

Matt Ferraz's  
Grandma Bertha Solving Murders  
The Convenient Cadaver

(preview)

The first jar of tea came out too weak, so Lydia decided to boil it again with some extra tea bags. She looked at the clock on the wall, thinking of the canapés on the main table and what a disaster it would be if Grandma Bertha decided to let Rufus, Castor or Mustafar (a yellow dachshund and two grey mutts, respectively) enter the house during the evening. Todd had had his mother promise that she wasn't going to open the door for the dogs, but it was cold, and Grandma Bertha had broken similar promises in the not-so-distant past.

Lydia Hepburn was a small, pale woman, with short, curly brown hair she was always putting behind her ears. She had big, dark green eyes that were always looking down at the tip of her big, thin nose. Her small, bony hands were always looking for something to play with, and she rarely painted her fingernails. Lydia had a nice body for a woman in her fifties, but she didn't like to show much of it, and was always wearing long, cream-colored dresses. With some makeup, a decent haircut and a whole new wardrobe, she could even be considered pretty.

It would take half an hour for the tea to get cold and, having already put her makeup on and selected her dress, there would still be time for a glass of sherry and a look at Grandma Bertha before the party officially started. She couldn't do the latter without the sherry.

The house felt strangely empty without little Stu's presence. With no experience of hiring a babysitter, Lydia couldn't stop thinking about whether she had done the right thing in letting her sister take the boy to the movies that evening. She still wasn't sure of the nature of the night's dinner, only that Todd wanted to make a good impression on his boss; what would be better than that beautiful, innocent child sitting at the table with them?

"I see what you mean," Todd said. He was taller than his wife, but not much. Todd had decided to shave his hair as soon as he started getting bald, even though the shaved look didn't suit him well. Far from handsome, he still had a frank smile and a calm voice that helped him in his accounting career. "But there will be too many adults in here, and nobody is bringing their kids. You were the one who didn't want to leave him with my mother in her room."

"I think we'd be better finding a babysitter for Grandma Bertha," she said with a nervous smile.

As usual, he changed the subject. “I’m proud of how you’re organizing everything,” he said. “It’s like we’ve done this a million times before.”

“I hope we eventually do,” she said. “Maybe then we’ll be able to afford some professional catering.”

The conversation ended with a kiss as Todd went out for aspirin and Lydia got busy with the tea. The second jar was too strong, so she just added some tap water before putting it in the fridge. Her own mother always told her not to put hot stuff in there, but hopefully that old piece of junk would be replaced in the next few months.

She stared at the big table and all the food and drink there, just waiting for the party. They had spent more with wine for that evening than on their wedding, and Lydia was tempted to open one of the bottles just to have a taste. Afraid to break the spell, she was content with the sherry they kept in the kitchen cabinet.

The dogs were barking out there, like they did every time they saw that stupid orange cat walking over the wall. Lydia had hated that noise in the beginning, but after four months she decided it just came with the package, which included Grandma Bertha and the soundtrack of her horror films in the middle of the night. After some time she learned to live with it—which didn’t mean she liked it.

At the thought of Grandma Bertha, Lydia decided to drink another glass of sherry. There were many things about that woman that she had had a hard time getting used to. It was a real pain coming home after a day’s work to find the old lady sitting on the couch, drinking beer and watching a film where a man killed zombies with a chainsaw. It wasn’t just the fact they had a child at home, but also that the neighbors complained about the constant screaming and yelling coming from the TV. So they had decided to turn the garden shed into a room for her. Now Grandma Bertha could watch those stupid films all day without bothering anyone.

She almost never left that room now, and Lydia almost never went back there. She let Todd deal with his mother; after all, it had been his idea to bring her. It was less expensive than a nursing home, he had told her. Plus, Stu liked her and not even Lydia could deny that, though she wasn’t sure the old bag was a good influence on him.

Lydia threw the empty bottle of sherry in the trash can and decided to do what she had to do. As soon as she opened the back door, something hit her in the chest, and she almost fell backwards. For once she was happy she hadn’t put on her evening dress yet, or else there would have been two paw marks on it.

“Stupid dogs!” Lydia said out loud as she tried to avoid them on her way to the old shed in the backyard. The lights were on in there, as they always were all night long. There was no need to knock at the door, as Grandma Bertha was always too focused on the film she was watching to answer. “Hello there, Grandma Bertha!” she said. The room was strangely quiet, and Lydia wondered if her mother-in-law might have gone to bed earlier that evening.

“I’m here, Lyd!” Grandma Bertha’s voice came from the dark room. “Come in, come in. You can turn the lights on.”

Lydia stepped inside the room, trying to find the switches on the wall. “Is everything okay?” she asked. “Do you need anything?”

“My back doesn’t feel so good,” said Grandma Bertha. “Are we going to talk in the dark?”

“Just a second!” Lydia said, just as her hand found the light switch. In the pale white light she could see how chaotic, yet strangely organized, the room was. The floor was covered in beer cans, empty candy bags and dozens of unmatched socks. Yet, as her eyes went up to the countless shelves on the wall, Lydia couldn’t help but gasp at the sight of more than two hundred DVDs, put together in an order that would make a librarian smile. How much time and effort did Grandma Bertha put into organizing those things?

Lydia stared at her mother-in-law, lying on the bed. Grandma Bertha was seventy-three years old and at least fifteen pounds overweight. Not that she cared for that. Her olive skin was less crinkled than most women her age, and her black eyes were so smart that they almost vanished when she smiled.

“Lydia, be careful of the shoe,” said Grandma Bertha.

“What shoe . . . ?” Lydia had barely finished the question when she stumbled into something among the mess and almost fell to the ground.

“That shoe,” said Grandma Bertha with a laugh. “I had to throw it at the switch to turn the lights off,” she said, and added with some pride: “I hit it on the first try!”

Lydia took the shoe off the ground and sighed. “Why were you in the dark?” she asked.

“I was lying here, trying to read a magazine,” said Grandma Bertha. “But my back was killing me. So I tried to take a nap.”

“Did you take your medicines?” Lydia asked. She was ready to ask the next question even before

Grandma Bertha nodded. “Did you take them with beer?”

Grandma Bertha gave her a toothless smile. *We paid a fortune on that denture, Lydia thought. And she never uses it.*

“Just a couple of them,” she said. “The vitamins. And the calcium. And the hormones. But not all of them.”

Lydia tried to think of Todd, of how much he loved his mother. “You know you’re not supposed to be drinking.”

“Did you feed the dogs?” Grandma Bertha asked.

“Don’t change the subject!” Lydia almost yelled.

“It’s just that they’ve been barking a lot,” Grandma Bertha replied, with a concerned look on her face, “and I don’t think it’s because of the cat.”

“Yes,” said Lydia. In her mind she could see the three dogs running in through the door and feeding on the canapés. “I’ve fed them. So there’s no need for you to go outside. We’re having a party, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let them in the house.”

“I never did that!” said Grandma Bertha. “Only that one time, and they were scratching the door to get in. I thought they wanted something.”

“Okay, just don’t do it again,” said Lydia, knowing this was a waste of time. There were more important things she had to do back home. “So, what you’re doing tonight?”

“I’m thinking of watching *Hellraiser 4*,” she said, and added: “The one that’s in space.”

“So can I trust you not to interrupt us?” Lydia asked.

“You won’t even remember I’m here,” said Grandma Bertha. “Can I just ask something? Can the dogs sleep with me tonight?”

“You know Todd doesn’t like that,” said Lydia, rubbing her neck.

“I know, I know,” replied Grandma Bertha. “They’re just so nervous!”

Lydia sighed again. “If I let them come in for a moment they’ll calm down,” she said. “But then I have to put them away again.”

Grandma Bertha nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Let them in!” They were still barking out there, and didn’t seem much interested in coming inside, even after Lydia opened the door and called their names. “Something isn’t right,” said Grandma Bertha. “Go check them!”

*Unbelievable!* Lydia thought. Todd must already be back, and in a few minutes the guests would be there and she hadn’t even put her dress on. What a nightmare! “Rufus! Castor! Mustafar!” The dogs’ names got lost in the darkness, and she felt like the backyard was the size of a football field. As her eyes got used to the dark, she was able to see the three of them scratching at the metal door in the back, which they almost never used.

“Is everything okay?” Grandma Bertha yelled from inside.

“It must be some animal in the alley!” Lydia yelled back. “I really must get home!”

“See what’s there!” Grandma Bertha yelled again.

Thankfully Lydia had the keys in her pocket. *That’s the last thing*, she thought to herself. *And then I don’t want to think about this again.*

Lydia held the three dogs back as she opened the door to the alley and closed it behind her so they wouldn’t escape. It was really bright back there, and it took a while for her to realize it was because there was an abandoned car parked at the end of the alley with its lights on. She turned her head towards the other end, where she saw a woman lying down in with her blonde hair covering her face, her dress soaked in blood and her dead eyes staring at nothing.