

LAST SCENE ALIVE

AN AURORA TEAGARDEN MYSTERY



"A delightful series."
—*Library Journal*

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LAST SCENE ALIVE

A Worldwide Mystery/December 2003

First published by St. Martin's LLC.

ISBN 0-373-26476-3

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I moved over to the open door of the trailer and peeked in. I didn't even put my foot on the concrete block that served as a step.

Celia was half lying on the couch, up against one wall. The stack of books—including some library books—and the manuscript were tossed around her feet, which were flat on the floor. A dark red throw cushion, stained and nasty, lay on the couch beside her. Her tongue protruded a little from her mouth. It looked bruised, as well. There was a big dent in her forehead.

The Emmy was on the couch beside her. Its base was not clean.



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Many people gave me information I used or misused in this book. First and foremost was Tom Smith, who knows more about the movie industry than I could ever include in one book. Also of great help were William Peschel, who gave me a great account of his time spent as an extra; Dr. John Alexander, who never minds answering odd questions; and Donna Moore, one of my cyberfriends on DorothyL, who gave me the title for this book.

ONE

WHEN I STOPPED at the end of the driveway to extract my letters and magazines from the mailbox, I never imagined that in five minutes I'd be sitting at my kitchen table reading an article about myself. But my entertainment magazine had had a fascinating teaser on the cover: "Crusoe's Book Comes to the Screen (Finally)—WHIMSICAL MURDERS Goes On Location." It had taken me only seconds to flip pages to the article, which was faced by a full-page picture of my former friend Robin Crusoe, his long frame folded into a chair behind a desk piled high with books. Then, with a much deeper sensation of shock, I realized that, in a green-shaded sidebar, the small woman walking to her car, head down, was me. Not surprisingly, I decided to read the sidebar first.

"It was a strangely jolting experience to see Aurora Teagarden in the flesh," began the writer, one Marjory Bolton.

Strangely jolting, my tushy.

"The diminutive librarian, whose courage and perspicuity led to the discovery of the serial killers terrorizing Lawrenceton, Georgia, is no recluse."

Why would I be?

“Though only in her thirties, she’s experienced more excitement than most women have in their lifetimes,” I read, “and though she became a widow last November, Aurora Teagarden could pass for someone ten years her junior.” Well, I kind of liked that. I could see the end of my thirties if I looked real hard. I wasn’t looking.

“She comes to work at the Lawrenceton Library every day, driving her new Chevy.” Would I drive someone else’s? “Modest in dress and demeanor, Teagarden hardly appears to be the independently wealthy woman she is.” Why would I wear designer originals (an inexplicable waste of money anyway) to my job at the library? This was absurdity.

I skimmed the remaining paragraphs, hoping to see something that made sense. Actually, I wouldn’t have minded another reference to my youthful appearance. But no. “Though Teagarden refused to let the filmmakers use her name, the main female character in the script is widely held to be based on her persona. Teagarden’s mother, Aida Queensland, a multi-million-dollar real estate salesperson, attributes her daughter’s distancing herself from the project to Teagarden’s aversion to the memories the incidents left and to Teagarden’s deeply religious heritage.”

I brought the cordless phone into the kitchen and hit an auto-dial number. “Mother, did you tell this Marjory Bolton that I came from a ‘deeply religious

heritage'?" We hadn't even settled on the Episcopal Church until Mother had married John Queensland.

My mother had the grace to sound a little embarrassed as she said, "Good evening, Aurora. She asked me if we went to church, and I said yes."

I read through the paragraph again. "And you told her you were a multimillion-dollar real estate broker?"

"Well, I am. And I thought I might as well get in a plug for the business."

"Like you needed it!"

"Business could always be better. Besides, I'm trying to get into the best position for selling the firm. One of these days I'm going to retire."

It wasn't the first time in the past couple of months Mother had said something about selling Select Realty. Since John had had a heart attack, my mother had cut back on her work hours. Apparently, she'd also begun to think about how much longer she wanted to work.

Two years ago, I'd have sworn she'd die while she was showing a house, but now I knew better. She'd gotten a wake-up call.

"Listen to this," I said. "Ms. Teagarden, close friend of rising power-that-be Cartland Sewell, may have political plans. Some insiders regard her as a power behind the scenes in area politics." Who on earth could've told them that? What a bunch of..."

"Aurora!" Mother warned.

“Codswallop,” I finished. It was a word I’d never had occasion to say out loud before.

“I’m sure it was Bubba himself,” Mother said. She was more politically astute without trying than I would be if I had a fully briefed advisor.

“Really?” Even I could hear the wonderment in my voice.

She sighed. “I hope you never remotely consider running for office or backing any candidate you really want to win,” she advised me. “And I’ve got to try to remember to call him Cartland. After calling him Bubba for forty years, Cartland is a mouthful. He seems to think he has a better chance of getting elected if he goes by his christened name.”

Well, I might not be politically astute like Bubba Sewell—excuse me, *Cartland* Sewell—but I could see that even my own mother had had a self-serving reason for contributing a quote to a completely unwanted, unnecessary magazine article about me.

“Have you finished the whole article?” Mother asked, and her voice had taken on some anxiety.

“No.” That sounded ominous. I skipped over the last part of the sidebar, the part where my friend Angel Youngblood had shoved the photographer, and returned to the main body of the article, the reason for the revival of interest in yours truly.

“After a long and frustrating wait, the grisly tale of the murders upon which Robin Crusoe’s book WHIMSICAL DEATH was based is coming to the small screen as a two-part miniseries. Filmmakers

hope for a more successful pairing of true-crime book and movie than *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Crusoe's sojourn in Hollywood has made him skeptical of the result. "I don't know how the natives of Lawrenceton will feel about the job we're doing," Crusoe admitted. "I plan to be there for the location shoot." Crusoe has another reason to be on the scene; he's the constant companion of actress Celia Shaw, who will play the Teagarden character."

I flipped the page, just hoping. Yep, there it was—a small shot of Robin and Celia Shaw at some movie premiere party. Celia had done an Emmy-winning guest stint on *ER* as a sexually addicted med student, and in this picture she and Robin were whooping it up with three of the cast members. My mouth dropped open. It was one thing to have known for the past several years that Robin was in Hollywood, writing his mystery novels from there while he touted the screenplay of his book, but it was another thing entirely to see him being Hollywood.

I examined Celia Shaw's face, the size of a fingernail, with a fascination I found hard to explain to myself. Of course, she really didn't look much like me, even like the Aurora of a few years ago. She was short, and she had notable cleavage, and her eyes were brown; those were the only points of similarity. Her face was narrower, her lips were plumper, and she had more of a nose. (I could hardly be said to have a nose at all.) And, of course, she wasn't wearing glasses. She was wearing a dress I wouldn't even

have given a second glance to as I flicked through a rack. It was deep emerald green, had a sequined top, and plunged low.

I glanced down at my own cleavage, modestly covered by the tobacco brown twin set I'd worn to work over khakis. I'd look good in that dress (I told myself loyally), but I'd be uncomfortable the entire time.

Not that I could imagine going to any occasion where that dress would be appropriate. A few Lawrencetonians mixed in Atlanta society, as our small town came closer and closer to being absorbed in the urban sprawl of the South's great city, but I was not one of them; nor had I ever wanted to be.

I'd never really enjoyed the social functions I had to attend or arrange as Martin's wife, and they'd been relatively modest. As the head of the large Pan-Am Agra plant, Martin had had many obligations, only some of them related to actually running the plant.

When I looked back on the two years we'd been married, the evenings seemed a blur of entertaining higher-ups from out of town, potential customers, and representatives from the bigger accounts. We'd been invited to every charity event in Lawrenceton, and not a few in Atlanta. I'd bought the appropriate clothes, worn them, and smiled through it all, but those social evenings hadn't been much fun. Coming home with Martin had been the good part.

Coming home with Martin had been worth every minute of that social tedium.

And with that memory, the heaviness I carried in-

side me every moment of every day came crashing back down. I actually felt the misery descend.

Until I'd thought about the article, been distracted for a few minutes, I hadn't realized how grievous a burden I was carrying: it was the weight of my widowhood.

As abruptly as it had engaged my interest, the magazine article repelled me. There would be strangers swarming around my hometown, strangers who were interested in me without caring about me. All the horror of those old deaths would be raked up. At least a few townspeople would be made miserable, as the deaths of their loved ones were reenacted for the titillation of whomever had a television set. There was no way to stop this from happening, apparently—no way to keep the curtain of privacy drawn around me. Already, in a national magazine, I was being depicted as mysterious, odd, and somewhat boring.

I didn't want this movie to be made, and I didn't want those people here.

AS I'D THOUGHT, there were a few people in Lawrenceton who were as glum as I was over the prospect of entertaining a film company. One of them was the aforementioned Bubba—excuse me, Cartland—Sewell's wife, my friend Lizanne. Her parents were among the victims of the pair of serial killers who had caused us all tremendous grief. Lizanne, too, had read the magazine article, I discovered later that evening.

Lizanne said, "Roe, I imagine Bubba's boosterism got in the way of his common sense." Beautiful Lizanne has always been a tranquil woman, resolutely uninvolved in any town intrigues, and for the past two years her attention had been narrowly focused on her children, two boys she'd named Brandon and Davis. Brandon was eighteen months old, and Davis had just turned three months, so Lizanne had her hands full. In the course of our choppy telephone conversation, we were constantly interrupted. Bubba, Lizanne told me, was at a bar association meeting. I fumed at not being able to speak my mind to Bubba, but I would have settled for a nice chat with Lizanne. But in five minutes, Brandon's shrieking and the wails of the baby reached such a peak that Lizanne excused herself.

While I washed my few dishes that cool October evening, I found myself wondering which of the unfamiliar faces in the library in recent weeks had belonged to the magazine writer. You'd think a writer for an L.A.-based entertainment weekly would have stood out like a sore thumb in our library. But the dress of our culture has become so universal, it isn't as easy to spot outsiders as it used to be.

It struck me as particularly nasty that this woman had been able to come and stare at me and dissect me, while I'd been totally unaware. She'd said I'd turned down a request for an interview. That was so automatic that I actually might not have remembered it. But how could I have been oblivious to the fact