

Chapter One

When my phone went off, I was sitting on a fake rock biting into what might have been my fortieth chicken breast, give or take a few. There were also thighs and drumsticks along there somewhere. The cell was in the vibration mode, and when it went off I almost choked. I couldn't look to see who called, but I knew it had to be Mavis, my secretary. She was the only one who had the number.

I was sitting next to Sidney Thornton, who was also on a fake rock. We were perched in front of a fake campfire, dressed like cowboys, shooting a television commercial for Chubby's Chicken and trying to love the hell out of every fake minute of it. It was difficult because our director, Gil Crawford, was acting like Simon Legree without the whip. Apparently he'd won an award a few years back, and ad execs thought he was D. W. Griffith reincarnated.

Of course the days of D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille with their jodhpurs and jaunty berets are gone. Nowadays an actor is more likely to be directed by intense young men hunched over small video monitors, watching the scene as it's being shot. Gil didn't trust the monitor, or else he didn't trust his director of photography, because we were doing take after take and going through chicken like we owned the ranch.

Sidney wasn't looking too well. Earlier in the day, Penni Wilson, the cute little production assistant with freckles running down the front of her tank-top to places I shouldn't be looking, had asked us if we wanted a spit-bag. I immediately said I did. Sidney declined and looked at me like I was deranged. "Excuse me, Eddie, but what's a spit-bag?"

"We're going to get pretty sick of chicken. Spit it out after each take. You'll see some pretty good residuals from this thing, Sidney. They'll look even better if you can't taste the product."

"Mr. Collins is right, Sidney," Penni chipped in. "You'll lose your taste for it after a while. It'll show in your performance."

I didn't know who Chubby was, or if there even was a Chubby, but I was willing to bet even he couldn't bite into forty chicken breasts, smile into the camera like a

Clive Rosengren

Neanderthal idiot and tell the folks that Chubby's was the best dang chicken to ever come out of an egg.

Penni had given Sidney another chance on the spit-bag, but he still declined. After seventeen takes, he relented. Nevertheless, right now he was looking a little peaked around the beak.

So at the moment the phone went off, Sidney and I were chewing our Chubby's Chicken and looking like we had died and gone to the last roundup in the sky. We held the moment for what seemed to be as long as a David Lean film until Gil shouted "cut!" and Penni came forth with the spit-bags.

I pulled my phone from underneath my chaps, which were so damn old they smelled like they had ridden with Butch and Sundance. Sure enough, it was Mavis at Collins Investigations. She had finally convinced me to get one of these things. If the opportunity to use it came along, she pounced on it like an egg-sucking dog.

Gil gave us five minutes to wash down the chicken while the crew added another light. I headed for the hole in the wall the production company was calling our dressing room. I told myself that a day around Chubby's fire was going to put a few more pennies into the pension fund, so I shouldn't complain. When I came out, Penni was bearing down on me with a frown on her face.

"Mr. Collins, can I talk to you?"

"Yeah, Penni. We ready to go again?"

"Well, actually, we've got a little problem."

I dropped my voice and said, "What? Gil wants a wagon train?" She rolled her eyes and managed a little giggle. I had a hunch Gil wasn't the most popular director the crew had ever worked with.

She said, "Sidney tossed his cookies all over the fake rocks."

"Oh, Christ. Bad Chubby's?"

"I don't think so, but we're going to stop anyway. We need to check your availability for tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'm fine, no problem." Since my agent had been able to wrangle a few bucks more than scale out of them for the session, another day wouldn't hurt.

"Great. I'll tell the producers." She headed for the knot of advertising people sitting in their director's chairs. They all looked very glum, like they had just been informed that Chubby's Chicken had been put on the endangered species list.

Gil walked up to me and stuck out his hand. "Good show, Eddie. Sidney seems to be feeling a bit plungy. We needed to rethink a sticky wicket on the set anyway, so we'll pack it in, get it straightened out, and have another go at it tomorrow, eh?"

I nodded and debated whether to ask him from which Masterpiece Theatre series he'd picked up his accent. However, discretion prevailed. I started untying my stinking leather chaps as I walked back to the hole in the wall. Sidney stood in just his cowboy boots and shorts, draining a glass of water. A credit to the craft.

"You gonna make it, pardner?"

"Oh, Christ, Eddie. I should have followed your advice from the first take. I've never been so sick of chicken in my life."

"Well, get some rest and we'll hit it again tomorrow."

He nodded. The mere thought of more chicken must have been the trigger. He darted into the bathroom. I heard the tell-tale groans of Chubby's Chicken on the rise as I got dressed. I ducked out, signed out with Penni, and headed for the parking lot.

Murder Unscripted

Mavis picked up the office line on the second ring. “Collins Investigations.”

“It’s your boss, kiddo. What’s up?”

“You got a call from a guy by the name of Chad Wentworth. Vandalia Bond and Casualty. You know him?”

“I don’t know him, but I’ve worked with Vandalia. What did he want?”

“Sounds like he’s got a job for you. Something to do with Americana Pictures.”

She gave me the number and I reached Chad Wentworth. He said, “You’ve worked for us in the past?”

“A few years back. What’s up?”

“We hold the completion bond on a picture called *Flames of Desire*. It’s shooting over at Americana. Are you familiar with them?”

“Absolutely. Sam Goldberg’s studio.”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, he referred you to us. Apparently a death has occurred on the set. There’s a good chance the project could be in jeopardy. We’d like to put you on retainer to look into it for us.”

“All right,” I said, taking my notebook from my pocket.

“Goldberg suggested you come to his office to get up to speed. I’ve got your previous contract in front of me. Is your fee still the same?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good. Then until you drop by the office, we’ll use our conversation as a handshake. Is that acceptable?”

“Okay by me.” I wrote down the address as he gave it to me. “Who died?”

I heard him shuffling some papers. “One of the stars. Elaine Weddington.”

My pen froze above the slip of paper as I stared at the phone. After a few long moments, Wentworth called my name.

I put the phone back to my ear. “Yes, yes, I’m here.”

“Is there anything else you need from me, Mr. Collins?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, then, I’ll look forward to meeting with you.” He rang off.

I stood in shock. My knees felt like they were going to buckle. A completion bond company insured a movie, protecting a producer’s investment in case something should go wrong during the production.

Something had definitely gone wrong on this movie. And it resonated deeply with me.

Elaine Weddington was my ex-wife.