

Old Hollywood Scandals and Murder Can't be Left Alone

“Alone” by Loren D. Estleman

Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 2009. \$24.99, 268 pages.

In Old Hollywood, glamour was everywhere, from the elaborate costumes worn by stars flickering on the silver screen to the opulent decorations on the walls in the ornate theaters, but like many things in the past, much of its history has been lost. Films were destroyed or discarded when studios no longer had the room to store them and once thriving theaters fell into disrepair once they were no longer profitable.

Valentino, a film archivist whose job is to find and preserve old films was introduced in Estleman's first Valentino novel “Frames.” In “Frames” the film detective known only by his last name uncovers a piece of cinematic history as well as a decades-old murder mystery when he purchases a rundown theater called The Oracle and finds both a long lost film and skeleton inside.

In “Alone” Valentino is back, both seeking out old films and working on the restoration of his beloved Oracle. This time he is in pursuit of an early work of Greta Garbo's entitled “How Not to Dress” which was filmed as an advertisement for the department store where she worked in Sweden, and Valentino's theater restoration is in jeopardy from an overzealous and corrupt building inspector.

It is at a party celebrating Garbo's 100th birthday when his host, Matthew Rankin, offers Valentino the coveted footage in exchange for a small favor. It seems that Rankin's assistant Roger Akers has been blackmailing him for some time over a letter between Rankin's late wife and Garbo that indicates a relationship closer than mere friendship. All Valentino has to do to get the film is dig up some dirt on Akers to help Rankin end the blackmail. Despite his reluctance, Valentino agrees to meet with Rankin the next morning, but upon his arrival finds Akers dead with Rankin holding the gun.

Rankin claims self-defense, but when the blackmail letter turns out to be a forgery, it is apparent that there is more to the story than just simple extortion, and Valentino is determined to find the truth behind the blackmail and the killing.

“Alone” is a fascinating look into the history and gossip of old Hollywood, and the lives of a few of its inhabitants. It also includes a bibliography for further reading into both Garbo and Hollywood history. The story is entertaining and should be a delight for any old movie buffs as well as casual fans.

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