

# HOODWINK

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The following is an excerpt from Hoodwink

*The Present, Herron Studios in Culver City, Los Angeles.*

'So this is where the body was discovered,' I mused.

We had a bird's eye view of Sound Stage 3 from the unused control booth high on the back wall.

'Just over there, Miss Dupree.' The lawyer nodded at the far, left corner where black and yellow striped Los Angeles Police Department tape blocked access.

A month ago a dead body had been dug out of that hole in the cement floor. The man...Earl Curtis...had been missing since 1939.

Shelby Bloom, the lawyer acting for the family of the deceased, had asked me to take the case.

I'm Kannon Dupree, a private investigator licensed to operate in the state of California. And sure I'm twenty-three, but I've already spent more years knee-deep in the sad and bad side of life than most people do in their entire existence.

Tough times make a good detective... Nothing shocks me and I never give up.

'All these years Earl's been completely encased in cement, cocooned in an airtight seal that prevented decay,' stated Shelby Bloom. 'Earl was so well preserved that at first the workmen thought he was a misplaced prop from the TV show.'

That sounded weird – a dead body is a dead body after all... But then Earl Curtis was dug up right next to Wizard's Cemetery, the main set of *Teen Scream*, the hot new retro-horror TV series.

It was set in the 1930s in a town called Bogeyman's Hollow and - as far as I could tell - was a supernatural soap opera...a glistening crest on the wave of nostalgia that was sweeping the entertainment industry. But this was the first I'd ever seen of the show. I just don't have the spare time or the inclination. I deal with enough real horror in my day-to-day life without letting the staged kind take up my few hours of freedom between work and collapsing into bed.

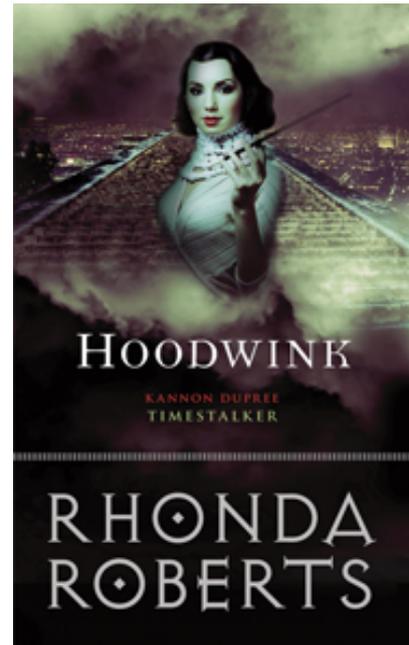
Anyway I hate TV.

Shelby Bloom had rung out of the blue late last night and informed me that he'd booked a seat on the 9.35am flight out of San Francisco. His driver would meet me at LAX and bring me out to Herron Studios in Culver City.

While I was still wondering who this Bloom was...and how the hell he'd got hold of my very private home number he'd introduced himself and outlined his brief.

That'd made me shut up and listen.

The Earl Curtis case had been in the news, one way or another, every day since the grisly discovery had been made.



First the shock of a cadaver being found in the floor of a hot new TV show...which of course seemed like a tacky publicity stunt. But, after the identification was made, everything had changed. The media had drawn a collective breath and exploded into a frenzy of reminiscences and speculation.

You see Earl Curtis was a legend.

Curtis had gone missing while directing in this very studio. Just seemed to walk into thin air, leaving behind a grieving family, a brilliant career and a reputation that'd skyrocketed with the years. According to all the experts, Earl Curtis was one of the pre-eminent directors of his generation...a shooting star in 1939, the golden year of old Hollywood.

And his disappearance while directing *Gone With The Wind* was one of the great unsolved Hollywood mysteries.

I'd known very little about Earl Curtis, he was too many generations removed from me, but even so I'd followed the case when I could.

This was a classic 'who done it'. How could I not be intrigued?

But the police had not revealed details of any solid leads and the media speculation had become so truly outrageous it was impossible to sort the facts from the fantasy... Everything from Nazi conspiracies to alien abductions laced with vengeful ghosts. So when Bloom rang last night and demanded that I take the case, on impulse I'd agreed to come down and meet with him...

You see, I'm one of the few private investigators licensed to use the National Time Administration's portal. That means my clients can employ me to retrieve information from the past...

And Shelby Bloom wanted me to return to 1939 and find out who murdered Earl Curtis.

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The chauffer dropped us off at the front door of the Los Angeles Coroner's Office. Bloom signed us in and a white-coated attendant walked us through the back to the morgue. It was cold and somewhere a tap was dripping on tiles.

Shelby Bloom had asked me to see Earl's body for myself. He said it held their only clue...but that's all he'd tell me.

'Is Farnsworth here yet?' Bloom asked the attendant.

'Yes, sir. He was in taking more samples yesterday and then came back again this morning.'

We went through double swinging doors and there it was, a sheet-draped body on a steel table. A white-coated man with puppy dog eyes waited next to it.

'Professor Eugene Farnsworth, this is our investigator, Kannon Dupree.'

We shook hands. His were cold and smelt of formaldehyde. Actually, everything smelt of formaldehyde.

'Eugene is an anthropologist.'

I tried to stare through the sheet. What the hell was an anthropologist doing here?

He coughed. 'Actually, Mr Bloom, I'm an anthropologist with a medical degree. My speciality is religious rituals.'

'Just show her!' Bloom was impatient to get the show over.

Eugene nodded, and rolled back the sheet, starting with the head. There was a square cotton cloth covering Earl's skull... It was disconcertingly flat. He rolled the sheet down further and revealed a bruised and broken grey-white neck. The flesh

was the consistency of old cheese. He kept rolling until the sheet lay across Earl's hips.

Bloody hell! I stopped my mouth from hanging open.

'Is that painted on?' I moved in for a closer look.

'No, it's a real tattoo,' replied Eugene.

A monstrous feline mauling a screaming man covered Earl's upper torso from neck to stomach. The animal was crushing the screeching human head between its dagger-sharp fangs.

'What kind of big cat is it? It isn't a lion or a tiger but it's a lot more powerfully built than any leopard I've ever seen?'

'It's a jaguar.' Eugene was certain.

'Why do you say that? It's white and there are no dappled markings? And it can't be albino because of the eye colour.'

The huge feline was coloured white with just enough black shading to delineate the tattoo. Its menacing predator's eyes were a startling bright green pierced at the centre by black slit pupils.

They stared out at you as though they were reading a dinner menu!

'Because it's crushing the head of its victim,' said Eugene. 'The jaguar is the only feline that does that. Most people don't know but the really big jaguars can match the lion and the tiger in size and strength. But what really sets the jaguar apart is that it has the most powerful jaws of all the big cats. It's the only one that kills its prey by crushing their skulls.'

'So what does this tattoo actually mean?' I asked.

'All we're really sure of is that it was done the week Earl died,' said Shelby Bloom. 'As for what it means...'

He looked to Eugene. 'Jaguars were often used as symbols of occult protection by many ancient Central and South American empires. When they were used in sacred tattoos then they were supposed to reflect the fate depicted onto the viewer. But...'

Eugene was puzzled.

'But what?'

'I'd only heard rumours about this kind of tattoo. They're described in the ancient texts but I've never actually seen one on a body before.'

I grimaced down at the tattoo. How could anyone let that be put on their chest. It repulsed me and, from the way Shelby Bloom was avoiding looking down, he felt the same way.

'From what I can find out, this tattoo was used only by certain high priests,' said Eugene. 'Ones who'd been initiated into the darker rituals.'

'And...?'

'The story I was told was that once the tattoos were on the body, they fed off your life force. So you had to be very powerful, or they could drain you to death. But it also gave great power...'

'Let me guess... Because you could kill people just by taking off your shirt?'

'That's right.'

'So where does that leave us?' I asked Bloom.

'Confused as hell,' he replied. 'Maybe Earl had a nervous breakdown...he certainly wasn't sane to have done this.'

Eugene agreed. 'Imagine the pain Mr Curtis would've had to go through to get all this work done in just a few days.'

I studied the body. 'You're wrong, Bloom.' I said. 'This clue tells us something very specific indeed. Earl knew someone was after him. That he was in danger.'

I nodded to myself. 'Earl Curtis knew he was about to be killed.'