

UNDEAD

Detective Saussure Mysteries

Book I

Trinidad Giachino

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BFB

Breath of **F**ire **B**ooks

I

THERE I WAS.

It had been drizzling, so I adjusted my hat and raincoat before ringing the doorbell. The weather matched the landscape. A climbing plant stretched its branches from the ground up, covering the walls of the Edwardian mansion nearly to the top. Winter had taken the leaves with it and color followed close behind. All that was left was a vertical carpet of rooted limbs trying to swallow the house with their cold embrace. This almost castle had two towers guarding the flanks, rising over the flat lifeless kingdom the house ruled upon.

The entire construction was gray, matching the fainting brown of the surroundings. It was a barren moor, a sea of death as far as I could tell, as if life had escaped from that piece of soil centuries ago. That square pile of exhausted bricks with cylindrical joints was the only thing I could see around me. No other buildings or constructions. No trees. No garden. No lakes or any kind of water except for the one drenching my coat. It all looked like the earth had decided to stop breathing in that particular space. I had forgotten how long the drive had been from the entrance gates to get to the house. This gate had stout iron bars, some curls here and there, but nothing too fancy. These folks were old money. They didn't need to show off. An overwhelming wealthy austerity dripped from the entire place. They owned a lot and they knew it. And so did everyone else.

The doorbell sounded almost mechanical. It ripped the overcast silence with its piercing beak. I waited. And waited. And waited. Eventually, the silence patched itself up where it had been torn, as if nothing had happened. Maybe I had come to the wrong place? I followed the instructions they had given me. I was beginning to think life had escaped from inside those walls as well. That entire place was doing a tightrope walk on the border between life and death, leaning towards the latter with each step. Perhaps my hope was supposed to die there, too.

As I slowly walked to my car after ringing the bell for the third time, a sudden breath of fetid air caught my nose and my attention, and would not let go of either. The door had been opened by a corpse in livery. It is possible that I was influenced

by the surroundings, but my instinct told me that that man belonged there. It turned out he had a pulse but just barely, as everything else in that forgotten place.

“In a hurry, sir?” He asked in a wrinkly voice that came from an even more wrinkled face.

There were so many furrows imprinted on that skin that any expression line got completely lost to the naked eye. It was the ultimate human paradox: he had so much expression on his face that he was expressionless. “*Too much of something can be a bad thing*”, I thought to myself. Later on, I would find out how true that random statement had been.

“I believe Lord Hurlingthon is waiting for you, Mr....?”

“Saussure. Richard Saussure,” I answered, hurrying inside the house since the rain was getting thicker.

“This way, please,” the valet said, moving aside and leading me to the stairs.

The interior was breathtaking in more than one way. The room I had first walked into had incredible dimensions. It made me forget I was inside due to the ceiling being so high. Funny how the murky sky I had been under felt heavier than the roof over my head. The outdoors were far more oppressive with their stubborn loneliness.

Inside the house, the lack of plainness was the rule. The pop-up feast of lavishing furniture and exquisite textures infused into my body all the life I had lost outside. The carpet, the drapes, the chandeliers, the fireplace working with exuberance, the paintings and sculptures...Everything, as far as I could let my professional eye stretch was set up to give a luxurious embrace that would warm up the coldest room in any heart. An embrace of money that would be. A human one seemed a much more difficult task to achieve.

“I’ll meet you upstairs, Mr. Saussure,” the talking corpse said. “Please, do not wander off when you reach the top”.

And as I asked myself, “*The top of what?*” he proceeded to turn his back on my bewildered face and enter into something that can only be described as a large birdcage. When the doors automatically closed and the valet began to detach himself from ground zero, I realized it was an elevator.

The staircase wrapped itself around the lift, so I trotted upstairs while staring at it the entire time. It was the first time I had seen an elevator inside a family house. Of course, I had never dealt with a *family* like that one before. I resented the valet for not taking me along with him, but then again, I wasn't sure I wanted to share an elevator with a man like that without having a crossbow with me...in case it turned out to be a zombie.

Once upstairs, I was quickly led into another enormous room. This one looked more like a multifunctional space, although its primordial objective had been to be a bedroom. A four-poster bed, swimming in satin and carmine velvet with sheets trimmed in lace, reigned at the end of the room. To the right, a floor to ceiling window let gray light in. Someone sitting in an armchair, looking out to the land, was the only person in the room. The opposite wall was covered by shelves overloaded with books and a desk with nothing on it, except for a lazy lamp that had been waiting to be used for a very long time.

"Mr. Saussure has arrived, Lord Hurlingthon," the doorman announced. I noticed: *wheelchair*. The lack of light did not allow me to see any further.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Saussure," a shadowy voice greeted me.

If I had thought that the sound the doorman made was old, this new sound entering my ears was beyond recognition. It was not only wrinkly, but also dusty, thin, breakable, inhuman, gasping for oxygen one minute, and cracking up the next. The words sounded as if the fabric they were made of was breaking into sharp points every time they were pronounced.

"A pleasure to meet you too, s...Lord Hurlingthon" I replied, walking towards the man and extending my arm to shake his hand. I had never dealt with nobility before. It had not occurred to me that greeting him by shaking his hand couldn't have been the best option in terms of manners.

"You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Saussure, but I can't lift my arms anymore. Please, sit down. Perhaps Marlon could prepare you a drink or coffee?"

"No, thank you, Lord Hurlingthon."

I took my hat off as I sat down. It was a miracle I was able to find the armchair, not only for the lack of light, but for the hypnotic image in front of me. This man was like nothing I had ever seen before.

“I take from your silence that you are in shock by my appearance.”

I began to mumble an apology, but he stopped me.

“That’s alright, don’t worry. I’ve not been able to look at myself in the mirror for a few decades now. I don’t exactly know how I appear to be on the outside, but I do know how I feel on the inside. And it is not pretty.”

He was more than right about that. His presence was mesmerizing and appalling at the same time. It looked as if his voice had taken human form. If Marlon looked dead, Lord Hurlingthon’s body seemed to be well into the decomposition process.

His skin, covered in wrinkles, lines and furrows, was a frightening shade of pale blue, about to shake hands with a watery green. Some of the veins were trying to be red, to pretend they carried some blood, but they failed miserably. Although that breathing pile of human remains was wrapped up in the most exquisite Italian suit, it could not hide away the fact that he was as dried of life as the land outside the window.

Lord Hurlingthon’s hair was gone. Only a few yellowy strands of hair here and there, tossed around over the spotted skin that covered his unintentionally well-defined skull.

The arms fell lifeless to the sides.

His eyes were long gone. Although the eyeballs had remained inside their cavities, they were covered by a veil of cerulean mist. He was gone and right there at the same time.

There was no denying the old man’s statement, so I went right into business mode.

“I’m here at your service, Lord Hurlingthon. What is it that you need me for?” I tried to smooth away the edge in my voice.

“Right to the point. I like that, Mr. Saussure. No wasting time. I can’t afford it.”

“*He’s correct about that, too*” I thought to myself.

“Actually, that is not right. I appear to have all the time in the world to spare, Mr. Saussure. But in my condition, as you surely can attest to, I don’t enjoy anything anymore”.

That puzzled me. What did he mean? He looked like he was going to die in the next five seconds, if he wasn't dead already.

"I'm...I'm not sure I follow, Lord Hurlingthon".

"I am two hundred and thirteen years old, Mr. Saussure."

A grin started to take shape in my mouth, but the blank face of the two men in the room stopped the reflex.

Dead silence around me.

"Surely that is not true. Are you trying to fool me? What kind of twisted joke is this?" I pretended to be more outraged than perplexed, which was what I really felt.

"Marlon, please hand him the papers. No joke, Mr. Saussure."

The valet approached me and gave me a pile of papers. The first one was a birth certificate for a *Hugh Hurlingthon*, son of *Lord Friedrick* and *Lady Adora Hurlingthon*. The date on that yellowy piece of paper corroborated Lord Hurlingthon's statement, but that did not make it true.

"It has to be a mistake. It is simply impossible for you to be that old. To my eyes, there's absolutely no difference between you and Marlon." A completely false statement, but I had to say something before fainting or vomiting on the beautiful Persian carpet. Where the hell were the crossbows of this world when I needed them? "How old are you, Marlon?"

Marlon looked at his master. Lord Hurlingthon made an almost imperceptible head movement.

"Eighty-four next November, Mr. Saussure."

"Alright then. How old were you when you started working for Lord Hurlingthon?"

"I have been at Lord Hurlingthon's service since I was a toddler. I was born here, in this very house. I remember being a little boy and helping my father with his chores."

"Marlon's family and my own have been together for several centuries, Mr. Saussure. We're more like one big family." A sad smile of satisfaction formed on Marlon's face. "Well, not so big anymore." The grin completely vanished.

"Right. Then, how old was Lord Hurlingthon when you were born?"

"A hundred and thirty, sir."

“No, see...that’s not possible...”

“Mr. Saussure,” Lord Hurlingthon interrupted my mild tantrum, “let me save you a considerable amount of energy. If you care to join me, I would gladly explain everything.”

“No! I demand to know! Why am I here?!”

I was out of control. My fear was triggered by the strange situation and those creepy characters. I was shooting all over the place.

“Do you want me to call the police, Lord Hurlingthon?”

“No, Marlon. It’s alright. I understand his confusion.”

“Damn right I’m confused!” I screamed, pacing the entire room.

“Are you sure, milord? Detectives are ten a dime. There’s no need for you to tolerate this kind of behavior.”

“Do you even know how to work a phone, you old bag of bones?!” I shouted at his imperturbable face.

“Mr. Saussure, I beg you not to insult the help. If you sit down, I could tell you my story and the reason for your visit. If you don’t believe this is the right job for you, Marlon will escort you outside and you’ll be back to your everyday life in no time. But I would like for you to listen, since I’m in desperate need of help and running out of options.”

The old man was right. What did I have to lose? They were obviously insane people and confronting them would not be of any use. If anything, it could make them more dangerous since I had no idea what kind of madhouse I had stepped into.

To walk or not to walk? That was the unspoken question. Lord Hurlingthon seemed like a fairly reasonable man. Apart from being over two hundred years old, nothing in his personality stood out screaming “*nutcase!*” I didn’t like Marlon, but it wasn’t a matter of sanity, it was a matter of skin. He could smell the old raincoat and worn-out shoes on me and I could smell *Heno de Pravia* soap and silver polish on him. He pretended he was wealthy. I knew I was poor. That kind of skin problem.

“Alright, I’ll stay and hear your story. But let it be on the record that I do not believe what you claim to be.”

“Should I get a pen?” Marlon asked wearily. We had definitely started on the wrong foot.

“Marlon, watch your manners. Mr. Saussure, please be seated. This may take a while. Coffee?”

I accepted the offer just to get Marlon out of my face, at least for a few minutes, and then I returned to my original chair. As intrigued as I was by that man’s story, I wanted to finish the interview and get the hell out of there.

“Please, take the papers Marlon has given you. I’ll explain everything as you go through them.”