he said. The cop was Gwen's husband...and Declan's father.

"Charlie, maybe you can talk some sense into this woman," he said before storming out of the café.

"What was all that about?" Charlie asked.

"What good is being married to a cop if he won't fix a traffic ticket for you?"

She glanced out of the window and yelled, "Don't you dare put it back on my windshield!"

"Men," she muttered before heading back around the counter. She shook her head and smiled at Charlie. "Now, what can I get you?"

A man of my own that I can yell at? Charlie thought.

"A scone, please," he answered. "Better make it two." Gwen raised her eyebrows.

"Don't worry. They're both for me."

"Good. I don't want to get yelled at by two Hunts in one day," she said, packing up the pastries.

Charlie shot her a crooked smile then headed back up to the office, pastries in hand. Declan had said not to come back with cookies but he'd said nothing about scones.

Charlie took a swig of his latte and munched on one of his scones before heading into Declan's office. Declan sat deep in thought staring at a picture in a silver frame which he held in his hand. Charlie paused, then knocked on the door jamb.

"I had a call from Mr Attwal this morning."

Declan set down the frame and looked blankly at Charlie. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"Mr Attwal. He has our monthly accounting statements ready. It's good news. We're in the black."

"Good to know," he said.

Charlie pointed to the framed portrait. "That's a good-looking young man. Is he a relative of yours?"

Declan shook his head. "No. Just someone from a long time ago."

Charlie considered offering Declan one of the scones as comfort food, but knew better. Then he remembered. "Oh, by any chance did you receive an email from the Alberta LGBTQ+ Business Association? Actually, did you receive six emails from them over the last few days?"

"Who the hell are they?"

"Well, if I were to take a wild shot at it, I'd guess that they're an association of LGBTQ+ business owners."

Declan smirked. "You'll make a great detective someday."

"Thank you. Anyway, I had a call from them this morning. They sounded a little stressed. It seems that they give out an annual 'local hero' award. A pretty big deal, from what I've read online. Apparently they chose you as this year's recipient."

"Oh...?"

"And they haven't heard back from you. They weren't sure if you were even still alive given the lack of communication."

"Well, I've been busy," he said.

"They've been a bit busy as well. Seems that you weren't their first choice. That was City Councillor Frasnjak."

Declan scowled. "Why's that name ring a bell?"

"He was just charged with six counts of misappropriation of city funds and two counts of bribery."

"Oooo," Declan said. "There's a hero for you."

"But you've always been their second choice. It was a close race."

"I guess Frasnjak was offering better bribes." Declan smiled.

"Funny."

"So when's the award being given out?"

"Friday night," Charlie replied.

"This Friday?"

"Yeah. But I'm sure if they could have arranged to have Councillor Frasnjak arrested sooner, they would have been able to give you more notice. Think of it this way—it would be such great publicity for the firm..."

Declan crossed his arms.

Charlie continued. "And you'd be helping them out, something that you're known for in the community, which is *why* they want to give you the award."

Declan sighed. "Okay. Call them back and tell them I'd be honoured to accept it."

As Charlie turned to leave Declan asked, "So, do they just mail the award-thing out?"

Charlie turned back and smiled. "Oh, right. I meant to tell you...it's a full ceremony. The award is presented at the Lambda Ball at the Palliser Hotel. It's the biggest event of their season. Every queen in Alberta will be there."

"Oh."

"And it's black tie. Is it safe to assume that we'll be needing to rent you one for the evening?"

Declan raised his eyebrows. "No. As a matter of fact, I actually have my own."

Charlie pictured Declan in a tux and his heart began to race. "By the way... It's customary for the honouree to bring a date for the evening..."

Declan stared Charlie in the eyes for a moment. "Well, I guess I'll be going stag then."

"Oh." Charlie's voice quavered.

"Unless...you'd like to be my date?"

"Really?" Charlie squeaked.

Declan laughed. "Why not? I can't think of a better person to take to the ball."

"Thank you. I'd...I'll need to rent something. Do you mind if I take the rest of the morning off?"

"No problem. And charge it to the company."

As Charlie turned to leave, Declan called out, "Stop."

He beckoned Charlie with his finger. When Charlie got to Declan's desk, his boss motioned for him to come

closer. Charlie's heart pounded. When he stood an arm's length away, Declan reached up and plucked a large flake of pastry off of Charlie's shirt, then popped it into his own mouth and sighed.

"Gwen's pastries...so good, and so evil," was all he said.

Charlie sailed back to the outer office and noticed a flashing light on the phone. He picked up the receiver, pressed a button on the phone and listened to the message. It was from someone named Sinclair Yamada who wanted to discuss a potential case with Declan. Charlie tried calling back, but it went straight to voicemail. He left a message, then quickly placed a call to the gay business association to tell them that Declan would be honoured to accept their award. Charlie added that Declan would be accompanied by his partner. He purposely failed to elaborate on the term. Charlie grinned as he headed out of the door.

Time to go and rent my tuxedo and glass slippers for the ball.

* * * *

Declan sat at his desk and stared out through the window. He'd invited Charlie to a ball. Declan had to admit that the thought of taking Charlie somewhere on a date had been crossing his mind more and more. The look on his face when he'd asked him...he was certain he'd seen tears.

But he had promised Charlie that their relationship would be business-only, and he had promised himself that he'd respect Charlie's wishes. And in spite of how much Declan hated a public fuss, he would go along with attending the awards ceremony for the sake of the business.

He looked back at the framed portrait of the teen.
“What do you think? Do I really deserve this?”