

SKELETON UNDER THE CLOSET



A COOPER WRIGHT MYSTERY
BY ROB STEELE

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Third time this month. I swear I get called to August Acres more than I get called by my wife. I know you hear me gripe about it almost every story I tell. Thing is, I don't tell you *every* case – just the weird ones that I think are interesting. I get about three calls a month to this subdivision. It's just weird.

August Acres is one of the newer subdivisions in town. It's not a poor neighborhood. It's not a rich neighborhood. Pretty much middle class all the way. But about once a week, a husband cheats on his wife so she shoots him. Or you could reverse that. Or someone forgot to put out the cat and gets shot for it. Or forgets to put the trash out for pickup. Or puts out too much trash that isn't really trash. Or some other equally pathetic excuse. It's times like these that I wish we didn't have such an obsession with guns in this country. You need a license to drive a car or get a library book but not a gun. I don't get that.

This case, however, is a bit different. The address says it's deep into August Acres at the apex of a cul-de-sac. I wasn't really sure it went back this far. Just to get it out of the way, I stop off at Sandarella Disney's house on the way in. She lives toward the front of the subdivision and knows just about everyone. She's helped on a few cases. Unfortunately, though, not this one. She says she's never even heard of the Holmwoods. So much for an easy end to the case.

I suppose I should have known that it wouldn't be this easy. Technically the Holmwoods moved about ten weeks ago. I've got Detective Manny Vasquez tracking them down back at the station. The story as I know it... well, it'll probably be better if I let real estate agent Levi Meyer explain.

"I was just showing the house to the Garza's," he began. "And since Halloween is coming up, I did my usual site-gag. I put a skeleton in the closet of one of the rooms. It usually gives the client a bit of a start but it makes the house memorable. And the Garza's are looking for a house just like this one so I figured it'd be a shoe-in, right?"

“It has never backfired on me like this before,” he complained. “I forgot that Hector, that is, Mr. Garza just retired from the military and is moving back here. Something about PTSD. I forgot entirely. When I mentioned the closet had a lot of room, he opened it and saw the skeleton. Now, it’s just a Halloween prop, and, Helen, that’s Mrs. Garza, screamed and he punched my skeleton. Shattered it into I don’t know how many pieces. But when he did that, he also put his foot through the floor of the closet. When he took it out, we saw that under the floorboards was this plastic bag. Well, we all thought it was drugs at first. Something white showing through a clear plastic bag. But that smell wasn’t drugs. It was death. There really was a skeleton in the closet... well, under it anyway.”

And that’s what he told me when I first pulled up. Officer Doug Adams apologized to me when I got to the door of the house. He said that he was busy taking a statement from the Garzas and lost track of Mr. Meyer. I ask if he’s the only officer here and he says that everyone else is busy with the protection duty tonight, but there is one more inside with Dr. Young. The president is coming through town on some kind of parade that isn’t a parade but, since the Secret Service is short of money, they recruited us. I get a statement from the Garzas and it pretty much matches Mr. Meyer’s story. “I guess you’ll continue house hunting?”

Mrs. Garza, who has an oddly gothic aura, perked up. “Are you kidding? A house with a real body in hidden in the basement? We’ll sign the papers once you guys, what is it? Clear the scene? Think of the stories we can tell. I mean a murder in the house! That’s awesome! I mean, not for the victim...” Her rant continued for a while and meandered from the victim in the house to her obsession with CSI, the television program. Although at the mention of buying the house, I do see Levi Meyer’s expression light up.

I tell Adams to finish up with the statements and to make sure to get everyone contact information. If there’s a skeleton here, it’s probably not these people who did it, but we may have questions later. I enter the house – a cute little, two-story. I follow the noise of the real CSIs to a bedroom on the first floor. It appears as though this house has kids’ rooms upstairs but the parents get to be downstairs by themselves. Not a bad layout. The ‘master’ bedroom opens into a bathroom which has a closet that looks like it

has three people squeezed into it.

“Cooper! Glad you’re here!” calls our coroner, Dr. Seong-ho Young from the back-left corner of the closet. To his right is Henry Ruth, the new coroner’s assistant and in the doorway, is an officer who I don’t know. “We’ll hold the body in place but see if you can dislodge that bottom foot. It’s caught on something.” I look in the closet and, while it is rather large (not quite walk-in size but...), it wasn’t made for three people. Especially since there’s a hole in the floor. Sure enough, there is a skeleton down there wrapped in plastic. I glove up, because plastic can have fingerprints, too, and help dislodge the skeleton. Once it’s disconnected from a random nail, the skeleton is easily lifted out and we manage to get the rather smallish frame on a gurney.

As Doc and Henry roll the body out, it gives me the opportunity to look into the hole in the floor to see what else is down there. I borrow the officer’s flashlight, Office Craft, at least according to his badge, and shine it down the hole. There isn’t a whole lot down there. Lots of dust. Some dirt. And a hinge. The hinge looks like it broke off and this was supposed to be a secret hidey-hole for... something. The skeleton looked a bit small but I’m guessing it wouldn’t be a hiding place for people. Drugs, maybe? I should probably get the vice-dogs to come sniff around.

But that can come later. First, we need to find out who was under the house, how that person died, why they were left there and who did it? Always questions with this job. Time to find some answers. I do a walkthrough of the house. Since it’s “on the market,” it’s pretty empty. They left the oven and the refrigerator but took the dishwasher. All the light fixtures are still here. Carpets are clean – probably freshly cleaned, too. There aren’t any signs that our vic was killed here. I’m assuming murder since it’s really hard for natural cause and suicides to wrap themselves in plastic and hide in a cubby hole under a bathroom closet. I decide to leave the rest of the house to the CSIs. Time to talk to the neighbors.

The questioning doesn’t take very long. Only three other houses are occupied in this section of the subdivision. Pretty empty for a cul-de-sac. The neighbors all say just about the same thing. Everyone here stays pretty much to themselves. The Holmwoods were a nice family, but a little over-the-top on the Christianity – which fits as members of the Spirit Filled

Evangelism Centre. (The last neighbor I talk to, Kay Anson, first neighbor to the left, says there was something a bit odd about the last couple months they were there. “They had a daughter, um, Leah, I think. I heard them arguing one night, but that was *months* ago. Come to think of it, I don’t remember seeing Leah after that.”

“You didn’t call the police when you heard the argument?”

“No. I guess I should have but... oh... I don’t know. I mean it didn’t sound *that* intense. And you know how teenagers can get.” Yeah, I know. I thank her for her time and make my way back to the morgue to see how Doc Young is getting on with our victim.

I suit up before I enter the operating theater – the full hazmat suit minus the helmet, but I do have a plastic face shield just in case. I’ve been in here before when an autopsy is going on and it can get messy. As I enter, I notice the skeleton has been debagged and is lying fully-outstretched on an autopsy table. On the slab next to it, there’s a ring and what looks like the remains of a bloody crucifix, a big one, like you see paraded in a church service. “Hey, Doc, what’s with the crucifix?”

Doc Young looked up from the skeleton’s skull that he was examining closely and said, “I’m pretty sure that’s your murder weapon. It was in the bag with her. If you look at the skull, here” he said indicating the portion of the skull he was examining. “I’ve been matching up that crucifix and this wound. It’s a pretty good match. I’m going to have someone from ballistics come down and verify.”

Using my phone, I take a picture of the crucifix, then I put the ring in an evidence bag. Wait. No assumptions. “Doc, this ring was in the bag too, right?” He nods and returns to his examination. Small ring. And very feminine. “This is a woman, right?”

Doc turns again and smiles. “You’ve been paying attention, Cooper. I’m proud of you. You could tell from the hips, right?” I just nod. Actually, I guessed from the small feminine ring and the daughter that no one saw after a yelling competition seems to be missing. But if it makes him happy... “Judging from other structural characteristics,” he continued, “I’d say she was in her late teens, maybe early 20s.”

I thank Doc and make a note in the evidence log that I'm taking the ring with me. I think it might help identify the woman in plastic. I take the ring and the picture on my phone to the Spirit Filled Evangelism Centre. I'm not much of one for religion, but I am passingly familiar with these people. They believe the word of the Bible is absolute. I have my doubts. Just logic alone gives me issues on the whole Noah's ark thing. Two of each animal on the planet? Please – like two penguins wandered up to the middle East to get on a boat.

Eventually I'm granted a meeting with one of their priests, Father Evander Carr. I ask him if he can identify the ring. "Oh, yes. I believe that it belonged to Leah Holmwood. It's one of our confirmation rings. Every year, a group of our young take several classes to become closer to the church. Rather than a diploma or certificate you hang on a wall, our students get one of these to wear instead."

"I'm a bit confused. How can you tell this is Leah's ring?" I look over the ring. "Are they all unique or is there a marking or something?"

"No," he sighs. "We only started the practice about, well, I believe it was seven years ago, now. I know all the youths who have gotten one. All of them attend regularly and always wear the ring. Leah is the only one that hasn't attended in a while. Process of elimination."

I nod and thank the priest but before I leave, he puts a hand on my arm and says, "I know you don't believe as we do. And I respect that. To each his own. But you should know that Leah had some troubles. Her parents disowned her a while back. They said something about her, what was the phrase? Coming out of the closet? I'm just an old priest and I'll admit I probably spend too much time here in the church, but I don't know what that phrase means. Do you, Lieutenant Wright?"

Explaining this to my kids was awkward enough, but a priest, who I suspect, was not exactly pro-LGBT? This was weird. But it didn't take long and he took it much better than expected. And somehow it also jogged my memory about the picture. I tell Father Carr that it may be a bit much to look at but if he recognized the crucifix, it might be helpful. "Lord of mercy! You found our missing Crucifix! Although I think it might be a good thing that we

replaced it. That one looks a bit... tarnished.”

I feel a bit guilty and ask if the explanation for these questions could be kept in something of a confessional confidence. He agrees and I explain, but I end with a question. “Father, when did this Crucifix go missing?”

“Oh, let’s see here. If I recall correctly, I’d say about five months ago.” I thank Father Carr for his time and head back to the morgue. After a consultation with Doc Young, he says that mummification could to this extent could be done in a couple months, although it was a bit odd that there was so little muscle or skin left. I return to my office to see if anything has popped up there.

I’m greeted by Det. Manny Vasquez who says he tracked the Holmwoods to Colorado and has spoken with them by phone. “I told them that we might have found their daughter but identification is going to be sketchy. They said they would come back to town as soon as they could. Seong-ho said you took the ring. I guess you confirmed it was her?”

Oh, he gets to be Seong-ho and I’m still not Cooper? Damn, Manny! “Yeah, we’re pretty sure it’s her.”

“Well, we might have a new suspect then. They said there were having issues with her being gay and having a girlfriend.” Manny shrugged but looked hopeful. “They said the girlfriend was named Gracie Tolbert. She was pretty easy to track down. I’m having her brought in for questioning.”

“Good job Manny!” And I mean that, too. An hour later, Gracie Tolbert is in interrogation room one. I pull the file on her, which isn’t much, and enter the room. She’s taller than I would have expected, about five and a half feet tall. Kinda skinny and gothic. Reminds me of Fazoola Balk (or however you pronounce it) in that movie *The Craft*. She and Helen Garza would probably get along just fine.

“You found her, didn’t you?” she starts before I can even sit down. I’m taken aback by this a bit but try not to let it show. I just nod. “I knew it would happen eventually. It was in the cubby hole in the closet, wasn’t it?”

“You knew about the cubby hole?”

“Of course, I knew,” she exclaimed. “My dad was the developer for August

Acres. All the houses have those secret hidey-holes. But they're all in the same spot. Damn! I knew he was listening!"

I hate being behind on something, like this conversation. "Who was listening?"

"Okay, the last time I saw Leah, it was in her church. She grew up really religious or something and she was having issues with her feelings for me. She went there to *pray for guidance* or... whatever. I told her that I loved her. That she didn't have to hide our..." she squirmed a bit, "toys in the hidey hole, and I kissed her. She returned the kiss and then there was a... thunk and she fell over. One of those big cross things was sticking out of her head. I saw this old priest standing over us and I just ran."

I'll admit to being flabbergasted at this confession. "And you didn't think to call this in to someone?"

"Call it in to *who*?" she exasperated. "I'm in the closet with my parents. And I've got a record, right? I mean that's what's in that folder you've got. Who's going to believe *me*? Everyone knows that churches are in with the government! Why do you think they don't pay taxes and those priests can get away with molesting the altar boys?"

I can't entirely argue with that logic. Not entirely. I tell Ms. Tolbert to wait here and I send Officer Walker to bring in Father Carr. I had to go through enough underlings during my visit to know that the only one in that church that looks old, is Father Carr. And I talked with the guy. Didn't see it in him.

When he's brought in, I have him charged with the murder of Leah Holmwood. He immediately launches into a tirade about how "I may have killed her body, but it wasn't her. She was possessed by a lesbian demon of the fifth order. She was a demon I tell you! A demon!"

When the Holmwoods finally arrive, the next day, we interrogate them about how their daughter ended up in a secret compartment in their bathroom closet. They claim that it was the only way to exorcise the demon from their daughter and that while her body may be deceased, her spirit could now be free. *Unlike when she was alive*, I add to myself. I'm glad I'm not the district attorney on this one. Father Carr might just get off on an

insanity plea. But the Holmwoods... whew... I don't even want to know. I'm just going to close this case.